

THE MOST IMPORTANT SUBJECT

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

“Men ought always to pray.”—Luke 18:1

PRAYER is the most important subject in practical religion. All other subjects are second to it. Reading the Bible, keeping the Sabbath, hearing sermons, attending public worship, going to the Lord’s Table—all these are very weighty matters. But none of them is as important as private prayer...

1. Prayer is absolutely needful to a man’s salvation. I say absolutely needful, and I say so advisedly.¹ I am not speaking now of infants and idiots.² I am not settling the state of the heathen. I remember that where little is given, there little will be required. I speak especially of those who call themselves Christians in a land like our own. Of such I say no man or woman can expect to be saved who does not pray.

I hold salvation by grace as strongly as any one. I would gladly offer a free and full pardon to the greatest sinner that ever lived. I would not hesitate to stand by his dying bed and say, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Act 16:31). But that a man can have salvation without asking for it, I cannot see in the Bible. That a man will receive pardon of his sins, who will not so much as lift up his heart inwardly and say, “Lord Jesus, give it to me,” this I cannot find. I can find that nobody will be saved by his prayers, but I cannot find that without prayer anybody will be saved.

There will be many at Christ’s right hand in the last day. The saints gathered from North and South, and East and West, will be “a great multitude, which no man could number” (Rev 7:9). The song of victory that will burst from their mouths, when their redemption is at length complete, will be a glorious song indeed. It will be far above the noise of many waters and of mighty thunders. But there will be no discord in that song. They that sing will sing with one heart as well as one voice. Their experience will be one and the same. All will have believed. All will have been washed in the blood of Christ. All will have been born again. All will have prayed. Yes, we must pray on

¹ **advisedly** – deliberately and after consideration.

² **idiots** – persons so deficient in mental ability as to be incapable of ordinary acts of reasoning or conduct.

earth, or we shall never praise in heaven. We must go through the school of prayer, or we shall never be fit for the holiday of praise. In short, to be prayerless is to be without God—without Christ—without grace—without hope—and without heaven. It is to be in the road to hell.

2. A habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian.

All the children of God on earth are alike in this respect. From the moment there is any life and reality about their religion, they pray. Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is *praying*.

This is one of the common marks of all the elect of God: “[They] cry day and night unto him” (Luk 18:7). The Holy Spirit, Who makes them new creatures, works in them the feeling of adoption and makes them cry, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15). The Lord Jesus, when He quickens them, gives them a voice and a tongue and says to them, “Be dumb³ no more.” God has no dumb children. It is as much a part of their new nature to pray, as it is of a child to cry. They see their need of mercy and grace. They feel their emptiness and weakness. They cannot do otherwise than they do. They *must* pray.

I have looked carefully over the lives of God’s saints in the Bible. I cannot find one of whose history much is told us, from Genesis to Revelation, who was not a man of prayer. I find it mentioned as a characteristic of the godly that they “call on the Father,” that they “call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” I find it recorded as a characteristic of the wicked that they “call not upon the LORD” (1Pe 1:17; 1Co 1:2; Psa 14:4).

I have read the lives of many eminent⁴ Christians who have been on earth since the Bible days. Some of them, I see, were rich, and some poor. Some were learned and some unlearned. Some of them were Episcopalians, some Presbyterians, some Baptists, some Independents. Some were Calvinists⁵ and some Arminians.⁶ Some have loved to use a liturgy,⁷ and some to use none. But one thing, I see, they all had in common. They have all been *men of prayer*...

³ **dumb** – without the power of speech.

⁴ **eminent** – famous and admired.

⁵ **Calvinists** – those who believe, along with the French-born Swiss Reformer John Calvin (1509-1664), that the Bible teaches the supreme authority of the Scriptures, the sovereignty of God, predestination, and the doctrines of grace.

⁶ **Arminians** – followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), Dutch theologian, born in Oudewater, the Netherlands.

⁷ **liturgy** – public worship according to set forms and rites.

I do not deny that a man may pray without heart and without sincerity. I do not pretend for a moment to say that the mere fact of a person praying proves everything about his soul. As in every other part of religion, so also in this: there is plenty of deception and hypocrisy.⁸

But this I *do* say—that not praying is a clear proof that a man is not yet a true Christian. He cannot really feel his sins. He cannot love God. He cannot feel himself a debtor to Christ. He cannot long after holiness. He cannot desire heaven. He has yet to be born again. He has yet to be made a new creature. He may boast confidently of election, grace, faith, hope, and knowledge, and deceive ignorant people. But you may rest assured, it is all vain talk *if he does not pray*.

I say furthermore that of all the evidences of real work of the Spirit, a habit of hearty private prayer is one of the most satisfactory that can be named. A man may preach from false motives. A man may write books, make fine speeches, seem diligent in good works, and yet be a Judas Iscariot. But a man seldom goes into his closet and pours out his soul before God in secret unless he is in earnest. The Lord Himself has set His stamp on prayer as the best proof of a true conversion. When He sent Ananias to Saul in Damascus, He gave him no other evidence of [Saul's] change of heart than this: "Behold, he prayeth" (Act 9:11)...

I know that the elect of God are chosen to salvation from all eternity. I do not forget that the Holy Spirit, Who calls them in due time, in many instances leads them by very slow degrees to acquaintance with Christ...I cannot call any one justified until he believes. I dare not say that any one believes until he prays...The first act of faith will be to speak to God. Faith is to the soul what life is to the body. Prayer is to faith what breath is to life. How a man can live and not breathe is past my comprehension, and how a man can believe and not pray is past my comprehension too.

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It is a good fall when a man falls on his knees.—*Charles Spurgeon*

⁸ See FGB 193, *Hypocrisy*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.