

our prayers, and that the prayer that pleases us *least* often pleases God *most*. Suffer me *then*, as a companion in the Christian warfare, to offer you a few words of exhortation. *One thing, at least, we all feel*—we must pray. We cannot give it up: we must go on.

(a) **I commend, then, to your attention the importance of *reverence and humility in prayer*.** Let us never forget what we are, and what a solemn thing it is to speak with God. Let us beware of rushing into His presence with carelessness and levity.⁴ Let us say to ourselves, “I am on holy ground. This is no other than the gate of heaven. If I do not mean what I say, I am trifling⁵ with God. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” Let us keep in mind the words of Solomon: “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth” (Ecc 5:2). When Abraham spoke to God, he said, “[I am] but dust and ashes.” When Job spoke, he said, “I am vile” (Gen 18:27; Job 40:4). Let us do likewise.

(b) **I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of *praying spiritually*.** I mean by this that we should labor always to have the direct help of the Spirit in our prayers and beware above all things of formality. There is nothing so spiritual but that it may become a form, and this is especially true of private prayer. We may insensibly get into the habit of using the fittest possible words and offering the most Scriptural petitions; and yet we may do it all by rote, without feeling it, and walk daily round an old beaten path, like a horse in a mill. I desire to touch this point with caution and delicacy. I know that there are certain great things we daily want, and that there is nothing necessarily formal in asking for these things in the same words. The world, the devil, and our hearts, are daily the same. Of necessity, we must daily go over old ground. But this I say—we must be very careful on this point. If the skeleton and outline of our prayers are by habit almost a form, let us strive that the clothing and filling up of our prayers be as far as possible of the Spirit...

(c) **I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of making prayer a *regular business of life*.** I might say something of the value of regular times in the day for prayer. God is a God of order. The hours for morning and evening sacrifice in the Jewish temple were not fixed as they were without a meaning. Disorder is eminently one of the fruits of sin. But I would not bring any under bondage. This only I

⁴ **levity** – lack of seriousness.

⁵ **trifling** – treating with lack of seriousness or respect.

say, that it is essential to your soul's health to make praying a part of the business of every twenty-four hours in your life. Just as you allot⁶ time to eating, sleeping, and business, so also allot time to prayer. Choose your own hours and seasons. At the very least, speak with God in the morning, before you speak with the world; and speak with God at night, after you have done with the world. But settle it down in your minds that prayer is one of the great things of every day. Do not drive it into a corner. Do not give it the scraps, leavings, and parings⁷ of your day. Whatever else you make a business of, make a business of prayer.

(d) **I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of *perseverance in prayer*.** Once having begun the habit, never give it up. Your heart will sometimes say, "We have had family prayers; what mighty harm if we leave private prayer undone?" Your body will sometimes say, "You are unwell, sleepy, or weary; you need not pray." Your mind will sometimes say, "You have important business to attend to today: cut short your prayers." Look on all such suggestions as coming direct from the devil. They are all as good as saying, "Neglect your soul." I do not maintain that prayers should always be of the same length—but I do say, let no excuse make you give up prayer. It is not for nothing that Paul said, "Continue in prayer," and "Pray without ceasing" (Col 4:2; 1Th 5:17). He did not mean that men should be always on their knees, as an old sect, called the Euchite,⁸ supposed. But he did mean that our prayers should be like the continual burnt offering—a thing steadily persevered in every day; that it should be like seed-time and harvest, and summer and winter—a thing that should unceasingly come round at regular seasons; that it should be like the fire on the altar, not always consuming sacrifices, but never completely going out. Never forget that you may tie together morning and evening devotions by an endless chain of short ejaculatory⁹ prayers throughout the day. Even in company, business, or in the very streets, you may be silently sending up little winged messengers to God, as Nehemiah did in the very presence of Artaxerxes (Neh 2:4). And never think that time is wasted that is given to God. A nation does not become poorer because it loses one year of working days in

⁶ **allot** – to give in portions.

⁷ **parings** – shavings; slivers.

⁸ **Euchite** – a member of a 4th century sect that believed salvation could be gained only through perpetual prayer.

⁹ **ejaculatory** – quickly and suddenly uttered.

seven by keeping the Sabbath. A Christian never finds he is a loser in the long run by persevering in prayer.

(e) I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of earnestness in prayer. It is not necessary that a man should shout, scream, or be very loud, in order to prove that he is in earnest. But it is desirable that we should be hearty, fervent, and warm, and ask as if we were really interested in what we were doing. It is the “effectual fervent” prayer that “availeth much,” and not the cold, sleepy, lazy, listless¹⁰ one. This is the lesson that is taught us by the expressions used in Scripture about prayer. It is called, “crying, knocking, wrestling, laboring, striving.” This is the lesson taught us by Scripture examples. Jacob is one. He said to the angel at Penuel, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me” (Gen 32:26). Daniel is another. Hear how he pleaded with God: “O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God” (Dan 9:19). Our Lord Jesus Christ is another. It is written of Him, “In the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears” (Heb 5:7). Alas, how unlike is this to many of our supplications! How tame and lukewarm they seem by comparison! How truly might God say to many of us, “You do not really want what you pray for!” Let us try to amend this fault. Let us knock loudly at the door of grace, like Mercy in *Pilgrim’s Progress*,¹¹ as if we must perish unless heard. Let us settle it down in our minds that cold prayers are a sacrifice without fire...

(f) I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of praying with faith. We should endeavor to believe that our prayers are always heard and that if we ask things according to God’s will, we shall always be answered. This is the plain command of our Lord Jesus Christ: “What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (Mar 11:24). Faith is to prayer what the feather is to the arrow; without it, prayer will not hit the mark. We should cultivate the habit of pleading promises in our prayers. We should take with us some promise and say, “Now, O LORD God, the word that thou hast spoken concerning thy servant, and concerning his house, establish it for ever, and do as thou hast said” (2Sa 7:25). This was the habit of Jacob, Moses, and David. The 119th Psalm is full of things asked “according to Thy word.” Above all, we should cultivate the habit of expecting answers to our prayers.

¹⁰ **listless** – characterized by being unwilling to make an effort.

¹¹ ***Pilgrim’s Progress*** – the classic Puritan allegory written by John Bunyan in 1678; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

We should do like the merchant who sends his ships to sea. We should not be satisfied unless we see some return. Alas, there are few points on which Christians come short so much as this. The church at Jerusalem made prayer without ceasing for Peter in prison; but when the prayer was answered, they would hardly believe it (Act 12:15). It is a solemn saying of old Traill's,¹² "There is no surer mark of trifling in prayer, than when men are careless what they get by prayer."

(g) I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of *boldness* in prayer. There is an unseemly familiarity in some men's prayers, which I cannot praise. But there is such a thing as a holy boldness, which is exceedingly to be desired. I mean such boldness as that of Moses, when he pleads with God not to destroy Israel: "Wherefore," says he, "should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains... Turn from thy fierce wrath" (Exo 32:12). I mean such boldness as that of Joshua, when the children of Israel were defeated before Ai: "What," says he, "what wilt thou do unto thy great name?" (Jos 7:9). This is the boldness for which Luther¹³ was remarkable. One who heard him praying said, "What a spirit—what a confidence was in his very expressions! With such a reverence he sued, as one begging of God, and yet with such hope and assurance as if he spake with a loving father or friend"... Here also I fear we sadly come short. We do not sufficiently realize the believer's privileges. We do not plead as often as we might, "Lord, are we not Thine own people? Is it not for Thy glory that we should be sanctified? Is it not for Thine honor that thy gospel should increase?"

(h) I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of *fullness* in prayer. I do not forget that our Lord warns us against the example of the Pharisees, who for pretense made long prayers, and commands us, when we pray, not to use vain repetitions. But I cannot forget, on the other hand, that He has given His own sanction to large and long devotions by continuing all night in prayer to God. At all events, we are not likely in this day to err on the side of praying *too much*. Might it not rather be feared that many believers in this generation pray *too little*? Is not the actual amount of time that many Christians give to prayer... very small? I am afraid these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily. I am afraid the private devotions of many are most painfully scanty and limited—just enough to prove they are alive,

¹² **Robert Traill** (1642-1716) – Presbyterian minister and author.

¹³ **Martin Luther** (1483-1546) – German Protestant theologian, the leading figure of the German Reformation.

and no more. They really seem to want little from God. They seem to have little to confess, little to ask for, and little to thank Him for. Alas, this is altogether wrong! Nothing is more common than to hear believers complaining that they do not get on. They tell us that they do not grow in grace as they could desire. Is it not rather to be suspected that many have quite as much grace as they ask for? Is it not the true account of many that they have little because they ask little? The cause of their weakness is to be found in their own stunted, dwarfish, clipped, contracted, hurried, little, narrow, diminutive prayers. *They have not because they ask not.* Oh, reader, we are not straitened in Christ, but in ourselves. The Lord says, “Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Psa 81:10). But we are like the king of Israel who smote on the ground thrice and stayed, when he ought to have smitten five or six times (2Ki 13:18-19).

(i) I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of *particularity in prayer.* We ought not to be content with great, general petitions. We ought to specify our wants before the throne of grace. It should not be enough to confess we are sinners. We should name the sins of which our conscience tells us we are most guilty. It should not be enough to ask for holiness. We should name the graces in which we feel most deficient. It should not be enough to tell the Lord we are in trouble. We should describe our trouble and all its peculiarities. This is what Jacob did when he feared his brother Esau. He tells God exactly what it is that he fears (Gen 32:11). This is what Eliezer did when he sought a wife for his master’s son. He spreads before God precisely what he wants (Gen 24:12). This is what Paul did when he had a thorn in the flesh. He besought the Lord (2Co 12:8). This is true faith and confidence. We should believe that nothing is too small to be named before God...Let us never forget that Christ is the true bridegroom of the soul—the true physician of the heart—the real father of all His people. Let us show that we feel this by being unreserved in our communications with Him. Let us hide no secrets from Him. Let us tell Him all our hearts.

(j) I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of *intercession in our prayers.* We are all selfish by nature, and our selfishness is very apt to stick to us, even when we are converted. There is a tendency in us to think only of our own souls—our own spiritual conflict—our own progress in religion, and to forget others. Against this tendency, we have all need to watch and strive, and not least in our prayers. We should study to be of a public spirit. We should stir ourselves up to name other names beside our own before the throne of

grace. We should try to bear in our hearts the whole world: the heathen, the Jews, the Roman Catholics, the body of true believers, the professing Protestant churches, the country in which we live, the congregation to which we belong, the household in which we sojourn,¹⁴ the friends and relations we are connected with. For each and all of these we should plead. This is the highest charity. He loves me best who loves me in his prayers. This is for our soul's health. It enlarges our sympathies and expands our hearts. This is for the benefit of the Church. The wheels of all machinery for extending the gospel are oiled by prayer... This is to be like Christ. He bears the names of His people on His breast and shoulders as their High Priest before the Father. Oh, the privilege of being like Jesus! This is to be a true helper to ministers. If I must needs choose a congregation, give me a people that pray.

(k) I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of thankfulness in prayer. I know well that *asking* God is one thing and *praising* God is another. But I see so close a connection between prayer and praise in the Bible that I dare not call that true prayer in which thankfulness has no part. It is not for nothing that Paul says, "By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Phi 4:6). "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Col 4:2). It is of mercy that we are not in hell. It is of mercy that we have the hope of heaven. It is of mercy that we live in a land of spiritual light. It is of mercy that we have been called by the Spirit and not left to reap the fruit of our own ways. It is of mercy that we still live, and have opportunities of glorifying God actively or passively. Surely, these thoughts should crowd on our minds whenever we speak with God. Surely, we should never open our lips in prayer without blessing God for that free grace by which we live and for that lovingkindness that endureth forever. Never was there an eminent saint who was not full of thankfulness. St. Paul hardly ever writes an Epistle without beginning with thankfulness. Men like Whitefield¹⁵ in the last century, and Bickersteth,¹⁶ Marsh,¹⁷ and Haldane Stewart¹⁸ in our own time, were ever running over with thankfulness. Oh, if we would be bright and shining lights in our day,

¹⁴ **sojourn** – stay temporarily.

¹⁵ **George Whitefield** (1714-1770) – Anglican preacher who helped spread the Great Awakening in Britain and the British North American colonies.

¹⁶ **Edward Bickersteth** (1825-1906) – Anglican minister, theologian, and author.

¹⁷ **William Marsh** (1775-1864) – Anglican minister and author.

¹⁸ **James Haldane Stewart** (1778-1854) – Anglican evangelical minister.

we must cherish a spirit of praise! And above all, let our prayers be thankful prayers.

(1) I commend to you, in the last place, the importance of *watchfulness over your prayers*. Prayer is that point of all others in religion at which you must be on your guard. Here it is that true religion begins: here it flourishes, and here it decays. Tell me what a man's prayers are, and I will soon tell you the state of his soul. Prayer is the spiritual pulse: by this, the spiritual health may always be tested...Oh, let us keep an eye continually upon our private devotions! Here is the pith,¹⁹ marrow, and backbone of our practical Christianity. Sermons, books, tracts, committee meetings, and the company of good men are all good in their way; but they will never make up for the neglect of private prayer. Mark well the places, society, and companions that unhinge your hearts for communion with God, and make your prayers drive heavily. *There be on your guard*. Observe narrowly what friends and what employments leave your soul in the most spiritual frame and most ready to speak with God. *To these cleave and stick fast*. If you will only take care of your prayers, I will engage that nothing shall go very wrong with your soul.

I offer these points for private consideration. I do it in all humility. I know no one who needs to be reminded of them more than I do myself. But I believe them to be God's own truth, and I should like myself and all I love to feel them more.

I want the times we live in to be praying times. I want the Christians of our day to be praying Christians. I want the Church of our age to be a praying Church. My heart's desire and prayer in sending forth this [article] is to promote a spirit of prayerfulness. I want those who never prayed yet, to arise and call upon God; and I want those who do pray, to improve their prayers every year, and to see that they are not getting slack, and praying amiss.

From *Practical Religion*, The Banner of Truth Trust,
www.banneroftruth.org.

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900): Anglican bishop and author; born at Macclesfield, Cheshire County, England.



Prayer is the longing of the soul to hold communion with the Most High, the desire of the heart to obtain blessings at His hands.—*Charles Spurgeon*

¹⁹ **pith** – the most essential part of an idea or experience.