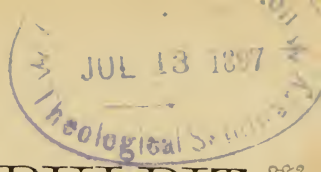


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VII.

UNANSWERED PRAYERS.

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Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss.—JAMES iv. 3.

THAT alone deserves the name of Prayer, which complies with certain well-defined conditions specified by him who has established the laws of prayer. It is important that we should study well these conditions; and if we do, we shall find the reasons why so much that is called prayer seems lost in the air, seems not to rise above the ceiling, seems thrown away. That is to say, we shall learn why men “ask and receive not.” There is something “amiss” in the petitioner or the petition. It is all-important, I say, to understand what this is, because a wrong idea of prayer and its answer will beget much mischief: leading first to disappointment, then doubt, then unbelief and formalism, and then to the entire neglect of this vital duty, this grand privilege of the creature and sinner—*an appeal to God*. I propose, then, to give a brief account of some of the principal reasons why what is called prayer is so often unanswered. This is the single object I have in view, and I shall aim at the utmost simplicity and brevity in tracing these reasons. Without further preface, let me say—

1. Some ask amiss, and therefore in vain, *because they*

appear before God with unrepented sin upon their consciences. Their attitude is not the befitting attitude of a suppliant who is approaching not only a great God, but a holy God. They are not humbled. There is a lurking love of sin which taints their prayers. There is some habitual sin perhaps, some evil temper or evil conduct over which they have not truly bemoaned as an insult to the good God to whom they bring their petitions. And although the things asked for may be altogether proper and desirable, and though they may be sought with a certain earnestness, yet so long as sin, any known sin, lies unrepented and overlooked in the heart, they ask "*amiss*" in the most radical sense of the word. It is not inconsistent with the doctrine of the efficacy of prayer, that when the life is full of vanity and corruption, and marked by practices denounced by God, the occasionally conscience-prompted prayer should be disregarded. The first cry of such a petitioner should be a penitent cry for forgiveness; the first duty, the duty of self-abasement.

The humility which God has assured us he will not despise, is not the humility of the creature merely, but of the sinner. What else but this is implied in the necessity of asking everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? Why in his name? Because at no time and under no conceivable circumstances could we hope to be answered for our own sakes. The very prayers and other acts of devotion of the best believer have so much of the taint of evil, that unless he be looked upon in the face of *God's anointed*, they will not be tolerated. He is our Atoner, our Advocate, our Intercessor—and all our hope of being listened to at all lies in the meritorious efficiency of his expiatory sacrifice, by which he bought for us the wedding garment in which to appear before God. All this implies an absolute sense

of unworthiness, and consequent repentance and renunciation of our sin before we can bring our special requests into the audience-chamber. Yes; the first cry of every prayer ought to be the "God be merciful to me a sinner," which made the publican's prayer successful.

At this critical period, when the Lord has sent his awakening Spirit so simultaneously, so extensively, and so unostentatiously upon the land, it is of primary importance to feel that the first call of "this Spirit of grace and of supplication" is a call to mourn over our personal and social offences, by looking upon him whom they have pierced. Let the family of the house of David, and of the house of Levi, and of the house of Shimei, "mourn apart," and their wives apart (Zech. xii. 10-14): for their declensions, their backslidings, their lukewarmness, their unbelief and omissions, have been very grievous before the Lord. How numerous and inexcusable they are, every one can see who looks at his own case. This attitude of contrition, an attitude far removed from the self-content and self-complacency which says "I am rich and have need of nothing," is the only one in which we may hope to meet a blessing from the God of Jacob, which shall both lift up his people to a higher level of holiness, and subdue to the obedience of Christ the careless and impenitent who swarm in our families, our congregations, our towns and cities.

Go, my friends, lie in the dust, put on sackcloth, put away iniquity—else your prayers, personal and social, will be as water spilled. For thus it is written, and let us ponder well the words—"The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God,

thou wilt not despise. "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He shall lift you up." While on the other hand, the "Lord, Lord!" of the wicked, whether inspired by fear or presumption, will be an abomination: "Depart, I never knew you." "When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear. Wash you, make you clean!"

2. Another reason why so much that is called prayer is unanswered is, that the petitioner *does not really desire the thing which the terms of the prayer imply*. The words are not an index of the true promptings of the heart. They are lacking in the essential element of honesty. Many prayers, eloquent and fervent though they seem, are only words, not so much meant for the ear of God, as for man's ears: hypocritical, hollow make-believes, offensive to him who looketh not on the outward appearance, but on the heart. Is it inconsistent with the divine pledge that God will hear and answer our requests, that such requests as he sees to be insincere should be not only not granted, but set down in the book of remembrance as crimes?

The formalism which counts its prayers, the ostentation which puts up glowing petitions meant for human ears, even the earnest conscience-prompted cries extorted by temporary fears, are condemned as offences by him who seeth not as man seeth. Common reason tells us this, and the word of God enjoins us to weigh well our words, that they may not go beyond the reality. Let us look deep into the heart, and inquire what are its real impulses, its real views of good, its uppermost objects of desire. The supreme desires of a man, whether they be for good or evil objects, are his real prayers. It is not enough to ask in words for humility or any other Christian grace; it is not enough to ask in

words for some blessing for our families, the church or the world. They must be sincere, hearty words.

Are *you* able to say, "Give ear unto my prayer, that goeth not forth out of feigned lips." Oh, remember that "the Lord is nigh unto all that call upon him—in *truth*. Ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." And let the warning of the Saviour strike you dumb when you are about to offer heartless petitions: "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy concerning you—this people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

3. Another reason why much that passes under the name of prayer is unanswered: *It is the prompting of a selfish, world-loving state of mind, which puts temporal before spiritual good as the predominant object of desire.* I speak now, not so much of the expressed as of the secret desires of the soul. It discovers a gross ignorance of relative values that the soul should ever place that which is fugitive before that which is permanent. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you." To reverse this order in our secret prayers, is a proof that our hearts are not right with God, and we have no cause of complaint if such selfish petitions should be disregarded. Suppose a case. If a man fix his eyes upon some success in life as the chief good at the moment, or if the absorbing desire of his heart be to escape some threatened temporal evil—sickness, loss of property, and such like; although he may not altogether omit from his prayers the weightier matters of the soul, its growth in the knowledge and grace of Christ, the subjugation of worldly passion, the forgiveness of sin, greater love and likeness to God in Christ, and kindred graces—yet by making that last which should be

first and that first which should be last, he virtually declares himself destitute of a right knowledge of himself, of the world, and of God.

Prayers thus reversed, have no right, we repeat, to expect an answer. Such were the prayers referred to in the text. They who asked, asked amiss in this respect, that they asked for something to expend upon their pleasures. But God has not promised to answer every man's prayer. It is the prayer of the "*righteous*," by which is meant the renewed, and justified, and spiritual man that availeth much. This reasonable condition of the promise is made plain by the hearer of prayer himself. "Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him; I will lift him up, because he hath known my name; he shall call upon me and I will answer him." This is an epitome of the word of God on this point, and it turns on the grand principle, that prayer being the index of love as well as of want, the supreme love of God as a portion, and of holiness as the only way to the enjoyment of that portion, will force all temporal things into a subordinate place among our petitions.

It is not meant by this remark, that we may not make wealth, or health, or influence, or any other temporal good an object of prayer. If it be lawful to aim at these things, it is lawful to pray for them. But only on two conditions. The first we have already noted, namely, that they should be counted secondary to the blessings of the spiritual life. The second is, that our motive for desiring them is a full purpose to devote them to the service of God. And be sure of this, my Christian brethren, that should you ever transgress these conditions in a fit of selfish forgetfulness—you shall not only not have your desires fulfilled, but God will chastise you until you are forced to abandon your idols and

cry, "Whom have I in heaven but thee, and there is none upon earth I desire beside thee?"

4. Consider now another explanation of unanswered prayers. *They are not mingled with thankfulness.* They are forgetful of past and present benefits. It is right that an ungrateful beneficiary who is always asking but never thanking should be turned away till he learns to have more decency. Look at the way in which many receive the good gifts of God's providence; taking them as if they were matters of course, or accidents in which God's goodness had no share, or the results of their own wisdom, industry, or merit,—and then remark how cheaply they are rated the moment some afflictive trial comes. A single want is permitted to shut from their view a thousand mercies. Can we wonder that the selfish cry of such a soul should be disregarded? Why, what right has any one to complain even if nothing of earthly joy be left but that which springs from the hope of heaven? To be out of perdition is a grand mercy for which to praise God. Everywhere throughout Scripture is gratitude represented as a necessary quality of acceptable prayer. A humble heart not only brings the sin-offering before the Lord, but the thank-offering. Hear the duties of the devout life summed up in a few brief sentences: "Offer unto God thanksgiving, and pay thy vows unto the Most High; call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee; and thou shalt glorify me." And study well an example full of these important lessons. Paul and Silas, covered with bruises, their feet in the stocks, cast into the dungeon of the prison, if they had been like some people I have seen, would have forgotten praise in the agony of prayer for deliverance. But it seems they "sang praises to God, and the prisoners heard them." Aye, and God heard them. You know what followed. I might

quote other precepts and examples, but let these suffice.

If you would have your prayers regarded, praise God for his mercies; make much of them, and do not suffer your approaches to God during even the severest crises of trial, to degenerate into reproachful, discontented, and impatient murmurings and repinings.

5. *The absence of pity for the suffering*, whether the suffering be of the soul or the body—is another explanation of unanswered prayer. Scripture is explicit on this point. Call to mind a few instances. “Blessed is he that considereth the poor, the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.” While, on the other hand, “whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he himself shall cry and shall not be heard.” I need not add, that the devouring of widow’s houses, the holding back the wages of the hireling, will only place one’s prayers, though they be as numerous as a Pharisee’s, among the rankest of his offences against God.

They who are themselves dependent, should not despise the dependent. The giving of Christian alms is a condition of acceptable prayer, not because attention to the poor and suffering is a meritorious prerequisite which entitles us to be heard, but because it is the evidence of a renewed soul, that has become one of the family of the gentle, compassionate Jesus. Such will make their alms a sweet-smelling savor to Christ, and will give them in Christ’s name, and in Christ’s spirit. Not the doling out of a few fragments of our superfluity, nor the alms of ostentation, nor the impatient gifts which are often flung into the face of the poor, as the rewards of their importunity—none of these mockeries of the kindly, patient, unwearied sympathies of the gospel can meet the demands of the Hearer of Prayer. “Freely ye have received, freely give”—this is the broad ground upon

which Christ claims our pity, our prayers, and our gifts, for those who are suffering under spiritual, or corporeal destitution.

Do you, my friends, consider how a practical oversight of this may be one of the reasons why some great blessing you have asked of God has been withheld?

6. Another reason why we sometimes ask and receive not, is, *that we do not ask in submission to the supreme wisdom and goodness of God*. Now there are many erroneous and vague ideas as to the breadth of the divine promise to grant "*whatsoever*" we ask in faith. Does that promise mean that God has bound himself to do precisely that thing in precisely that way which the petitioner selects as the best? In effect, this would be to convert prayer into dictation. It would be for God to abdicate the throne, and give the government of all things into the hands of the creature. The promise of the Saviour which pledges his Heavenly Father to do all we ask, does not imply consequences so dishonoring to God, and so injurious to ourselves.

There are various ways in which unbelief and presumption may "limit" the Holy One of Israel. Even in respect to *spiritual good* we are required to observe the obvious conditions which God's word and providence impose upon our prayers. For example: would it comport with the economy of God in respect to the laws of progress which he has imposed on the Christian life, to consider the promise as pledging God to grant the prayer of one who should ask for instantaneous and perfect sanctification while he is yet in the body? Or, were we to ask for one grace at the expense of another, would we have a right to expect it? Or, to insist upon the bestowment of any spiritual good for ourselves, or others, in precisely that form, and by those methods, which may seem to us most natural and propitious? But without

pushing the privilege of prayer to such extremes, how broad is the field of promise—how large the spiritual blessings we may seek with fearless importunity, submitting to God the questions of time, place, and methods.

And in respect to *earthly good*, while there are many things we may ask, there is still more reason for the exercise of submission to the supreme wisdom and goodness of our Heavenly Father. When our Lord says, "Whatsoever thing ye ask, believing, ye shall have"—are we to include results, the accomplishment of which would require an absolute miracle? As, for example, the bestowment of hearing and speech upon a deaf mute? This is one limitation which the nature of things imposes upon our petitions for earthly benefits. And even in those cases where no natural impossibility is implied, our petitions for any earthly good will be circumscribed by our well-known incompetency to decide whether any particular form of earthly good would, under the circumstances, be a good to us. The possibility that health, wealth, or any other real blessing, might not be for our spiritual benefit and growth in grace, nay, might be positively evil and injurious, will make the humble believer qualify every prayer of this sort, with the proviso—"if it seem good in thy sight." It is still true, "no good thing will he withhold," but let us leave it to him to decide what, in our precise condition, *is* a good thing. Carnal fondnesses are to be carefully watched, and often crucified. Tens of thousands have occasion to thank God that he has disappointed their prayers. We might "be cursed with every granted wish," as were the Israelites when they impatiently demanded flesh in the wilderness.

7. But still oftener are our prayers defeated and unanswered by *the absence of a believing importunity*.

This lays bare the secret of God's silence in many cases. Faith in the hearer of prayer—in the efficacy of prayer—in the assurance that he will grant our reasonable desires—this is the *sine quâ non* of all successful petitions. And yet do not many who call themselves Christian believers, believe many other things more than they believe this? They look more to preaching, and reading, and conversing, than to praying. They resort more to man than to God. When the question is of the conversion, comfort, or edification of friends and children, how many rely more upon other influences than they do upon prayer: more upon man's eloquence, reasonings, teachings, persuasions, than upon God's. Without forgetting the lawful use, or disparaging the value of appropriate instrumentalities, do we not know that the efficiency of them rests supremely and sovereignly with God? "I will be sought by the house of Israel." "Oh thou that hearest prayer, to thee must all flesh come." Paul plants, Apollos waters, but God giveth the increase. We must carry all means and instruments and lay them at his feet. If we do not, if any skepticism as to this class of truths lurk in our souls, we shall find our wordy petitions rejected as spurious.

God is not nigh, God does not hear, does not care, will not give—thoughts which would thus express themselves were they framed into speech, are a dishonor to God, and will paralyze prayer, or make it a mockery. It will become a cold, hesitating, half-hearted form. We will not ask fervently, not even honestly. Faith, even as a grain of mustard seed, is a living and germinating principle in the heart; it may be weak or strong, great or small—but it must be Faith. Else we will not take God at his word, will not act on his assurance; but will bring into his presence a suspicious countenance which virtually gives him the lie. Will he honor such peti-

tioners? Better to believe too much than too little, when God has commanded us to try him, to prove him, to open wide our mouths, to ask, seek, and knock. If it be an error to prescribe how and when God shall give, an equally great error is not to believe that he *will* give, and not to ask for the great things he has said he would give. How often do we ask, and omit to look for an answer? What is it to us, that *we* cannot see how the answer can possibly come? God's power can make a way. We look at the difficulties, but how many cases are on record, in which man's extremity has proved to be God's opportunity. Instances in which he has honored an implicit, trusting faith, abound in the history of every godly man, and put to shame all suspicious doubting of his power. When these instances are set before us, we are prone to call them marvellous, and regard them as exceptional—but is it not our incredulity which makes them seem so? There is nothing marvellous in God's keeping his word, or in his having employed some remote and unexpected channel; for are not all things under his control? But we are often so incredulous as to the possibility of an answer, we deem it so improbable, that even when it comes it causes doubt, surprise, alarm. When the Lord turned the captivity of Zion, although the captives had been praying for it, they felt as one that dreamed. The little prayer-meeting in the house of Mary, while engaged in praying for the imprisoned Peter, were thrown into alarm when he himself came and knocked at the door. They did not believe it. Had we more faith in prayer, we should have more perseverance in prayer. The little word "*wait*" is often to be found in this connection, and is full of meaning. It signifies desire, hope, submission, and patient constancy. It is the appropriate and honorable attitude of the believer.

8. We mention as last, not least, of the reasons which explain much unanswered prayer, that *the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit of supplication is not sufficiently sought as to the manner and the matter of our requests*. He alone can bestow the true *manner* of prayer: the fervent desire, the reverent dependence, the importunate steadfastness, the habitual appetency which hold the soul in the true attitude before God. But it is concerning the *matter*, or objects of prayer, that I now desire to speak, regretting that the limits of our time require me to be brief.

Have you studied what the word of God teaches on this subject? The apostle, who is our best human instructor and example, forcibly declares that the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us. These are his words, "Likewise the Spirit helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints, according to the will of God." In accordance with this are many other passages, such as these: "Praying with all prayer and supplication by the Spirit: Praying in or by the Holy Ghost: because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father."

These are parts of the divine science of prayer that few seem to have studied and fewer still carried into practice. Here the Spirit of God is presented as a Spirit of supplication, not only in the sense of his being the inspirer of the sacred manual of prayer, the word of God—not only as giving the right disposition of dependence and faith, but as indicating in some impressive manner *what* at any given time we may bring before

the throne as a special petition, and with an urgency so earnest and so profound as to be inarticulate. They are groanings that cannot be uttered. And what child of God, especially at critical periods of his experience, has not felt these impulses towards some object of desire, which seemed so large, so necessary, so vital as to be too big for words? Now, such prayer may well be recognized as the inwrought aspiration of the Spirit of God, and being such, we may all the more confidently believe that that longing is according to the will of God, and will be answered.

Why not then, believing hearers, seek more earnestly for this divine impulse as a guide to the matter or object of prayer: why not implore these intercessory leadings of the Spirit of God with a more frequent and importunate desire to be taught by him *what* to pray for as we ought? Guided by this heavenly Spirit of adoption, we may exercise the rights of intimacy in the house of our Father, and passing out of the region of vague generalities enter into particulars. With the written teachings of the word let us couple this secret of the Lord, and wrestling like Jacob, say, "I will not let thee go, unless thou bless me."

When I hear of an otherwise active, consistent, holy Christian saying, "I felt much impressed to pray for this or that person, or this and that thing," I recognize the impulses of the Spirit of God teaching him *what* to pray for: and when I hear, as I often have, that that prayer was answered, I comprehend the meaning of such scriptures as these: "Lord, thou wilt prepare their heart; thou wilt cause thine ear to hear. Quicken us and we will call upon thy name."

My dear friends, if ye know these great principles belonging to the grandest of all duties and privileges—intimacy with God, reconciled and fatherly through our

Lord Jesus Christ—happy are ye if ye put them to the full stretch of their power. All things, all revelations made to faith, all ministrations, all providences, are in order to prayer. Prayer is the climax of all other duties, because it gives God the dominion, and subjects everything to him.

If these essential conditions characterize the communion of saints with God and with one another, which has, we trust, been awakened into an unwonted activity through our land—if humiliation, honesty, unselfishness, thankfulness, sympathy, submissiveness, believing importunity, and an earnest desire for the leadings of the Spirit of grace and of supplications, should mark the secret and social prayers of God's people, we may assure ourselves that he will send us down a blessing so large that there shall not be room to contain it. But not otherwise. We need large blessings. You have only to look first of all within, and then abroad upon your families, the church and the state, to be impressed with the greatness of the necessities which at all times make the arm of the Lord our only hope. Do not then restrain prayer, when he has been pleased to honor us so vastly, by placing the prayers of his people among the chief laws and forces of the world.