

## Prayer.

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'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.'—Mt 7<sup>7, 8</sup>.

THERE is nothing which the world would be more glad to be sure of, or that most Christians desire to be clear about, than the value of prayer. Does God answer it, does He always answer it? Many people doubt whether He does at all. Most Christians doubt if He answer more than a few. Perhaps the majority of Christian people pray with a doubtful mind: *i.e.* not in doubt of what they desire, but whether God will respond in any way to their desire, which is just to say that in such conditions they do not pray at all. They keep up the form on the off-chance that there may be an answer. But they are not surprised when they see none; they cease to expect and then to pray, such praying is unworthy of the name at all; it hampers, not helps, spiritual life.

Yet here are Christ's words. Apart from the place in which they are found, they bear the hallmark of the Lord. No other could have ventured to utter them. And unmistakably their message is that every prayer is answered by God, that no prayer fails of its right effect with Him. Thrice, and always more emphatically, Christ insists on it. And He knew. He emphasized its importance, because He knew how difficult it is for us to accept and to act consistently on this truth.

The whole evil proceeds from the different view taken of what is involved.

Men, even Christian men, make prayer the means of trying to get from God what they desire. That is only a subordinate use of prayer; though it is good on a limited scale and so far as it goes. People, however, seldom look on prayer as the means by which God may be able to give them what He desires. The former way looks suspiciously like the heathen way of threatening or cajoling the gods. The latter is the aim of Him who devised prayer and gave it to us. For though His ways are not ours, nor His aims, they are high above ours as the heavens are above the earth. And assuredly they are wiser and better than ours. Men in praying can see nothing better than they ask

for: they do not see as God sees. For one thing they look only for that for which they asked. They expect to see it. They walk by sight, and not by faith. They do not guide themselves by the God to whom they pray, but by what they themselves are. They think of Him by what they themselves would do. They distrust Him, when they do not see the result. They cannot imagine the answer coming in another shape, or being delayed that something better may be given.

And if that is true of their view as to the answer, what must be said as to their prayer itself? There are prayers and prayers, just as there are Christians and Christians. Prayer reflects the heart that utters it, as well as the God to whom it is offered. Some prayers grovel in the dust and are utterly unworthy: others soar heavenwards and even touch the clouds. Now God's will is to make prayer helpful to men. He designs by it to raise men from the unworthy to the glorious in their petitions. He instituted prayer as the means for gaining this gracious aim. He treats all prayers in this way and uses them for this end. He tries to make them the means not of giving men in an easy slipshod way what they would like, but in the purest love what is in their best interest. He bends everything to that. He will deny or delay or give differently, where the prayer is not for the best. How can the answer be seen, or even sent, if the heart be set on other things and incapable of appreciating it?

One cannot fail to see in the text that though the whole refers to the certainty of an answer to every prayer, the truth is thrice repeated, but in each case differently. Had the aim been simply to emphasize that great truth, the formal repetition of the same words, with perhaps a 'verily, verily' before them, might have been sufficient. One cannot imagine, however, that such solemn words had no special meaning, especially on His lips who 'spake as never man spake.' Moreover, the truth they are intended to convey is necessary to the full understanding of the greater truth contained in them all—that God answers every prayer. The repetition of the truth by means of three emblems was designed to show *how* it is that God answers

all prayers, though in such a way that men do not always recognize it. For men *ask* for things. They *seek* for persons. They *knock* in order to gain access to an interior. And that is the order in prayer—*things, person, fellowship*. The matter may very well be illustrated by means of the structure of an Eastern house; indeed, it is quite within the bounds of possibility that Christ may have had the idea in His mind consciously as the basis of what He said. In the East a house is usually surrounded by a high wall and fronted by a heavy wooden gate as some sort of protection. If the travellers call and are admitted—which is doubtful always,—they have a measure of safety and shelter, even though they get no further; just as Mary the virgin, when the inn was full, had to go to the cattle-sheds at the side and her child was laid in the elevated hollow, which was the manger, and was cradled among the straw. Of course the visitor may get further in, if the master of the house is content. The stranger has not seen him at the gate; his servant or his son opened it, or he pulled back the heavy wooden bolt by means of a long rope. However, he will be found in what now would be called the public rooms of the house. And if he be satisfied more than usual with the visitor, he will perhaps take the extreme step of receiving the person into the private apartments with their intimacy. In the case of men this is all a mere possibility, becoming at every step more unlikely. But God is not man. With Him it is true absolutely at every step. Persons may ask things as at the outer court, or seek a person as in the public rooms, or knock for fellowship as in the inner sanctuary, but the truth never fails—every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

For instance, a person might begin by praying for mere things. Now, not all things are unworthy to be asked for. Those which are unworthy are usually recognized in their true character as what cannot be pressed for. But when the Lord taught men to pray 'give us this day our daily bread,' He showed that it was not a wrong thing in itself. The spirit made all the difference. Luxury, drunkenness, pride were forbidden when He said, 'Say not what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewithal shall we be clothed. After all these things do the heathen seek. Your heavenly Father knows that ye have need of these things.

Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you.' The situation is seen in these words. Men and God are looking at the matter from opposite poles. Men have little idea of a right perspective; they see small things as great because these are near, and great things as small because these seem afar off. God tries to educate men to see things in proper proportion. And the great rule is that everything is out of place and so out of all proportion if it be seen apart from Jesus Christ. This is an absolute rule. It is as true of spiritual things as of temporal—almost more so. Suppose that a man asks forgiveness, but does not consciously associate his desire with the person of Christ. A person is perhaps not entitled to say that the request will not be granted. But at least this can be said, that the gift will not bring the assurance and joy and healthy spiritual vitality which were intended to accompany it. The man could never have any assurance that he was forgiven. For Christ is man's guarantee for, just as He is the means of, all good. The 'For Christ's sake,' with which prayers so frequently close, are no vain words. They 'condition' all the rest of the prayer. If a man be better than a sheep, how much better the sacrifice of Him who was Godman than such trifles as food and clothes, or even than such wonderful things as forgiveness or holiness. Why, all these are but things; and though all other things were added to them, how could they ever outbalance His worth, or even be worth mentioning in the same breath as Him? He more than covers the value of the whole. How can it be but that all things come by Him? How can it be but that, having Him, men have all things? All things are yours, for ye are Christ's. Men are complete in Him. If God gave Him for them, nothing but Christ is needful. To have Christ means to have not only food and clothes guaranteed, but forgiveness granted; ay, and holiness too. God does not give as a niggard. He gives all. He who has Christ receives all things as a gift, just as he receives the fruits of the Spirit in their cluster and not just singly. And he who prays for Christ receives not only the pardon he desires, but much more besides, much that it will take time to unfold. Nay, he can be sure not of the immediate need, but of the full result; for he has Christ.

Now this is the way in which God desires men to pray. He desires them to see all in perspec-

tive. All things whatever must be correlated to Christ, else they are no blessing. If a man prays to be wealthy, it may be the worst thing for him to have his prayer granted. If the desire is not connected with Christ and subordinated to Christ, the soul's perspective is wholly disordered; the greed, if gratified, would mean 'leanness' to the man's soul. Let it be quite clearly understood that, as God looks on His Son as of more value than all else beside, men must give Him the same place as God has given Him; they must put Him first and value Him more than all. Any deviation from this rule is ruinous. To desire forgiveness and despise Christ is to defeat its own object. To desire holiness apart from Him is impossible.

Now it is the continued experience of what Christ means that leads men up into fellowship with God. The years show how truly 'God so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son.' He who sees in Christ the means of all good, who finds his own increasing need and continuing unreliability, will be led to look up and see who He was who provided so for him. He will recog-

nize his God. He will become assured that 'no man cometh unto the Father but by Me.' The Father he cannot mistake. His confidence and love are drawn out. He can go to God in the assurance that even if he make mistakes he will be received in the same spirit it which he comes; he will not be misjudged; he may even feel that, like Abraham, he can treat God as his friend and do what another dare not, or intercede and press his case. He knows what fellowship with God means in Jesus Christ; and as he looks on every thing only in connexion with Christ, he understands too what it is to be like-minded with God, and to pray according to His will. Such a man's prayers soar beyond the clouds instead of trailing along the earth. He has no doubt as to the answer to them all. What is good the Lord will give, is the rule of his faith. His prayers lift him out of his old self. He could not pray them now. He has come not only to see that God always answers prayer, but he sees in order to that how God does it; for he has been led upwards by God's treatment of his prayers—asking, seeking, knocking.

## Literature.

### WATTS-DUNTON.

'My experience,' says James Payn in his *Literary Recollections*, 'my experience of men of letters is that for kindness of heart they have no equal. I contrast their behaviour to the young and struggling with the harshness of the Lawyer, the hardness of the Man of Business, the contempt of the Man of the World, and am proud to belong to their calling.'

This tribute to the literary man is quoted in *The Life and Letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton* (Jack; 2 vols., 30s. net). It is the best introduction to a notice of the biography. Watts-Dunton was a literary man and he was kind. From beginning to end the reader is in touch with authors. If they are artists, they are also authors, as was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who has much of the book to himself. Watts-Dunton was a literary man. But he was also kind-hearted. Let us give an example. 'On one occasion Watts-Dunton befriended an artist with whom he had been on intimate terms

in days gone by. This artist, a portrait painter whose genius was never recognized except by a limited circle of friends, lost heart when old age was coming upon him, and fell into evil ways. He squandered the paltry sums he received for his work from picture-dealers and pawnbrokers in drink. He drifted out of sight of all his friends; his condition became so desperate that, homeless and without a soul, he started off to tramp through England, no one, not even his only sister, knew whither. Every one believed him dead. One day, however, there was a ring at the front door of The Pines, and a grimy-faced man, dust-ridden and in rags, inquired of the servant if Mr. Watts-Dunton was at home. Watts-Dunton was out; but it so chanced that his sister, Mrs. Charles Mason, at this moment passed through the hall, and recognized the tramp as an artist who in better days had painted her portrait. She was deeply moved at the wretched plight into which her brother's old friend had obviously fallen. She gave him enough money to provide him with a "square