

Public Prayer.

Paper to a Company of Lay-Preachers.

THE great difficulty in studying the subject of public prayer is that its success must come from spiritual sources. It is impossible to deal with the holy exercise itself, without having regard to the soul, from which it springs. As was said of evangelizing, in a late article on this subject in the *Baptist Times*, by the Rev. F. W. Boreham, so we may say of public prayer, "*it is much more to do with the spiritual mood of the man than with any outward form or method.*" Our task, therefore, is not so much an intellectual exercise as a spiritual meditation.

It is safe to remark upon the very threshold of the study, that only the man who is frequently in private prayer, and so secures the help of the Holy Spirit in that sacred duty, can lead the prayers of a congregation aright. There is an old story of the American Civil War, that when a soldier-boy was seen leaving the lines, he was arrested by a sentinel, and brought before the Commandant, on the suspicion of communicating with the enemy. When the officer asked him the reason for his going out of bounds he replied, he was going into the wood to pray. "Then kneel down and pray now," said the Commandant, "for you had never more need of it in your life." The boy's prayer was so artless and powerful that the officer released him, saying to his fellow-officers around: "He must be often at drill, or he would not have been so good at review." It is only the soul that has enjoyed communion with its Lord in secret, that can rightly express the needs of a congregation in public.

It has been said of preaching, that it is "all in the man"; that is to say, the secret of success is not found in words, manner, or style, but in the dealings of God with the preacher's soul, and the preacher's soul with God, before the ambassador of Christ stands before the people. That is still more true of public prayer. The cry, "Prepare your hearts before Him," uttered of old, should ring in the ears of all those who have to lead the supplications of the congregation before they open their lips in public. If he who preaches needs the teaching of the Holy Ghost before he speaks in the ears of the people, how much more does he who prays with them need to be taught of heaven before he speaks with God. "Keep thy foot when thou goest into the House of God," is good advice for all worshippers, but especially applicable to the leader in public prayer.

Another preliminary remark, very necessary, is, that the qualifications for acceptable public prayer are such as should characterize our private devotions. When we speak of prayer, there is much in common between that which we offer alone and that we offer in the hearing of the people. We must bear this in mind as we pursue our study. An enjoyed union with Christ before the Throne is the secret of both.

We come nearer to the heart of our theme in saying that we must keep before our minds the two views which may be taken of prayer—the human and the divine, our wants and God's gifts. Since the last is so overwhelmingly the most important, we must recognize that *God's power and love*, His ear and heart open to our cry, and His hand ready to send answers down, are so much *more important* than the thought of our needs. It is not exaggeration to say that the keynote of every public petition must be God—God—God! There are but four instances of lengthy public prayers given to us in the scripture outside the Book of Psalms—Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple; Daniel's prayer; the prayer of the Levites, recorded in Nehemiah; and the prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ in John xvii. The great characteristic of each of these is the *felt presence of God*. You have only gone a few sentences in the prayer, whether that of the dear Master or of His servants of old, when you feel already that you are bowing in the Holy of Holies. This was a peculiar characteristic of the public prayers of C. H. Spurgeon. When the people were gathered in the Tabernacle on Sunday morning, and there was a hum of conversation all over the place, at the stroke of eleven a hush would come on the assembly as the pastor walked down upon the platform. After two or three sentences of worship had fallen from his lips you forgot the presence of the multitude—so restless a few minutes ago—and the one thought was, "God is in this place, though I knew it not."

Nothing can exceed in impropriety the rushing into the presence of God with some personal request, without acknowledging the greatness and the glory of Jehovah, to whom the suppliant prays. It was this want of reverence which made one say of the prayers of a well-known preacher that, "He ordered God about as though He were his errand boy." And again, it is the lack of this holy reverence which produces what has been called the "familiar jabberings to God" which too often disgrace our Nonconformist services. "God is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him." "Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker." "God is in Heaven, and we upon earth, therefore let our words be few." "I have taken upon myself, who am but dust and ashes, to speak unto the Lord." "Thou art the God, who has made heaven and earth." Such thoughts must fill our hearts, even if some of the

scripture expressions do not rise to our lips, when we commence our public prayer.

The thought is of such importance that we do not like to leave it too speedily. What is needed is not only a sense of God and His presence in our own hearts, but to lead the people to feel the same. Surely Christ impressed this upon His disciples when He gave an example of the Church's prayer commencing with the lowliest homage, "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Both for ourselves and for the people, we need in our opening sentences to seek to press into the Divine presence. When Carlyle was describing the prayers of Edward Irving, he said: "He is seeking to do what no man can do and live, even *to see God*." There should be something of this hunger and thirst after God in our own souls as we approach unto Him, if we are to lead the people into the same mood.

And for this we need to recognize each Person of the Trinity. "Having therefore boldness to enter into the Holiest by the Blood of Jesus, let us draw near, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water"—that is, our lives cleansed by the Spirit's sanctification. "Through Christ we have access, by the Spirit, unto the Father." It is well, at the beginning of our prayers, equally as at the end, to ascribe honour and glory to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. We need the Father's ear, the Son's redeeming blood, and the Spirit's gracious energies, if we are to pray aright.

Coming closer to the main trend of our prayer, there are certain things we must seek to avoid. As D. M. Pantou has lately exhorted us, we must shun a *liturgy*, that is, saying the same things over and over in the same words Sunday after Sunday. There can be *order* in our petitions without using the same phraseology continually. Neither must we turn the prayer into a Bible reading. It is well frequently to quote the Word of God, especially His promises, and turn them round upon Himself. It was this which made George Herbert call prayer "reversed thunder." But that is quite a different thing to unloading our memory of a long list of texts, which both God and perhaps the people, know as well as, or better than, we do; and which are not needed at the time to express our wants before God. We must take care, also, not to make the prayer a short address. Nothing can be more inappropriate, and almost repulsive, than to make a pretence of talking to God, and all the while to be addressing the people. This is quite a familiar fault in prayer, and we charge our soul and the souls of our brethren to beware of such a grievous fault. There is a time for everything—a time to exhort and a time to pray. Let us avoid, also, cold formality.

Some prayers suggest that those who deliver them are only praying because it is the time to pray. There is no fire, no warmth, no emotion in what they say. No wonder that the audience goes to sleep under the infliction, and the responses of the auditory—whether spoken or felt—are few and far between.

What we have said already about seeking the presence of God, suggests the earliest thought in the prayer itself—*adoration*. When Andrew Murray brought out his little book, *Secret of Intercession*, he found in writing it, that he was continually met with the remembrance, "But many will say, how am I to carry out this gracious work?" His second book in the little pocket series was, therefore, *The Secret of Adoration*. It is in this spirit we must stand up before the people and open our lips. "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, fear before Him all the earth." "Thou art great and greatly to be praised; and to be had in reverence above all gods."

But having thus come and bowed our souls in the Divine presence, the next thought ought to be *praise*. And here is one of the most joyous departments of public prayer. To think of all those before you enjoy with yourself the forgiveness of sin, the witness of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of adoption, persevering grace, the promises which feed faith upon its journey, the fellowship of God in His three persons, the sure hope of heaven, the daily bread, the enjoyment of health and strength, the smile of friends, answered prayers, providential deliverances—

Moments come quick, but mercies are
More swift and free than they.

What a joyous exercise is this expression of praise for a number of hearts while you feel they are singing with your own! How often have we felt lifted up as on wings, heavenward, as we have tried to express the loving gratitude of the people of God. And yet, this is no easy part of public prayer. Have you ever asked, in a prayer meeting, one of the congregation to spend a few moments *in nothing but praise*? It is really amusing to do so. The brother or sister is almost certain to go off after a few sentences in asking for something. So naturally selfish are our hearts, or so burdened are we with our own and others' needs, that our songs soon die away into sighs.

And yet we must not undervalue this part of public prayer. The Divinely-provided prayer-book is the Book of Psalms, and it is full of singing. Sixty—more than one-third—are full of praise, and the last five are all Hallelujah Psalms, beginning and ending with "Praise the Lord!"

After praise should come *confession of sin*; and there, too, you will feel that instead of the few hastily-fleeing moments allowed you for the holy exercise, you need hours, to tell the

Lord the faults and failings and infirmities of the people before you, as well as your own. And he who knows his own heart best will best be able to lead the people in confession before God. Sins since conversion; the first love dying down into a smouldering flame; the first hatred of sin, when its true character was seen in the Spirit's light, now less fierce; and even a coquetting with evil allowed once more. The yielding to the carnal nature; ill tempers which disgrace the Christian home; coldness in holy exercises, especially neglect of the Sacred Word: all leading up to the cry, even on behalf of God's chosen and redeemed people: "We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and have left undone that which we ought to have done," and in us there is neither spiritual health nor spiritual help.

Then the sins of the unconverted: the hardness of heart; the worldliness and enthronement of self; the bitterness of disposition; the rejection of mercy and wilful blindness to death and eternity; sins of the tongue, and the thoughts, and the life; business sins, home sins; leading to the bitter cry, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." This part of public prayer needs deep heart-searching lest there be a self-righteous condemnation of others, or, on the other hand, a shutting of one's eyes to evils which should be confessed publicly. But no public confession of sin should ever be made without pleading the precious Blood, and casting self and hearers alike upon the merits of Christ's Atonement.

The next thought in our public prayer—and I remind my hearers again of Pantou's warning, "No liturgy!"—must be *supplication*. Here comes an immense field. Remember, to begin with, how graciously Christ allowed the daily need to be put very early in what we call the Lord's Prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread" precedes the request for many spiritual blessings. This was just like His tender heart. "Thou rememberest that we are dust." Therefore, before you plead for an increase of holiness, or for the salvation of sinners, begin by dealing with those things which, alas! lie nearest home to the hearts of most of your auditory. Tell the Lord about the sick ones, about the bereaved ones, about those who find a hard struggle, about the tempted ones, about those who are saying, "No man careth for my soul"; about those who have brought burdens to the House of God which no one must know of but He, who listens to the sighing of the soul in secret. Distinguish carefully in your audience here. Pray for the aged in their feebleness, for the children in their ignorance, for the young people in their bright outlook on life, for the merchant, for the workman, for the tired mother; pray for such things as you feel the hearts of your people are calling after, and with your supplications mix the Divine promises suited to the cases for

which you plead. Perhaps I was never so struck with the wisdom exercised in this part of prayer than in the case of the present beloved pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

But if the Spirit's aid is indispensable to express the multifarious temporal needs of the flock, how much more do we need His assistance in bringing their spiritual wants before God. Who shall catalogue their number? Who shall adequately feel their importance? What tongue can tell their urgency? What man amongst us may not tremble as we thus stand "between the living and the dead"? Only to name the spiritual needs of a congregation is sufficient to make a man who is going to lead the prayers of the people to cry out afresh for Divine help to pray aright.

The needs of the people of God for a new consecration, a return of the soul to the "first love"; a filling of the Spirit at the foot of the Cross: "Christ has redeemed us . . . that we might receive the promise of the Spirit by faith"; the anointing for service; the joy of soul-winning; the growth in grace; the preparation for the Lord's coming; the bearing witness to the world, "in holiness and righteousness before Him"—what a field for prayer! Then the supplication voicing the needs of the *unsaved*—the healing of spiritual diseases; the unveiling of Divine truth; the Spirit's light and power with the Word; conviction of sin; faith in Jesus; regeneration; a new heart and a new life—what themes for agonized supplication! To voice the hunger of the human soul—*God help us!*

Now let me give a word of warning here. It would be manifestly absurd if any young preacher considered that public prayer would be incomplete, unless every hint given in this paper was followed every time he gets up to pray. There are diverse seasons; and the heart, guided by the Spirit, will dictate which department of prayer it is especially needed to enlarge upon, or which special petition is needful just then to bring before God. Some matters in this sketch of public prayer need not, of course, *be mentioned every time*. God forbid that we should clog the wheels of the chariot by loading it too heavily.

Following supplication in public prayer comes *intercession*, and there again the field is as wide as the world, and as full of opportunities for prayer as are the needs of all classes and of all nations. Begin with the Church, her ministers and officers, ask for revival, pray for her guidance in any path of holy service her steps seem specially to be guided into at the present. Ask for the different branches of usefulness in the Church in whose service you are preaching, that every branch and every twig of every branch, every worker in every field of service, may be fruitful. Then let your intercession go forth to the neighbourhood which surrounds the Church, and there again no

specific advice can be given. Your intercessions must be shaped by the character and needs of the people around. Then pray for your land. You have no need to mention the monarch and various members of the royal family every time you open your mouth, but do not forget that it is enjoined upon us to pray "for kings and all those in authority." Then pray for other nations, as well as the one in which you have found a home, and pray for any specially downtrodden or oppressed people. Do not turn your prayer into a newspaper, but at the same time, be large-hearted enough to take the whole world in your intercessions. Then very especially bring in God's missionary servants. If you would have the people do their work for God aright in giving, sending, and going to the uttermost parts of the earth, do not neglect the interests of the missionary societies in your prayers. And end where you began. As the praises of God will crown your earthly course, as at conversion they heralded the following years of your Christian life, so let the peroration of your prayer be a doxology "unto Him that sitteth upon the Throne and unto the Lamb for ever."

But the more we try to set forth what public prayer should be, the more hopeless the task appears. Who shall describe the spirit with which the man of God should pray? "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Oh! for this *fervency*, so lacking in our public devotions! "Labouring fervently in prayer." When the prayer is over, how much *labour* have we put into it? One of our most popular preachers lately said, that the word "organize" might well be dropped out of the Church's vocabulary for the present, and the word "*agonize*" be allowed to take its place. Oh! for Jacob-like wrestlings with God! Oh! for the tears of Christ and of His great apostle! If God Himself could say, as He looked upon His straying people, "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?" are we to be content with languid emotion when we pray for others, undeserving and ill-deserving? It was the pleadings of a young advocate in an American court of law which aroused the enthusiasm of a young preacher in pleading both with God and men. Let us emulate such enthusiastic earnestness. So shall we carry the people along with us in our petition and conquer at the Mercy-seat.

Perhaps an appropriate closing word would be this—think more of Him *to* whom you speak than of those *for* whom you speak. In other words, think more of *what* you are doing than of *how* you are doing it. It is a great temptation, but a terrible weakness, in our public prayers, to allow our thoughts to be carried to the criticism of our hearers. Where there are frequent responses to public petitions, I have found myself listening for the "Amens!" of the people, and when they have not come, I

have felt discouraged in praying. This is a great fault, and must be guarded against. We do not pray to please their prejudices, we are praying that we may prevail with God. While you seek to speak to the Most High so that you express the desires of your flock, at the same time, let the eye of your soul be on Him who fills the Throne rather than on the congregation listening to your prayer.

And, above all, never pray without leaning heavily on the Spirit of grace and supplication. If you need His teaching in other departments of holy service, how much more do you need that Divine help in addressing the Sovereign of Heaven and Earth. As we think together over the sacred task, we will follow the disciples back to the Master, with their old request, "Lord, teach us to pray." Let us value the task unspeakably. It will obtain blessing. Prayer cannot fail. The rule of Christ's Kingdom is, "Ask, and ye shall receive." Let this cheer you as you lead the people into prayer. Remember the words of George Herbert—

Prayer is the Church's banquet, angel's age,
 God's breath in man returning to its birth;
 The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
 The Church's plummet, sounding heaven and earth.
 Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tear,
 Reversed thunder, Christ's side-piercing spear.

Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
 The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
 Church bells beyond the stars heard, the saints' blood,
 The land of spices, something understood.

May your public prayers be all that, and much more.

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