

# Prayer in the Life and Teaching of Jesus.

**I**N a brief word of introduction I want to define the scope and the limits of this paper. Its Theme is the Theory and Practice of Prayer in the Life and Teaching of Jesus. Everything that is written here will come within the scope of that title and will not go beyond it.

## THE PRACTICE OF JESUS.

One of the very obvious facts revealed by the Gospels is that Jesus frequently prayed. That is a fact worth observing. For while we have few records of what Jesus actually said in prayer, the fact that He engaged in it is an indication of the value He attached to it. From some private points of view it is unfortunate that the Gospels are only a record of the memorabilia of Jesus, and not standard biographies. But we must work under such limitations.

It is interesting to notice the numerous occasions on which the Gospels declare that Jesus prayed. By collecting those references and re-arranging them it is possible to arrive at some conclusions about Christ's Practice of Prayer. The methods adopted by Jesus were infinitely varied as to time and place. He prayed early in the morning and late at night, sometimes continuing in prayer through all the watches of the night. At times He prayed in solitude on the mountains or in the wilderness; while at other times He prayed before His disciples. His methods were varied.

On several occasions His prayers took the form of public thanksgiving. Once he offered thanks because God had hidden His Truth from the wise and prudent and had revealed it to babes. There is no attempt to justify this fact. All He does is to render thanks for it and to say, "Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight." On another occasion just prior to His feeding of the five thousand we are told that Jesus took the loaves and gave thanks. And in the story of the Last Supper, which is recorded by all the synoptic writers, Jesus gave thanks for the bread and the cup. Thanksgiving was certainly part of His Prayer Life.

Moreover all the big moments of His life were associated with prayer. Thus, for example, we are told that He prayed at His Baptism and Transfiguration. He prayed at the grave of Lazarus before raising him from the dead, and on the occasion of His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. He prayed in the

Garden of Gethsemane and at last when He found Himself upon the Cross. In the big moments He prayed.

Another fact made clear by the Gospels is that when virtue had gone out of Him Jesus prayed. We are told He did so after a strenuous evening spent in healing the sick; after cleansing the leper; after healing the man with the withered hand; and after feeding the five thousand. The performance of such tasks means the expenditure of spiritual forces and a consequent need for renewal. Jesus found that renewal of strength in prayer.

There were times when He prayed for special individuals. For Peter in his impending denial of the Master, and for the disciples that they might receive the Comforter. Evidently His prayers for individuals were highly valued and trusted. Something of that faith in the efficacy of His prayers was revealed by Martha just before He raised Lazarus from the dead.

But the most striking fact about the Gospel records is their comparative silence about the subject matter of Christ's prayers. There is a valuable deduction we can make from this. It is that in the life of Jesus, prayer was not necessarily His asking for something. The only feasible explanation of these morning solitudes and midnight watches—and surely they were more numerous than the records tell—is that to Jesus, prayer meant primarily an opportunity for communion with God. It brought a time of fellowship, and the fellowship may have been just as intimate in silence as in speech. Praise and thanksgiving and silent adoration constitute prayer just as much as actual petition does. If we have grasped this truth we have at least got rid of the idea that Prayer can be dispensed with. Prayer is communion with God. It is essential for soul culture. It is forced upon us by a great human instinct. The practice of Jesus will teach us that.

#### THE PRAYERS OF JESUS.

The recorded prayers of Jesus are few in number but of great importance. They cannot be ignored in any attempt to state the teaching of the Gospels about prayer. In the four Gospels the recorded prayers of Jesus are of four types.

(1) First of all there are the *Prayers of Thanksgiving*. The first is recorded in Matthew xi., and in Luke x. 21. Here is Jesus confronted by a mystery that meets us all. Somehow, according to the arrangements of Providence, spiritual Truth is more clearly discerned at times by those very people whom we should imagine lacked qualification. There is an inscrutable mystery about it all. Jesus recognizes that, but He gives thanks for the mysterious arrangements of an all wise Providence. It is an attitude of mind that is well worth cultivat-

ing towards most of the mysteries of this life. To Jesus even mystery affords an opportunity for the giving of thanks. The second recorded Prayer of Thanksgiving is in John xi. 41-42. Jesus is about to restore Lazarus from the dead, and, feeling that big issues are involved, He offers prayer. But, contrary to our expectation, it is a Prayer of Thanksgiving, not of petition. It is a prayer dictated by a triumphant faith, the faith that attempts big things and expects to see them done. Since this work is for the glory of God, why not be assured of it and give thanks in advance. If such a faith were ours it might conceivably alter the nature of many of our prayers. A mystery and a venture of faith prompt Christ to thanksgiving in prayer.

(2) Next we turn to Christ's *Prayers for His Disciples*, and here the Master's Prayers definitely assume the form of petition. There are three such prayers recorded in the Gospels.

The first is for Peter who will soon have to endure a severe trial. Jesus sees it coming and He prays for His disciple, that he may surmount the trial. There is no desire expressed that Peter may be delivered from the necessity of enduring the test. The prayer only desires that strength be given him for it. (Luke xxii. 32.) The second prayer is in John xiv. 16, 17. What Jesus is thinking of is the need of the disciples in their future service. His prayer has for its chief end the supplying of those needs.

The other petitions for the disciples are all found in John xvii. There Jesus prays that His followers may be kept from the world's evil and sanctified through the word of truth. He prays that all who believe may be one, that the world may believe; and that at last those who believe may be with Him to behold His glory. Behind all these petitions for the disciples lies a passion for the Kingdom of God. The needs of the disciples are related to the needs of the Kingdom; "That the world may believe"; "That they may behold My glory."

(3) In the Gospels there is one of Christ's *Prayers for His Enemies* (Luke xxiv. 34). When He was dying on the Cross, He even thought of the needs of those who were putting Him to death. He prayed that they might be forgiven. It is Christian Prayer at its best. There is no prostitution of prayer to selfish ends. It is again related to the Kingdom of God.

(4) Finally, there are Christ's *Prayers for Himself*. There is one prayer which Jesus refused to offer when He was at last taken prisoner. He could have prayed for legions of angels. But the prayer was never offered. Jesus refused to pray for a life of personal ease, void of suffering. Again it was the Kingdom of God that mattered. Even personal desires must be subjected to it. The first duty is to know the will of God.

There were two occasions when Jesus offered prayers which might challenge the Will of God. The first was when He made His entry to Jerusalem (John xii. 27). The second was in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew xxvii. 39). On both occasions He uttered a petition which might not be in keeping with God's will, but in the end confessed Himself ready for that will. Again the needs of the Kingdom became His chief concern. The same passion for the Kingdom reveals itself in the personal petitions recorded in John xvii. Everywhere in that prayer is the consciousness of the Kingdom and all its varied petitions have their definite relation to the Kingdom.

On the Cross it seemed that for one brief moment Jesus lost His consciousness of God, when in agony He cried, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" But in the end the old conviction returned, that everything was in the hands of God, and once more peace returns to the spirit of Christ; "Into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

The only possible conclusion you can reach when you have studied the recorded prayers of Jesus, is that Christ prayed chiefly for the doing of God's will. He prayed that it might be done in and through Himself and His disciples. It is the highest level to which prayer can rise. When the prayers of Jesus passed from praise to petition they ended on this note, "Thy will be done."

#### THE TEACHING OF JESUS.

##### (A) THE SUBJECT MATTER OF OUR PRAYERS.

What Jesus taught His disciples to pray for is contained in The Pattern Prayer, commonly called "The Lords Prayer." Everything Jesus had to say on this subject is there. In such passages as Luke xxi. 36; Mark xiii. 33; Mark xiii. 18; Matthew xxix. 20, it would seem that the word "pray" is used in a purely conversational way. There are other passages such as Matthew ix. 38; Matthew v. 44; Mark xiv. 38, and their parallels in the other Gospels which can all be grouped under the petitions of The Pattern Prayer.

In the Lord's Prayer (Matthew vi. 9-13) there are seven definite requests, which though not exhaustive are intended to be our pattern. The first three requests are all concerned with God. They seek the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's Kingdom, and the doing of God's will on earth.

The last four requests are concerned with ourselves, but each one is social. The Prayers for daily bread, and forgiveness, and the avoidance of temptation, and deliverance from evil, can only be understood in a social context. Therefore they are really prayers for the coming of God's Kingdom.

According to the Teaching of Jesus, the Kingdom should be the burden of our requests in prayer. There is no sanction for purely selfish desires, except where these are related to the Kingdom and its needs. Many such requests are bound to arise. We cannot avoid being personal in prayer. But detached desires and purely selfish motives are quite unauthorised. God makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and is kind to the unthankful also. To make the Kingdom the standard is to allow a sufficient latitude in prayer, even for foolishness. If earthly parents know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. Your Father knoweth what things ye need have of. Individual desires may not be for the advancement of the Kingdom nor for our own good, and must end as the Master has taught us they should, "Not my will but Thine be done."

#### (B) THE SPIRIT OF OUR PRAYERS.

Jesus has a good deal to say about the spirit of our prayers. His teaching in this respect can be grouped with a fair degree of success and without doing violence to His teaching.

(1) The first great essential is sincerity. If any prayer is to be sincere there must be a sincere life behind it. When Jesus denounced the Pharisees for making long prayers and devouring widows' houses, He is condemning insincerity in prayer. These men love to pray at street corners and in synagogues, to be seen of men. Jesus would have His disciples pray in secret. When He cleansed the temple, He declared that you cannot run a House of Prayer and a Den of Robbers at the same time. If you pray for forgiveness you must also forgive. The insincerity of the Pharisee and the humility of the publican are the two possible attitudes, and we know which merited the approval of the Master. The rich man's prayer in Hell is unanswered because he failed to use opportunities that were given. All this leads us to understand that the underlying motive of a life creates the value of the prayer. Only if the living is sincere can the prayer be sincere. Therefore the inner ethic of prayer is just as severe as any that was ever enunciated by the great Teacher from the mountain top.

(2) The second essential is Persistence. The ministry of Prayer is a strenuous one. The very way in which Jesus united Prayer and Fasting indicates that. Your prayer like your fasting must cost you something. It must involve sacrifice. Prayer is not the easy thing that some of us imagine. In prayer Jesus sweat great drops of blood. Prayer will prevail because of its importunity. The parables of the Importunate Friend and the

Unjust Judge, emphasize that men ought always to pray and not to faint. The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence and the violent take it by force. Prayer is neither vain repetition nor much speaking. It is the expenditure of your life's blood. It creates a passion in life and demands from us in service and sacrifice, the very utmost we have to give.

(3) The third essential is Faith, which certainly does not mean that our little personal desires will be answered as we think they ought to be. Divorce some passages from their context or separate them from the whole of the teaching of Jesus, and they will seem to indicate that we can pray for anything. Such passages as John xiv. 13; xv. 7; xvi. 23: xvi. 26, have all conditional phrases. Everything we desire may not be for God's glory; nor may it be the product of our abiding in Christ; nor may it always be asked in Christ's name. Mark xi. 23-24, with its parallel in Matthew is a very difficult passage. But from what we already know of Jesus and His Teaching, we cannot understand that passage to mean that every little whim will be satisfied by a supernatural visitation that will remove mountains. It is but an illustration, an encouragement to have faith in prayer as Christ taught men to pray. Matthew xviii. and xix. is related to the passage where Christ speaks of the Church and her function. The Church exercises her function for the Kingdom. All Christ has to say about ordinary desires is that your Father knoweth ye have need of them. The injunction is to seek first the Kingdom and the other things are added. Faith in Christian prayer is a belief in the goodness of God and the final triumph of the cause of righteousness. It is when our faith is of that quality that we ask and receive. Jesus does not speak of an answer to prayer, He speaks of a Reward; and there is a difference.

#### A SUMMARY.

And now we must try to summarize the points we have made, so that some clear impression may be left upon our minds.

From our study of the Life of Jesus we have discovered that the frequency with which He prayed revealed the value He attached to Prayer as Communion with God. That conception of Prayer made it an essential for the human soul.

Petition, however, is bound to be an element of all true prayer. The end Jesus always had in view when He presented petitions was the doing of God's will and the coming of God's Kingdom.

His Teaching on the subject matter of the Disciples' Prayer, is that the validity of individual requests depends upon their rela-

tion to the needs of the Kingdom. And the essential characteristics of true prayer are sincerity and persistence and faith.

Prayer first involves Communion with God, and only afterwards Petition. With the teaching of Jesus before us we can be dogmatic about this; that petition is for the Kingdom of God, and only for personal desires as these affect the Kingdom. A study of this whole theme makes one feel that the disciples have great need to bow themselves in the Master's presence, asking Him again and again as the first disciples did, "Lord, teach us to pray."

R. GUY RAMSAY.

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THE OLNEY CHURCH is investigating its early history. It knows that John Gibbs was preaching there before 1669, that in 1672 a friend of Bunyan was preaching in the barn of William Henseman, that members of Rothwell church in Olney formed a Pedobaptist church in 1691 (the Lower Meeting), of which Henseman was Elder, that Gibbs formed in 1694 an open-membership church which built itself the Upper Meeting, that Matthias Maurice became its pastor in 1699, but the church split and he went next year to the Lower Meeting, then on to Rothwell. For the next fifty years the thread is lost, but there are these beads, which may have fallen off. In 1711 Joseph Palmer was preaching here, who four years later was at Road; in 1713 John Chater, formerly of Bradfield, attended hence at College Street; in 1716 there was dissension, no soul-food; in 1718 there were two sections, one headed by Williamson; in 1720 John Castor was buried here; perhaps Charles Rodgers, till at the end of 1721 he settled at Northampton Green; in 1733 he baptized Mary Allsop of Olney in her 89th year; in 1738 several members joined from Walgrave, and Moses Deacon re-formed them as a Strict church; in 1741 Francis Walker settled, from Prince's Risborough; in 1748 he died; another Rogers appears 1749-52, succeeded about 1754 by W. Walker, of Rushden or Northampton Green. Thenceforward there are documents. The church will appreciate any information as to the people named, or anything to elucidate the half-century.