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Learning To Pray

By the late: C. D. Cole

"And it came to pass, that as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1).

After listening to their Lord and Master pray on a certain occasion, one of the disciples said to Him: "Lord, teach us to pray." This request suggests several things. There must have been an obvious difference between their praying and His. Their prayers, like most of the prayers one hears today, must have been for the most part, perfunctory, stereotyped, listless, and cold. The disciples could see the difference and were greatly impressed. They wanted to improve in their prayer life. And who shouldn't?

Another thing, we have to learn to pray. Prayer is an art. Someone has said that by the very constitution of our being, men are praying creatures, so that we pray by instinct. Wherever you find people, you will find religion of some sort, and wherever you find religion, you will find men praying—they are seeking to contact the god they worship and fear. This very instinct to pray is implanted in the human soul. So-called irreligious people will call upon some god in a crisis.

The instinct to pray is the very norm of the Christian life. Every Christian prays to the true God as his Father. He prays by instinct. Prayer is a part of the birth pangs of the new-born. Now this instinct to pray is raw and uncul-

tivated and undisciplined. Prayer is the most rudimentary of the Christian graces and needs to be improved upon. Unless we learn to pray, we will continue to pray by mere instinct as a child of God. We will instinctively turn to our Heavenly Father when we are in conscious need, when we are in danger, or in time of crisis. In times of trouble, we turn to God just as instinctively as a hurt or frightened child seeks the refuge of its mother's arms.

When we pray by instinct and not as a matter of habit, our prayers are apt to be self-centered, and forgetful of others. And we may never get beyond the begging stage. Jules Romains, French poet and novelist, observed people in church as they bowed their heads in silent prayer and surmised that they were presenting such pleas as these:

"O God of heaven, please heal my injured leg—O God, fill my shop with customers—O Lord, help me to find out if my servant, John, is robbing me—O God, cure my sore eyes—Save me, O God, from being drunk so often—Lord, let my son pass his examination—O Lord, help me to make her fall in love with me—O God, if only I could get some work—O Lord, my husband makes a martyr of me, Let me die." Now, there is nothing wrong with such prayers as these; they do express various desires of the human heart and acknowledge the need of divine help. It is legitimate to pray for help when anything concerns or troubles us.

Another danger, when we pray by mere in-

instinct, is that it is likely to be spasmodic and occasional. This kind of prayer is during the storm; when the winds cease, and the sun shines, the praying stops. As soon as the danger is past, or the pressure is relieved, or the sickness gone, the prayer ceases. When we pray by mere instinct, we are always driven to our knees by a situation that has us licked. And there can never be any joy in such praying. It is always and only a time of agony. I am not saying that we should never pray in a time of crisis, but that is not the only time to pray. There is a joyful time to pray as well as a time of need. When one learns to pray, he will pray at all seasons, and there will be joy in prayer.

This leads us to say, that there are other kinds of prayer besides begging. We are beggars and our Heavenly Father wants us to ask Him for blessings. But begging is not all of praying. Other forms of prayer are adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, and confession.

A general definition of prayer makes it intercourse or communion with God. In prayer we talk to the unseen but real God. Sometimes we need to come to him in confession of sins. This is necessary for continued fellowship with God and for a happy Christian life. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins," is the promise of His word. And prayer should always take the form of adoration. In the model prayer, Christ taught His disciples to first hallow His Name; that is to set His Name apart from all other names. And since the name of God stands for what He is, we should think and speak of Him as separate and apart and above and beyond all others. We should think of Him as solitary and alone—the only true and living God—the incomparable One. This will keep us from idolatry—from trying to make a likeness of God. There should also be thanksgiving in our prayers. "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (I Thess. 5:18).

Then there should be the prayer of intercession. We should pray for others—we should want our Father's blessings to fall upon others—even upon our enemies.

Why do we pray so little? It is because we have not learned the art of praying. The instinct to pray has not been developed and disciplined.

To learn to pray, we must be much in the conscious presence of God. We cannot adore God unless we know Him, and we cannot know Him apart from the Scriptural revelation He has given of Himself. The Scriptures reveal God in His personal attributes and marvelous works. To see who God is and what He has done and can do, is to draw the heart out in praise and worship. Thomas Goodwin, one of the Puritans, says that he knew men who came

to God for nothing else but just to come to Him—just to be in His presence. He who likes good company should and will like to be in God's presence, that is, consciously in His presence. Oh how much all of us need to practice the presence of God.

Prayer is fellowship with God. In prayer we are in agreement with God. We think His thoughts after Him. We think of sin as He thinks of it. One can't pray and be in love with sin. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). It is quite impossible for the man who is selfish and superficial and in love with sin on his feet to be a saint on his knees.

To learn to pray takes time and practice. Proficiency in prayer comes only with long and patient practice. It demands just as much patience and industry and devotion as men give to any other work, such as painting and sculpture and music. Brother Lawrence, the man who became so well-known as the man who practiced the presence of God, spent ten years teaching himself to pray—ten years of quiet, resolute, unceasing effort.

The only way to get beyond the impulsive, ejaculatory, spasmodic prayer, prompted by some sort of crisis, is to deliberately cultivate the practice of daily prayer. In prayer we need to copy the musician, bent on the mastery of his instrument, and refuse to allow anything to interfere with the practice of prayer.

Medical science tells us that the body builds up a natural immunity to certain diseases after one has had such a disease. One may have measles or small pox or scarlet fever, or some other disease, and will then be immune to catching the disease again. And so medical science has found a way to make people artificially immune by the injection of antitoxins or antibodies. In plain words, give a man a very mild dose of the disease and he develops an immunity to the real thing. This leads us to the terrible suggestion that this can happen religiously as well as physically. A person may become immune to the real thing by being partially infected with a small amount. A person vaccinated with a small dose of religion may become immune to the real thing. Or one may be inoculated with false religion with the same effect. That is why, from our point of view, a lost church member is more difficult to reach than one outside the church. Thunder at him the warnings of God, and he is not alarmed because he has religion and is a church member. Appeal to him to support the work of the church, and he is vaccinated against taking the appeal seriously. He turns the edge of the appeal by saying that salvation is free, without money and without price.

One can know just enough Scripture to make

him immune to certain portions of Scripture. A man may hold to the doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the law in such a way that He will become immune to the Scriptures that say that saving faith is faith that works by love.

I would challenge all of us in the words of Peter to make our calling and election sure; that is, let us not take our salvation for granted, but look into the evidences of it. And I would use the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

And let us remember that as born again believers we have been created in Christ Jesus in order to do good works. And may God help us to find joy in prayer and be able to say with the poet:

"Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer!
That calls me from a world of care,
And bids me at my Father's throne
Make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief,
My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter's snare,
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer."

"Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer!
Thy wings shall my petition bear
To Him whose truth and faithfulness
Engage the waiting soul to bless;
And since He bids me seek His face,
Believe His word, and trust His grace,
I'll cast on Him my every care;
And wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer."

"Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer!
May I thy consolation share,
Till, from Mount Pisgah's lofty height,
I view my home and take my flight.
This robe of flesh I'll drop and rise
To seize the everlasting prize;
And shout, while passing through the air,
Farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer."



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