

Lecture Vi. - the Spirit of Prayer.

by Charles Finney

The Holy Spirit helps Christians pray according to God's will and intercedes for them when they do not know what to pray for.

Scripture: Romans 8:26

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Prayer", "Effective Prayer"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the vital role of the Holy Spirit in prayer, explaining how the Spirit intercedes for believers, helping them to pray according to God's will, especially in times of ignorance about what to pray for. He outlines the nature of the Holy Spirit's influence, the necessity of fervent prayer, and the importance of recognizing and not grieving the Spirit. Finney encourages believers to seek the Spirit's guidance actively and to maintain a deep awareness of the spiritual state of themselves and others, as this leads to effective prayer and a fruitful Christian life.

Transcript

TEXT. --Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which 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. --ROMANS viii. 26, 27.

My last lecture[s] but one was on the subject of Effectual Prayer; in which I observed that one of the most important attributes of effectual or prevailing prayer is FAITH. This was so extensive a subject that I reserved it for a separate discussion. And accordingly, I lectured last Friday evening on the subject of Faith in Prayer, or, as it is termed, the Prayer of Faith. It was my intention to discuss the subject in a single lecture. But as I was under the necessity of condensing so much on some points, it occurred to me, and was mentioned by others, that there might be some questions which people would ask, that ought to be answered more fully, especially as the subject is one on which there is so much darkness. One grand design in preaching is to exhibit the truth in such a way as to answer the questions which would naturally arise in the minds of those who read the Bible with attention, and who want to know what it means, so that they can put it in practice. In explaining the text, I propose to show,

- I. What Spirit is here spoken of, "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities."
- II. What that Spirit does for us.

III. Why he does what the text declares him to do.

IV. How he accomplishes it.

V. The degree in which he influences the minds of those who are under his influence.

VI. How his influences are to be distinguished from the influences of evil spirits, or from the suggestions of our own minds.

VII. How we are to obtain this agency of the Holy Spirit.

VIII. Who have a right to expect to enjoy his influences in this matter--or for whom the Spirit does the things spoken of in the text.

I. What Spirit is it that is spoken of in the text?

Some have supposed that the Spirit spoken of in the text means our own spirit--our own mind. But a little attention to the text will show plainly that this is not the meaning. "The Spirit helpeth our infirmities" would then read, "Our own spirit helpeth the infirmities of our own spirit,"--and "Our own spirit likewise maketh intercession for our own spirit." You see you can make no sense of it on that supposition. It is evident from the manner in which the text is introduced, that the Spirit referred to is the Holy Ghost. "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father, The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." And the text is plainly speaking of the same Spirit.

II. What the Spirit does.

Answer--He intercedes for the saints. "He maketh intercession for us," and "helpeth our infirmities," when "we know not what to pray for as we ought." He helps Christians to pray according to the will of God, or for the things that God desires them to pray for.

III. Why is the Holy Spirit thus employed?

Because of our ignorance. Because we know not what we should pray for as we ought. We are so ignorant both of the will of God, revealed in the Bible, and of his unrevealed will, as we ought to learn it from his providence. Mankind are vastly ignorant both of the promises and prophecies of the Bible, and blind to the providence of God. And they are still more in the dark about those points of which God has said nothing but by the leadings of his Spirit. You recollect that I named these four sources of evidence on which to ground faith in prayer--promises, prophecies, providences, and the Holy Spirit. When all other means fail of leading us to the knowledge of what we ought to pray for, the Spirit does it.

IV. How does he make intercession for the saints? In what mode does he operate, so as to help our infirmities?

Not by superseding the use of our faculties. It is not by praying for us, while we do nothing. He prays for us, by exciting our own faculties. Not that he immediately suggests to us words, or guides our language. But he enlightens our minds, and makes the truth take hold of our souls. He leads us to consider the state of the church, and the condition of sinners around us. The manner in which he brings the truth before the

mind, and keeps it there till it produces its effect, we cannot tell. But we can know as much as this--that he leads us to a deep consideration of the state of things; and the result of this, the natural and philosophical result, is, deep feeling. When the Spirit brings the truth up before a man's mind, there is only one way in which he can keep from deep feeling. That is, by turning away his thoughts, and leading his mind to think of other things. Sinners, when the Spirit of God brings the truth before them, must feel. They feel wrong, as long as they remain impenitent. So, if a man is a Christian, and the Holy Spirit brings a subject into warm contact with his heart, it is just as impossible he should not feel, as it is that your hand should not feel if you put it into the fire. If the Spirit of God leads him to dwell on things calculated to excite warm and overpowering feelings, and he is not excited by them, it proves that he has no love for souls, nothing of the Spirit of Christ, and knows nothing about Christian experience.

2. The Spirit makes the Christian feel the value of souls, and the guilt and danger of sinners in their present condition. It is amazing how dark and stupid Christians often are about this. Even Christian parents let their children go right down to hell before their eyes, and scarcely seem to exercise a single feeling, or put forth an effort to save them. And why? Because they are so blind to what hell is, so unbelieving about the Bible, so ignorant of the precious promises which God has made to faithful parents. They grieve the Spirit of God away, and it is in vain to try to make them pray for their children, while the Spirit of God is away from them.

3. He leads Christians to understand and apply the promises of Scripture. It is wonderful that in no age have Christians been able fully to apply the promises of Scripture to the events of life, as they go along. This is not because the promises themselves are obscure. The promises themselves are plain enough. But there has always been a wonderful disposition to overlook the Scriptures, as a source of light respecting the passing events of life. How astonished the apostles were at Christ's application of so many prophecies to himself! They seemed to be continually ready to exclaim, "Astonishing! Can it be so? We never understood it before." Who, that has witnessed the manner in which the apostles, influenced and inspired by the Holy Ghost, applied passages of the Old Testament to gospel times, has not been amazed at the richness of meaning which they found in the Scriptures? So it has been with many a Christian; while deeply engaged in prayer, he has seen that passages of Scripture are appropriate which he never thought of before, as having any such application.

I once knew an individual who was in great spiritual darkness. He had retired for prayer, resolved that he would not desist till he had found the Lord. He kneeled down and tried to pray. All was dark, and he could not pray. He rose from his knees, and stood for a while, but he could not give it up, for he had promised that he would not let the sun go down before he had given himself to God. He knelt again, but it was all dark, and his heart was hard as before. He was nearly in despair, and said in agony, "I have grieved the Spirit of God away, and there is no promise for me. I am shut out from the presence of God." But his resolution was formed not to give over, and again he knelt down. He had said but a few words, when this passage came into his mind as fresh as if he had just read it; it seemed as if he had just been reading the words, "Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." Jer. xxix. 13. Though this promise was in the Old Testament, and was addressed to the Jews, it was still as applicable to him as to them. And it broke his heart, like the hammer of the Lord, in a moment. He prayed, and rose up, happy in God. Thus it often happens when professors of religion are praying for their children. Sometimes they pray, and are in darkness and doubt, feeling as if there was no foundation for faith, and no special promises for the children of believers. But while they are pleading, God has shown them the full meaning of some promise, and their soul has rested on it as on the mighty arm of God. I once heard of a

widow who was greatly exercised about her children, till this passage was brought powerfully to her mind: "Leave thy fatherless children with me, I will preserve them alive." She saw it had an extended meaning, and she was enabled to lay hold on it, as it were, with her hands; and then she prevailed in prayer, and her children were converted. The Holy Spirit was sent into the world by the Saviour, to guide his people and instruct them, and bring things to their remembrance, as well as to convince the world of sin.

4. The Spirit leads Christians to desire and pray for things of which nothing is specifically said in the word of God. Take the case of an individual, That God is willing to save is a general truth. So it is a general truth that he is willing to answer prayer. But how shall I know the will of God respecting that individual, whether I can pray in faith according to the will of God for the conversion and salvation of that individual, or not? Here the agency of the Spirit comes in, to lead the minds of God's people to pray for those individuals, and at those times, when God is prepared to bless them. When we know not what to pray for, the Holy Spirit leads the mind to dwell on some object, to consider its situation, to realize its value, and to feel for it, and pray, and travail in birth, till the object is attained. This sort of experience I know is less common in cities than it is in some parts of the country, because of the infinite number of things to divert the attention and grieve the Spirit in cities. I have had much opportunity to know how it has been in some sections. I was acquainted with an individual who used to keep a list of persons that he was specially concerned for; and I have had the opportunity to know a multitude of persons for whom he became thus interested, who were immediately converted. I have seen him pray for persons on his list, when he was literally in an agony for them; and have sometimes known him call on some other person to help him pray for such a one. I have known his mind to fasten on an individual of hardened, abandoned character, and who could not be reached in any ordinary way. In a town in the north part of this State, where there was a revival, there was a certain individual who was a most violent and outrageous opposer. He kept a tavern, and used to delight in swearing at a desperate rate, whenever there were Christians within hearing, on purpose to hurt their feelings. He was so bad, that one man said he believed he should have to sell his place, or give it away, and move out of town, for he could not live near a man that swore so. This good man, that I was speaking of, was passing through the town, and heard of the case, and was very much grieved and distressed for the individual. He took him on his praying list. The case weighed on his mind, when he was asleep and when he was awake. He kept thinking about him, and praying for him for days. And the first we knew of it, this ungodly man came into a meeting, and got up and confessed his sins, and poured out his soul. His bar-room immediately became the place where they held prayer meetings. In this manner the Spirit of God leads individual Christians to pray for things which they would not pray for, unless they were led by the Spirit. And thus they pray for things according to the will of God.

By some, this may be said to be a revelation from God. I do not doubt that great evil has been done by saying that this kind of influence amounts to a new revelation. And many people will be afraid of it if they hear it called a new revelation, so that they will not stop to inquire what it means, or whether the Scriptures teach it or not. They suppose it to be a complete answer to the idea. But the plain truth of the matter is, that the Spirit leads a man to pray. And if God leads a man to pray for an individual, the inference from the Bible is, that God designs to save that individual. If we find by comparing our state of mind with the Bible, that we are led by the Spirit to pray for an individual, we have good evidence to believe that God is prepared to bless him.

6. By giving to Christians a spiritual discernment respecting the movements and developments of Providence. Devoted, praying Christians often see these things so clearly, and look so far ahead, as greatly to stumble others. They sometimes almost seem to prophesy. No doubt persons may be deluded,

and sometimes are so, by leaning to their own understanding when they think they are led by the Spirit. But there is no doubt that a Christian may be made to see and to discern clearly the signs of the times, so as to understand, by providence, what to expect, and thus to pray for it in faith. Thus they are often led to expect a revival, and to pray for it in faith, when nobody else can see the least signs of it.

There was a woman in New Jersey, in a place where there had been a revival. She was very positive there was going to be another. She insisted upon it that they had had the former rain, and were now going to have the latter rain. She wanted to have conference meetings appointed. But the minister and elders saw nothing to encourage it, and would do nothing. She saw they were blind, and so she went forward and got a carpenter to make seats for her, for she said she would have meetings in her own house. There was certainly going to be a revival. She had scarcely opened her doors for meetings, before the Spirit of God came down in great power. And these sleepy church members found themselves surrounded all at once with convicted sinners. And they could only say, "Surely the Lord was in this place, and we knew it not." The reason why such persons understand the indication of God's will is not because of the superior wisdom that is in them, but because the Spirit of God leads them to see the signs of the times. And this, not by revelation; but they are led to see that converging of providences to a single point, which produces in them a confident expectation of a certain result.

V. In what degree are we to expect the Spirit of God to affect the minds of believers? The text says, "The Spirit maketh intercession with groanings that cannot be uttered." The meaning of this I understand to be, that the Spirit excites desires too great to be uttered except by groans. Something that language cannot utter--making the soul too full to utter its feelings by words, where the person can only groan them out to God, who understands the language of the heart.

VI. How are we to know whether it is the Spirit of God that influences our minds or not?

1. Not by feeling that some external influence or agency is applied to us. We are not to expect to feel our minds in direct physical contact with God. If such a thing can be, we know of no way in which it can be made sensible. We know that we exercise our minds freely, and that our thoughts are exercised on something that excites our feelings. But we are not to expect a miracle to be wrought, as if we were led by the hand, sensibly, or like something whispered in the ear, or any miraculous manifestation of the will of God. People often grieve the Spirit away, because they do not harbor him and cherish his influences. Sinners often do this ignorantly. They suppose that if they were under conviction by the Spirit, they should have such and such mysterious feelings, a shock would come upon them, which they could not mistake. Many Christians are so ignorant of the Spirit's influences, and have thought so little about having his assistance in prayer, that when they have them they do not know it, and so do not cherish, and yield to them, and preserve them. We are conscious of nothing in the case, only the movement of our own minds. There is nothing else that can be felt. We are merely aware that our thoughts are intensely employed on a certain subject. Christians are often unnecessarily misled and distressed on this point, for fear they have not the Spirit of God. They feel intensely, but they know not what makes them feel. They are distressed about sinners; but why should they not be distressed, when they think of their condition? They keep thinking about them all the time, and why shouldn't they be distressed? Now, the truth is, that the very fact that you are thinking upon them is evidence that the Spirit of God is leading you. Do you not know that the greater part of the time these things do not affect you so? The greater part of the time you do not think much about the case of sinners. You know their salvation is always equally important. But at other times, even when you are quite at leisure, your mind is entirely dark, and vacant of any feeling for them. But now, although you may be busy about other things, you think, you pray, and feel intensely for them, even while

you are about business that at other times would occupy all your thoughts. Now, almost every thought you have is, "God have mercy on them." Why is this? Why, their case is placed in a strong light before your mind. Do you ask what it is that leads your mind to exercise benevolence for sinners, and to agonize in prayer for them? What can it be but the Spirit of God? There are no devils that would lead you so. If your feelings are truly benevolent, you are to consider it as the Holy Spirit leading you to pray for things according to the will of God.

2. Try the spirits by the Bible. People are sometimes led away by strange fantasies and crazy impulses. If you compare them faithfully with the Bible, you never need be led astray. You can always know whether your feelings are produced by the Spirit's influences, by comparing your desires with the spirit and temper of religion as described in the Bible. The Bible commands you to try the spirits. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they be of God." Observe not only your own feelings in regard to your fellow-men, but also, and more especially, the teachings of the Spirit within you respecting our Lord Jesus Christ. "Hereby know ye the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God; and this is that spirit of Antichrist whereof ye have heard that it shall come; and even now already it is in the world."

VII. How shall we get this influence of the Spirit of God?

1. It must be sought by fervent, believing prayer. Christ says, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him!" Does any one say, I have prayed for him, and he does not come? It is because you do not pray aright. "Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." You do not pray from right motives. A professor of religion, and a principal member in a church, once asked a minister what he thought of his case; he had been praying week after week for the Spirit, and had not received him. The minister asked him what his motive was in praying. He said he wanted to be happy. He knew those who had the Spirit were happy, and he wanted to enjoy his mind as they did. Why, the devil himself might pray so. That is mere selfishness. The man turned away in anger. He saw that he had never known what it was to pray. He was convinced he was a hypocrite, and that his prayers were all selfish, dictated only by a desire for his own happiness. David prayed that God would uphold him by his free Spirit, that he might teach transgressors and turn sinners to God. A Christian should pray for the Spirit that he may be the more useful and glorify God more; not that he himself may be more happy. This man saw clearly where he had been in error, and he was converted. Perhaps many here have been just so. You ought to examine and see if all your prayers are not selfish.

2. Use the means adapted to stir up your minds on the subject, and to keep your attention fixed there. If a man prays for the Spirit, and then diverts his mind to other objects; uses no other means, but goes right away to worldly objects; he tempts God, he swings loose from his object, and it would be a miracle if he should get what he prays for. How is a sinner to get conviction? Why, by thinking of his sins. That is the way for a Christian to obtain deep feeling, by thinking on the object. God is not going to pour these things on you without any effort of your own. You must cherish the slightest impressions. Take the Bible, and go over the passages that show the condition and prospects of the world. Look at the world, look at your children, and your neighbors, and see their condition while they remain in sin, and persevere in prayer and effort till you obtain the blessing of the Spirit of God to dwell in you. This was the way, doubtless, that Dr. Watts came to have the feelings which he has described in the second Hymn of the second Book, which you would do well to read after you go home.

My thoughts on awful subjects roll,
Damnation and the dead:
What horrors seize the guilty soul
Upon a dying bed!
Lingering about these mortal shores,
She makes a long delay,
Till, like a flood, with rapid force
Death sweeps the wretch away.
Then, swift and dreadful, she descends
Down to the fiery coast,
Amongst abominable fiends,
Herself a frightened ghost.
There endless crowds of sinners lie,
And darkness makes their chains;
Tortured with keen despair they cry,
Yet wait for fiercer pains.
Not all their anguish and their blood
For their past guilt atones,
Nor the compassion of a God
Shall hearken to their groans.
Amazing grace, that kept my breath,
Nor bid my soul remove,
Till I had learned my Saviour's death,
And well insured his love!

Look, as it were, through a telescope that will bring it up near to you; look into hell, and hear them groan; then turn the glass upwards and look at heaven, and see the saints there, in their white robes, with their harps in their hands, and hear them sing the song of redeeming love; and ask yourself--Is it possible, that I should prevail with God to elevate the sinner there? Do this, and if you are not a wicked man, and a stranger to God, you will soon have as much of the spirit of prayer as your body can sustain.

3. You must watch unto prayer. You must keep a look out, and see if God grants the blessing when you ask him. People sometimes pray, and never look to see if the prayer is granted. Be careful also, not to grieve the Spirit of God. Confess and forsake your sins. God will never lead you as one of his hidden ones, and let you into his secrets, unless you confess and forsake your sins. Not be always confessing and never forsake, but confess and forsake too. Make redress wherever you have committed an injury. You cannot expect to get the spirit of prayer first, and then repent. You cannot fight it through so. Professors of religion, who are proud and unyielding, and justify themselves, never will force God to dwell with them.

4. Aim to obey perfectly the written law. In other words, have no fellowship with sin. Aim at being entirely above the world; "Be ye perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect." If you sin at all, let it be your daily grief. The man who does not aim at this, means to live in sin. Such a man need not expect God's blessing, for he is not sincere in desiring to keep all his commandments.

VIII. For whom does the Spirit intercede?

Answer--He maketh intercession for the saints, for all saints, for any who are saints. "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which 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."--Rom viii. 26,27.

REMARKS.

1. Why do you suppose it is, that so little stress is laid on the influences of the Spirit in prayer, when so much is said about his influences in conversion? Many people are amazingly afraid the Spirit's influences will be left out. They lay great stress on the Spirit's influences in converting sinners. But how little is said, how little is printed, about his influence in prayer! How little complaining that people do not make enough of the Spirit's influences in leading Christians to pray according to the will of God! Let it never be forgotten, that no Christian ever prays aright, unless led by the Spirit. He has natural power to pray, and so far as the will of God is revealed, is able to do it; but he never does, unless the Spirit of God influences him. Just as sinners are able to repent, but never do, unless influenced by the Spirit.

2. This subject lays open the foundation of the difficulty felt by many persons on the subject of the Prayer of Faith. They object to the idea that faith in prayer is a belief that we shall receive the very things for which we ask; and insist that there can be no foundation or evidence upon which to rest such a belief. In a sermon published a few years since, upon this subject, the writer brings forward this difficulty, and presents it in its full strength. I have, says he, no evidence that the thing prayed for will be granted, until I have prayed in faith; because, praying in faith is the condition upon which it is promised. And of course I cannot claim the promise, until I have fulfilled the condition. Now, if the condition is, that I am to believe I shall receive the very blessing for which I ask, it is evident that the promise is given upon the performance of an impossible condition, and is of course a mere nullity. The promise would amount to just this: You shall have whatsoever you ask, upon the condition that you first believe that you shall receive it. Now, I must fulfill the condition before I can claim the promise. But I can have no evidence that I shall receive it until I have believed that I shall receive it. This reduces me to the necessity of believing that I shall receive it before I have any evidence that I shall receive it--which is impossible.

The whole force of this objection arises out of the fact, that the Spirit's influences are entirely overlooked, which he exerts in leading an individual to the exercise of faith. It has been supposed that the passage in

Mark xi. 22 and 24, with other kindred promises on the subject of the Prayer of Faith, relate exclusively to miracles. But suppose this were true. I would ask, What were the apostles to believe, when they prayed for a miracle? Were they to believe that the precise miracle would be performed for which they prayed? It is evident that they were. In the verses just alluded to, Christ says, "For verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, but SHALL BELIEVE THAT THESE THINGS WHICH HE SAITH SHALL COME TO PASS, he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you, what things soever ye desire, when ye pray, BELIEVE THAT YE RECEIVE THEM, and ye shall have them." Here it is evident, that the thing to be believed, and which they were not to doubt in their heart, was, that they should have the very blessing for which they prayed. Now the objection above stated, lies in all its force against this kind of faith, when praying for the performance of a miracle. If it be impossible to believe this in praying for any other blessing. it was equally so in praying for a miracle. I might ask, Could an apostle believe that the miracle would be wrought, before he had fulfilled the condition? inasmuch as the condition was, that he should believe that he should receive that for which he prayed. Either the promise is a nullity and a deception, or there is a possibility of performing the condition.

Now, as I have said, the whole difficulty lies in the fact that the Spirit's influences are entirely overlooked, and that faith which is of the operation of God, is left out of the question. If the objection is good against praying for any object, it is as good against praying in faith for the performance of a miracle. The fact is, that the Spirit of God could give evidence, on which to believe that any particular miracle would be granted; could lead the mind to a firm reliance upon God, and trust that the blessing sought would be obtained. And so at the present day he can give the same assurance, in praying for any blessing that we need. Neither in the one case nor the other, are the influences of the Spirit miraculous. Praying is the same thing, whether you pray for the conversion of a soul, or for a miracle. Faith is the same thing in the one case as in the other; it only terminates on a different object; in the one case on the conversion of a soul, and in the other on the performance of a miracle. Nor is faith exercised in the one more than in the other, without reference to a promise; and a general promise may with the same propriety be applied to the conversion of a soul as to the performance of a miracle. And it is equally true in the one case as the other, that no man ever prays in faith without being influenced by the Spirit of God. And if the Spirit could lead the mind of an apostle to exercise faith in regard to a miracle, he can lead the mind of another Christian to exercise faith in regard to receiving any other blessing, by a reference to the same general promise.

Should any one ask, "When are we under an obligation to believe that we shall receive the blessing for which we ask?" I answer:

(1.) When there is a particular promise, specifying the particular blessing: as where we pray for the Holy Spirit. This blessing is particularly named in the promise, and here we have evidence, and are bound to believe, whether we have any Divine influence or not; just as sinners are bound to repent whether the Spirit strives with them or not. Their obligation rests, not upon the Spirit's influences, but upon the powers of moral agency which they possess; upon their ability to do their duty. And while it is true that not one of them ever will repent without the influences of the Spirit, still they have power to do so, and are under obligation to do so, whether the Spirit strives with them or not. So with the Christian. He is bound to believe where he has evidence. And although he never does believe, even where he has an express promise, without the Spirit of God, yet his obligation to do so rests upon his ability, and not upon the Divine influence.

(2.) Where God makes a revelation by his providence, we are bound to believe in proportion to the clearness of the providential indication.

(3.) So where there is a prophecy, we are bound also to believe. But in neither of these cases do we, in fact, believe, without the Spirit of God.

But where there is neither promise, providence, nor prophecy, on which to repose our faith, we are under no obligation to believe, unless, as I have shown in this discourse, the Spirit gives us evidence, by creating desires, and by leading us to pray for a particular object. In the case of those promises of a general nature, where we are honestly at a loss to know in what particular cases to apply them, it may be considered rather as our privilege than as our duty, in many instances, to apply them to particular cases; but whenever the Spirit of God leads us to apply them to a particular object, then it becomes our duty so to apply them. In this case, God explains his own promise, and shows how he designed it should be applied. And then our obligation to make this application, and to believe in reference to this particular object, remains in full force.

3. Some have supposed that Paul prayed in faith for the removal of the thorn in the flesh, and that it was not granted. But they cannot prove that Paul prayed in faith. The presumption is all on the other side, as I have shown in a former lecture. He had neither promise, nor prophecy, nor providence, nor the Spirit of God, to lead him to believe. The whole objection goes on the ground that the apostle might pray in faith without being led by the Spirit. This is truly a shorthand method of disposing of the Spirit's influences in prayer. Certainly, to assume that he prayed in faith, is to assume either that he prayed in faith without being led by the Spirit, or that the Spirit of God led him to pray for that which was not according to the will of God.

I have dwelt the more on this subject, because I want to have it made so plain, that you will all be careful not to grieve the Spirit. I want you to have high ideas of the Holy Ghost, and to feel that nothing good will be done without his influences. No praying or preaching will be of any avail without him. If Jesus Christ were to come down here and preach to sinners, not one would be converted without the Spirit. Be careful then not to grieve him away, by slighting or neglecting his heavenly influences when he invites you to pray.

4. In praying for an object, it is necessary to persevere till you obtain it. Oh, with what eagerness Christians sometimes pursue a sinner in their prayers, when the Spirit of God has fixed their desires on him! No miser pursues his gold with so fixed a determination.

5. The fear of being led by impulses has done great injury, by not being duly considered. A person's mind may be led by an ignis fatuus. But we do wrong if we let the fear of impulses lead us to resist the good impulses of the Holy Ghost. No wonder Christians do not have the spirit of prayer, if they are unwilling to take the trouble to distinguish; and so reject or resist all impulses and all leadings of invisible agents. A great deal has been said about fanaticism, that is very unguarded, and that causes many minds to reject the leadings of the Spirit of God. "As many as are the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God." And it is our duty to try the Spirits whether they be of God. We should insist on a close scrutiny and an accurate discrimination. There must be such a thing as being led by the Spirit. And when we are convinced it is of God, we should be sure to follow--follow on, with full confidence that he will not lead us wrong.

6. We see from this subject the absurdity of using forms of prayer. The very idea of using a form rejects, of course, the leadings of the Spirit. Nothing is more calculated to destroy the spirit of prayer, and entirely to darken and confuse the mind, as to what constitutes prayer, than to use forms. Forms of prayer are not

only absurd in themselves, but they are the very device of the devil to destroy the spirit and break the power of prayer. It is of no use to say the form is a good one. Prayer does not consist in words. And it matters not what the words are, if the heart is not led by the Spirit of God. If the desire is not enkindled, the thoughts directed, and the whole current of feeling produced and led by the Spirit of God, it is not prayer. And set forms are, of all things, best calculated to keep an individual from praying as he ought.

7. The subject furnishes a test of character. The Spirit maketh intercession--for whom? For the saints. Those who are saints are thus exercised. If you are saints, you know by experience what it is to be thus exercised, or it is because you have grieved the Spirit of God, so that he will not lead you. You live in such a manner that this Holy Comforter will not dwell with you, nor give you the spirit of prayer. If this is so, you must repent. Whether you are a Christian or not, do not stop to settle that, but repent, as if you never had repented. Do your first works. Do not take it for granted that you are a Christian, but go like a humble sinner, and pour out your heart unto the Lord. You never can have the spirit of prayer in any other way.

8. The importance of understanding this subject.

(1.) In order to be useful. Without this spirit there can be no such sympathy between you and God that you can either walk with God or work with God. You need to have a strong beating of your heart with his, or you need not expect to be greatly useful.

(2.) As important as your sanctification. Without such a spirit you will not be sanctified, you will not understand the Bible, you will not know how to apply it to your case. I want you to feel the importance of having God with you all the time. If you live as you ought, he says he will come unto you, and make his abode with you, and sup with you, and you with him.

9. If people know not the spirit of prayer, they are very apt to be unbelieving in regard to the results of prayer. They do not see what takes place, or do not see the connection, or do not see the evidence. They are not expecting spiritual blessings. When sinners are convicted, they think they are only frightened by such terrible preaching. And when people are converted, they feel no confidence, and only say, "We'll see how they turn out."

10. Those who have the spirit of prayer know when the blessing comes. It was just so when Jesus Christ appeared. These ungodly doctors did not know him. Why? Because they were not praying for the redemption of Israel. But Simeon and Anna knew him. How was that? Mark what they said, how they prayed and how they lived. They were praying in faith, and so they were not surprised when he came. So it is with such Christians. If sinners are convicted or converted, they are not surprised at it. They were expecting just such things. They know God when he comes, because they were looking out for his visits.

11. There are three classes of persons in the church who are liable to error, or have left the truth out of view, on this subject.

(1.) Those who place great reliance on prayer, and use no other means. They are alarmed at any special means, and talk about your "getting up a revival."

(2.) Over against these are those who use means, and pray, but never think about the influences of the Spirit in prayer. They talk about prayer for the Spirit, and feel the importance of the Spirit in the conversion of sinners, but do not realize the importance of the Spirit in prayer. And their prayers are all cold talk, nothing that any body can feel, or that can take hold of God.

(3.) Those who have certain strange notions about the sovereignty of God, and are waiting for God to convert the world without prayer or means.

There must be in the church a deeper sense of the need of the spirit of prayer. The fact is that, generally, those who use means most assiduously, and make the most strenuous efforts for the salvation of men, and who have the most correct notions of the manner in which means should be used for converting sinners, also pray most for the Spirit of God, and wrestle most with God for his blessing. And what is the result? Let facts speak, and say whether these persons do or do not pray, and whether the Spirit of God does not testify to their prayers, and follow their labors with his power.

12. A spirit very different from the spirit of prayer appears to prevail in certain portions of the Presbyterian church at the present time. Nothing will produce an excitement and opposition so quick as the spirit of prayer. If any person should feel burdened with the case of sinners, in prayer, so as to groan in his prayer, why, the women are nervous, and he is visited at once with rebuke and opposition. From my soul I abhor all affectation of feeling where there is none, and all attempts to work one's self up into feeling by groans. But I feel bound to defend the position that there is such a thing as being in a state of mind in which there is but one way to keep from groaning; and that is, by resisting the Holy Ghost. I was once present where this subject was discussed. It was said that groaning ought to be discountenanced. The question was asked, whether God could not produce such a state of feeling that to abstain from groaning was impossible? and the answer was, "Yes, but he never does." Then the apostle Paul was egregiously deceived when he wrote about groanings that cannot be uttered. Edwards was deceived when he wrote his book upon revivals. Revivals are all in the dark. Now, no man who reviews the history of the church will adopt such a sentiment. I do not like this attempt to shut out, or stifle, or keep down, or limit the spirit of prayer. I would sooner cut off my right hand than rebuke the spirit of prayer, as I have heard of its being done by saying, "Do not let me hear any more groaning."

But then, I hardly know where to conclude this subject. I should like to discuss it a month, and till the whole church could understand it, so as to pray the prayer of faith. Beloved, I want to ask you if you believe all this? Or do you wonder that I should talk so? Perhaps some of you have had some glimpses of these things. Now, will you give yourselves up to prayer, and live so as to have the spirit of prayer, and have the spirit with you all the time? Oh, for a praying church! I once knew a minister who had a revival fourteen winters in succession. I did not know how to account for it till I saw one of his members get up in a prayer meeting and make a confession. "Brethren," said he, "I have been long in the habit of praying every Saturday night till after midnight, for the descent of the Holy Ghost among us. And now, brethren," and he began to weep, "I confess that I have neglected it for two or three weeks." The secret was out. That minister had a praying church. Brethren, in my present state of health, I find it impossible to pray as much as I have been in the habit of doing, and continue to preach. It overcomes my strength. Now, shall I give myself up to prayer, and stop preaching? That will not do. Now, will not you, who are in health, throw yourselves into this work, and bear this burden, and lay yourselves out in prayer, till God will pour out his blessing upon us?

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