

Prayer and Desire

by E.M. Bounds

True and effectual praying is inspired by a deeply seated desire for God and his righteousness.

Scripture: Psalm 42:1, Matthew 5:6, James 5:16

Topics: "Spiritual Hunger", "Desire in Prayer"

Description

E.M. Bounds emphasizes the critical role of desire in prayer, arguing that true prayer is born from a deep-seated craving for God and His righteousness. He asserts that without genuine desire, prayer becomes a hollow exercise devoid of meaning and power. Bounds encourages believers to cultivate their desire for God, even praying for the desire itself when it is lacking, as this longing is essential for effective supplication. He illustrates that fervent prayer, fueled by intense desire, is what truly connects us to God and brings about spiritual transformation. Ultimately, he calls for a church ablaze with holy zeal, reflecting the passionate heart of God.

Transcript

DESIRE is not merely a simple wish; it is a deep seated craving; an intense longing, for attainment. in the realm of spiritual affairs, it is an important adjunct to prayer. So important is it, that one might say, almost, that desire is an absolute essential of prayer. Desire precedes prayer, accompanies it, is followed by it. Desire goes before prayer, and by it, created and intensified. Prayer is the oral expression of desire. If prayer is asking God for something, then prayer must be expressed. Prayer comes out into the open. Desire is silent. Prayer is heard; desire, unheard. The deeper the desire, the stronger the prayer. Without desire, prayer is a meaningless mumble of words. Such perfunctory, formal praying, with no heart, no feeling, no real desire accompanying it, is to be shunned like a pestilence. Its exercise is a waste of precious time, and from it, no real blessing accrues.

And yet even if it be discovered that desire is honestly absent, we should pray, anyway. We ought to pray. The "ought" comes in, in order that both desire and expression be cultivated. God's Word commands it. Our judgment tells us we ought to pray-to pray whether we feel like it or not-and not to allow our feelings to determine our habits of prayer. In such circumstance, we ought to pray for the desire to pray; for such a desire is God-given and heaven-born. We should pray for desire; then, when desire has been given, we should pray according to its dictates. Lack of spiritual desire should grieve us, and lead us to lament its absence, to seek earnestly for its bestowal, so that our praying, henceforth, should be an expression of "the soul's sincere desire."

A sense of need creates or should create, earnest desire. The stronger the sense of need, before God, the greater should be the desire, the more earnest the praying. The "poor in spirit" are eminently competent to pray

Hunger is an active sense of physical need. It prompts the request for bread. In like manner, the inward consciousness of spiritual need creates desire, and desire breaks forth in prayer. Desire is an inward longing for something of which we are not possessed, of which we stand in need-something which God has promised, and which may be secured by an earnest supplication of his throne of grace.

Spiritual desire, carried to a higher degree, is the evidence of the new birth. It is born in the renewed soul:

As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

The absence of this holy desire in the heart is presumptive proof, either of a decline in spiritual ecstasy, or, that the new birth has never taken place.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

These heaven-given appetites are the proof of a renewed heart, the evidence of a stirring spiritual life. Physical appetites are the attributes of a living body, not of a corpse, and spiritual desires belong to a soul made alive to God. And as the renewed soul hungers and thirsts after righteousness, these holy inward desires break out into earnest, supplicating prayer.

In prayer, we are shut up to the name, merit and intercessory virtue of Jesus Christ, our great high priest. Probing down, below the accompanying conditions and forces in prayer, we come to its vital basis, which is seated in the human heart. It is not simply our need; it is the heart's yearning for what we need, and for which we feel impelled to pray. Desire is the will in action; a strong, conscious longing, excited in the inner nature, for some great good. Desire exalts the object of its longing, and fixes the mind on it. It has choice, and fixedness, and flame in it, and prayer, based thereon, is explicit and specific. It knows its need, feels and sees the thing that will meet it, and hastens to acquire it.

Holy desire is much helped by devout contemplation. Meditation on our spiritual need, and on God's readiness and ability to correct it, aids desire to grow. Serious thought engaged in before praying, increases desire, makes it more insistent, and tends to save us from the menace of private prayer-wandering thought. We fail much more in desire, than in its outward expression. We retain the form, while the inner life fades and almost dies.

One might well ask, whether the feebleness of our desires for God, the Holy Spirit, and for all the fulness of Christ, is not the cause of our so little praying, and of our languishing in the exercise of prayer? Do we really feel these inward pantings of desire after heavenly treasures? Do the inbred groanings of desire stir our souls to mighty wrestlings? Alas for us! The fire burns altogether too low. The flaming heat of soul has been tempered down to a tepid lukewarmness. This, it should be remembered, was the central cause of the sad and desperate condition of the Laodicean Christians, of whom the awful condemnation is written that they were "rich, and increased in goods and had need of nothing," and knew not that they "were wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind."

Again: we might well inquire-have we that desire which presses us to close communion with God, which is filled with unutterable burnings, and holds us there through the agony of an intense and soul-stirred supplication? Our hearts need much to be worked over, not only to get the evil out of them, but to get the

good into them. And the foundation and inspiration to the incoming good, is strong, propelling desire. This holy and fervent flame in the soul awakens the interest of heaven, attracts the attention of God, and places at the disposal of those who exercise it, the exhaustless riches of divine grace.

The dampening of the flame of holy desire is destructive of the vital and aggressive forces in church life. God requires to be represented by a fiery church, or he is not in any proper sense, represented at all. God, himself, is all on fire, and his church, if it is to be like him, must also be at white heat. The great and eternal interests of heaven-born, God-given religion are the only things about which his church can afford to be on fire. Yet holy zeal need not to be fussy in order to be consuming. Our Lord was the incarnate antithesis of nervous excitability, the absolute opposite of intolerant or clamorous declamation, yet the zeal of God's house consumed him; and the world is still feeling the glow of his fierce, consuming flame and responding to it, with an ever-increasing readiness and an ever-enlarging response.

A lack of ardor in prayer, is the sure sign of a lack of depth and of intensity of desire; and the absence of intense desire is a sure sign of God's absence from the heart! To abate fervor is to retire from God. He can, and does, tolerate many things in the way of infirmity and error in his children. He can, and will pardon sin when the penitent prays, but two things are intolerable to him—insincerity and lukewarmness. Lack of heart and lack of heat are two things he loathes, and to the Laodiceans he said, in terms of unmistakable severity and condemnation:

I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

This was God's expressed judgment on the lack of fire in one of the seven churches, and it is his indictment against individual Christians for the fatal want of sacred zeal. In prayer, fire is the motive power. Religious principles which do not emerge in flame, have neither force nor effect. Flame is the wing on which faith ascends; fervency is the soul of prayer. It was the "fervent, effectual prayer" which availed much. Love is kindled in a flame, and ardency is its life. Flame is the air which true Christian experience breathes. It feeds on fire; it can withstand anything, rather than a feeble flame; and it dies, chilled and starved to its vitals, when the surrounding atmosphere is frigid or lukewarm.

True prayer must be aflame. Christian life and character need to be all on fire. Lack of spiritual heat creates more infidelity than lack of faith. Not to be consumingly interested about the things of heaven, is not to be interested in them at all. The fiery souls are those who conquer in the day of battle, from whom the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and who take it by force. The citadel of God is taken only by those, who storm it in dreadful earnestness, who besiege it, with fiery, unabated zeal.

Nothing short of being red hot for God, can keep the glow of heaven in our hearts, these chilly days. The early Methodists had no heating apparatus in their churches. They declared that the flame in the pew and the fire in the pulpit must suffice to keep them warm. And we, of this hour, have need to have the live coal from God's altar and the consuming flame from heaven glowing in our hearts. This flame is not mental vehemence nor fleshly energy. It is divine fire in the soul, intense, dross-consuming—the very essence of the Spirit of God.

No erudition, no purity of diction, no width of mental outlook, no flowers of eloquence, no grace of person, can atone for lack of fire. Prayer ascends by fire. Flame gives prayer access as well as wings, acceptance as well as energy. There is no incense without fire; no prayer without flame.

Ardent desire is the basis of unceasing prayer. It is not a shallow, fickle inclination, but a strong yearning, an unquenchable ardor, which impregnates, glows, burns, and fixes the heart. It is the flame of a present and active principle mounting up to God. It is ardor propelled by desire, that burns its way to the throne of mercy, and gains its plea. It is the pertinacity of desire that gives triumph to the conflict, in a great struggle of prayer. It is the burden of a weighty desire that sobers, makes restless, and reduces to quietness the soul just emerged from its mighty wrestlings. It is the embracing character of desire which arms prayer with a thousand needs, and robes it with an invincible courage and an all-conquering power.

The Syrophenician woman is an object lesson of desire, settled to its consistency, but invulnerable in its intensity and pertinacious boldness. The importunate widow represents desire gaining its end, through obstacles insuperable to feebler impulses.

Prayer is not the rehearsal of a mere performance; nor is it an indefinite, widespread clamor. Desire, while it kindles the soul, holds it to the object sought. Prayer is an indispensable phase of spiritual habit, but it ceases to be prayer when carried on by habit alone. It is depth and intensity of spiritual desire which give intensity and depth to prayer. The soul cannot be listless when some great desire fires and inflames it. The urgency of our desire holds us to the thing desired with a tenacity which refuses to be lessened or loosened; it stays and pleads and persists, and refuses to let go until the blessing has been given.

Lord, I cannot let thee go,

Till a blessing thou bestow;

Do not turn away thy face;

Mine's an urgent, pressing case.

The secret of faintheartedness, lack of importunity, want of courage and strength in prayer, lies in the weakness of spiritual desire, while the nonobservance of prayer is the fearful token of that desire having ceased to live. That soul has turned from God whose desire after him no longer presses it to the inner chamber. There can be no successful praying without consuming desire. Of course there can be much seeming to pray, without desire of any kind.

Many things may be catalogued and much ground covered. But does desire the catalogue? Does desire map out the region to be covered? On the answer hangs the issue of whether our petitioning be prating or prayer. Desire is intense, but narrow; it cannot spread itself over a wide area, It wants things, and wants them badly, so badly, that nothing but God's willingness to answer, can bring it easement or content.

Desire single-shots at its objective. There may be many things desired, but are specifically and individually felt and expressed. David did not yearn for everything; nor did he allow his desires to spread out everywhere and hit nothing. Here is the way his desires ran and found expression:

One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple.

It is this singleness of desire, this definiteness of yearning, which counts in praying and which drives prayer directly to the core and center of supply.

In the beatitudes Jesus voiced the words which directly bear upon the desires of a renewed soul, and the promise that they will be granted: Blessed are they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

This, then, is the basis of prayer which compels an answer-that strong inward desire has entered into the spiritual appetite, and clamors to be satisfied! Alas for us! It is altogether too true and frequent, that our prayers operate in the arid region of a mere wish, or in the leafless area of a memorized prayer. Sometimes, indeed, our prayers are merely stereotyped expressions of set phrases and conventional proportions, the freshness and life of which have departed long years ago.

Without desire, there is no burden of soul, no sense of need, no ardency, no vision, no strength, no glow of faith. There is no mighty pressure, no hold on to God, with a deathless, despairing grasp-"I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." There is no utter self-abandonment, as there was with -when, lost in the throes of a desperate, pertinacious, and all-consuming plea he cried: "Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin; if not, blot me, I pray out of thy book." Or, as there was with John Knox when he pleaded: "Give me Scotland, or I die!"

God draws mightily near to the praying soul. To see God, to know God, and to live for God-these form the objective of all true praying. Thus praying is, after all, inspired to seek after God. Prayer-desire is inflamed to see God, to have clearer, fuller, sweeter, and richer revelation of God. So to those who thus pray, the Bible becomes a new Bible, and Christ a new savior, by the light and revelation of the inner chamber.

We stress and emphasize that burning desire-enlarged and ever enlarging-for the best, and most powerful gifts and graces of the Spirit of God, is the legitimate heritage of true and effectual praying. Self and service cannot be divorced-cannot possibly be separated. More than that: desire must be made intensely personal, must be centered on God with an insatiable hungering and thirsting after him and his righteousness. "My soul thirsteth for God, the living God." The indispensable requisite for all true praying is a deeply seated desire which seeks after God himself, and remains unappeased, until the choicest gifts in heaven's bestowal, have been richly and abundantly granted.

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