

Prayer and God's Work

by E.M. Bounds

The main purpose of God's work in the world is to make men and women holy, requiring a change of heart and life, and this is hindered by the lack of holiness in the preacher and the people.

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:15

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Holiness"

Description

E.M. Bounds emphasizes that God's primary work in the world is to transform fallen humanity into holy beings, aligning with His nature. He stresses the importance of prayer in this process, noting that true holiness must precede righteous actions, and that the church must prioritize spiritual growth over material prosperity. Bounds challenges the church to reflect on whether its leaders and members are genuinely pursuing holiness and engaging in fervent prayer. He warns against the dangers of complacency and the neglect of the work of holiness, urging believers to seek a deeper relationship with God through prayer. Ultimately, he calls for a revival of holiness within the church to fulfill God's divine purpose.

Transcript

GOD has a great work on hand in this world. This work is involved in the plan of salvation. It embraces redemption and providence. God is governing this world, with its intelligent beings, for his own glory and for their good. What, then, is God's work in this world? Rather what is the end he seeks in his great work? It is nothing short of holiness of heart and life in the children of fallen Adam. Man is a fallen creature, born with an evil nature, with an evil bent, unholy propensities, sinful desires, wicked inclinations. Man is unholy by nature, born so. "They go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies." God's entire plan is to take hold of fallen man and to seek to change him and make him holy. God's work is to make holy men out of unholy men. This is the very end of Christ coming into the world:

For this purpose was the Son of God manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil.

God is holy in nature and in all his ways, and he wants to make man like himself.

As he who hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of living; because it is written, Be ye holy, for I am holy.

This is being Christlike. This is following Jesus Christ. This is the aim of all Christian effort. This is the earnest, heartfelt desire of every truly regenerated soul. This is what is to be constantly and earnestly

prayed for. It is that we may be made holy. Not that we must make ourselves holy, but we must be cleansed from all sin by the precious atoning blood of Christ, and be made holy by the direct agency of the Holy Spirit. Not that we are to do holy, but rather to be holy. Being must precede doing. First be, then do. First, obtain a holy heart, then live a holy life. And for this high and gracious end God has made the most ample provisions in the atoning work of our Lord and through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

The work of God in the world is the implantation, the growth and the perfection of holiness in his people. Keep this ever in mind. But we might ask just now, Is this work advancing in the church? Are men and women being made holy? Is the present-day church engaged in the business of making holy men and women? This is not a vain and speculative question. It is practical, pertinent and all important.

The present-day church has vast machinery. Her activities are great, and her material prosperity is unparalleled. The name of religion is widespread and well-known. Much money comes into the Lord's treasury and is paid out. But here is the question: Does the work of holiness keep pace with all this? Is the burden of the prayers of church people to be made holy? Are our preachers really holy men? Or to go back a little further, are they hungering and thirsting after righteousness, desiring the sincere milk of the Word that they may grow thereby? Are they really seeking to be holy men? Of course men of intelligence are greatly needed in the pulpit, but prior to that, and primary to it, is the fact that we need holy men to stand before dying men and proclaim the salvation of God to them.

Ministers, like laymen, and no more so than laymen, must be holy men in life, in conversation and in temper. They must be examples to the flock of God in all things. By their lives they are to preach as well as to speak. Men in the pulpit are needed who are spotless in life, circumspect in behavior, "without rebuke and blameless in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom they are to shine in the world." Are our preachers of this type of men? We are simply asking the question. Let the reader make up his own judgment. Is the work of holiness making progress among our preachers?

Again let us ask: Are our leading laymen examples of holiness? Are they seeking holiness of heart and life? Are they praying men, ever praying that God would fashion them according to his pattern of holiness? Are their business ways without stain of sin, and their gains free from the taint of wrongdoing? Have they the foundation of solid honesty, and does uprightness bring them into elevation and influence? Does business integrity and probity run parallel with religious activity, and with churchly observance?

Then, while we are pursuing our investigation, seeking light as to whether the work of God among his people is making progress, let us ask further as to our women. Are the leading women of our churches dead to the fashions of this world, separated from the world, not conformed to the world's maxims and customs? Are they in behavior as becometh holiness, teaching the young women by word and life the lessons of soberness, obedience, and home-keeping? Are our women noted for their praying habits? Are they patterns of prayer?

How searching are all these questions? And will anyone dare say they are impertinent and out of place? If God's work be to make men and women holy, and he has made ample provisions in the law of prayer of doing this very thing, why should it be thought impertinent and useless to propound such personal and pointed questions as these? They have to do directly with the work and with its progress and its perfection. They go to the very seat of the disease. They hit the spot.

We might as well face the situation first as last. There is no use to shut our eyes to real facts. If the church does not do this sort of work-if the church does not advance its members in holiness of heart and life-then

all our show of activities and all our display of church work are a delusion and a snare.

But let us ask as to another large and important class of people in our churches. They are the hope of the future church. To them all eyes are turned. Are our young men and women growing in sobermindedness and reverence, and in all those graces which have their root in the renewed heart, which mark solid and permanent advance in the divine life? If we are not growing in holiness, then we are doing nothing religious nor abiding.

Material prosperity is not the infallible sign of spiritual prosperity. The former may exist while the latter is significantly absent. Material prosperity may easily blind the eyes of church leaders, so much so that they will make it a substitute for spiritual prosperity. How great the need to watch at that point! Prosperity in money matters does not signify growth in holiness. The seasons of material prosperity are rarely seasons of spiritual advance, either to the individual or to the church. It is so easy to lose sight of God when goods increase. It so easy to lean on human agencies and cease praying and relying upon God when material prosperity comes to the church.

If it be contended that the work of God is progressing, and that we are growing in holiness, then some perplexing questions arise which will be hard to answer. If the church is making advances on the lines of deep spirituality-if we are a praying people, noted for our prayer habits-if our people are hungering after holiness-then let us ask, why do we now have so few mighty outpourings of the Holy Spirit on our chief churches and our principal appointments? Why is it that so few of our revivals spring from the life of the pastor, who is noted for his deep spirituality, or the life of our church? Is the Lord's hand shortened that he cannot save? Is his ear heavy that he cannot hear? Why is it that in order to have so-called revivals, we must have outside pressure, by the reputation and sensation of some renowned evangelist? This is largely true in our larger charges and with our leading men. Why is it that the pastor is not sufficiently spiritual, holy, and in communion with God, that he cannot hold his own revival services, and have large outpourings of the Holy Spirit on the church, the community and upon himself? There can be but one solution for all this state of things. We have cultivated other things to the neglect of the work of holiness. We have permitted our minds to be preoccupied with material things in the church. Unfortunately, whether designedly or not, we have substituted the external for the internal. We have put that which is seen to the front and shut out that which is unseen. It is all too true as to the church, that we are much further advanced in material matters than in matters spiritual.

But the cause of this sad state of things may be traced further back. It is largely due to the decay of prayer. For with the decline of the work of holiness there has come the decline of the business of praying. As praying and holiness go together, so the decline of one, means the decay of the other. Excuse it if we may, justify the present state of things if we will, yet it is all too patent that the emphasis in the work of the present-day church is not put on prayer. And just as this has occurred, the emphasis has been taken from the great work of God set on foot in the atonement, holiness of heart and life. The church is not turning out praying men and women, because the church is not intently engaged in the one great work of holiness.

At one time, John Wesley saw that there was a perceptible decline in the work of holiness, and he stopped short to inquire into the cause, and if we are as honest and spiritual as he was, we will now see the same causes operating to stay God's work among us. In a letter to his brother, Charles, at one time, he comes directly to the point, and makes short, incisive work of it. Here is how he begins his letter:

What has hindered the work? I want to consider this. And must we not first say, we are the chief. If we were more holy in heart and life, thoroughly devoted to God, would not all the preachers catch fire, and carry it with them, throughout the land?

Is not the next hindrance the littleness of grace (rather than of gifts) in a considerable part of our preachers? They have not the whole mind that was in Christ. They do not steadily walk as he walked. And, therefore, the hand of the Lord is stayed, though not altogether; though he does work still. But it is not in such a degree as he surely would, were they holy as he that hath sent them is holy.

Is not the third hindrance the littleness of grace in the generality of our people? Therefore, they pray little, and with little fervency for a general blessing. And, therefore, their prayer has little power with God. It does not, as once, shut and open heaven.

Add to this, that as there is much of the spirit of the world in their hearts, so there is much conformity to the world in their lives. They ought to be bright and shining lights, but they neither burn nor shine. They are not true to the rules they profess to observe. They are not holy in all manner of conversation. Nay, many of them are salt that has lost its savor, the little savor they once had. Wherewith then shall the rest of the land be seasoned? What wonder that their neighbors are as unholy as ever?

He strikes the spot. He hits the center. He grades the cause. He freely confesses that he and Charles are the first cause, in this decline of holiness. The chief ones occupy positions of responsibility. As they go, so goes the church. They give color to the church. They largely determine its character and its work. What holiness should mark these chief men? What zeal should ever characterize them? What prayerfulness should be seen in them! How influential they ought to be with God! If the head be weak, then the whole body will feel the stroke.

The pastors come next in his catalogue. When the chief shepherds and those who are under them, the immediate pastors, stay their advance in holiness, the panic will reach to the end of the line. As are the pastors, so will the people be as a rule. If the pastors are prayerless, then will the people follow in their footsteps. If the preacher be silent upon the work of holiness, then will there be no hungering and thirsting after holiness in the laymen. If the preacher be careless about obtaining the highest and best God has for him in religious experience, then will the people take after him.

One statement of Wesley needs to be repeated with emphasis. The littleness of grace, rather than the smallness of gifts,-this is largely the case with the preachers. It may be stated as an axiom: That the work of God fails as a general rule, more for the lack of grace, than for the want of gifts. It is more than this. It is more than this, for a full supply of grace brings an increase of gifts. It may be repeated that small results, a low experience, a low religious life, and pointless, powerless preaching always flow from a lack of grace. And a lack of grace flows from a lack of praying. Great grace comes from great praying.

What is our calling's glorious hope

But inward holiness?

For this to Jesus I look up,

I calmly wait for this.

I wait till he shall touch me clean,

Shall life and power impart;

Give me the faith that casts out sin,

And purifies the heart.

In carrying on his great work in the world, God works through human agents. He works through his church collectively and through his people individually. In order that they may be effective agents, they must be "vessels unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work." God works most effectively through holy men. His work makes progress in the hands of praying men. Peter tells us that husbands who might not be reached by the Word of God, might be won by the conduct of their wives. It is those who are "blameless and harmless, the sons of God," who can hold forth the word of life "in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation."

The world judges religion not by what the Bible says, but by how Christians live. Christians are the Bible which sinners read. These are the epistles to be read of all men. "By their fruits ye shall know them." The emphasis, then, is to be placed upon holiness of life. But unfortunately in the present-day church, emphasis has been placed elsewhere. In selecting church workers and choosing ecclesiastical officers, the quality of holiness is not considered. The praying fitness seems not to be taken into account, when it was just otherwise in all of God's movements and in all of his plans. He looked for holy men, those noted for their praying habits. Prayer leaders are scarce. Prayer conduct is not counted as the highest qualification for offices in the church.

We cannot wonder that so little is accomplished in the great work in the world which God has in hand. The fact is that it is surprising so much has been done with such feeble, defective agents. "Holiness to the Lord" needs again to be written on the banners of the church. Once more it needs to be sounded out in the ears of modern Christians. "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

Let it be emphasized and reemphasized that this is the divine standard of religion. Nothing short of this will satisfy the divine requirement. O the danger of deception at this point! How near one can come to being right and yet be wrong! Some men can come very near to pronouncing the test word, "Shibboleth," but they miss it. "Many will say unto me, Lord, Lord, in that day," says Jesus Christ, but he further states that then will he say unto them, "I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

Men can do many good things and yet not be holy in heart and righteous in conduct. They can do many good things and lack that spiritual quality of heart called holiness. How great the need of hearing the words of Paul guarding us against self-deception in the great work of personal salvation:

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

O may I still from sin depart;

A wise and understanding heart,

Jesus, to me to be given;

And let me through thy Spirit know

To glorify my God below,

And find my way to heaven.

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