

I Ask Whether You Pray, Because Prayer Is an Act of Religion to Which There Is Great Encouragement.

by J.C. Ryle

Prayer is an act of religion with great encouragement, and it is essential for spiritual growth and avoiding backsliding.

Scripture: Matthew 7:7

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the vital role of prayer in the life of a believer, asserting that God has made every provision for us to approach Him in prayer without fear. He highlights that through Jesus Christ, we have a direct and confident access to God, and that the Holy Spirit assists us in our prayers, ensuring they are powerful and effective. Ryle warns that neglecting prayer can lead to spiritual stagnation and backsliding, while diligent prayer fosters growth in holiness and closeness to God. He encourages believers to recognize the encouragement and promises found in Scripture regarding prayer, urging them to make it a priority in their lives. Ultimately, Ryle challenges his audience with the question, 'Do you pray?'

Transcript

There is everything on God's part to make prayer easy if people will only attempt it. All things are ready on his side. Every objection is anticipated. Every difficulty is provided for. the crooked places are made straight and the rough places made smooth. There is no excuse left for the prayerless person.

There is a way by which any person, however sinful and unworthy, may draw near to God the Father. Jesus Christ has opened that way by the sacrifice he made for us upon the cross. The holiness and justice of God need not frighten sinners and keep them back. Only let them cry to God in the name of Jesus, and they shall find God upon the throne of grace, willing and ready to hear. The name of Jesus is a never-failing passport for our prayers. In that name a person may draw near to God with boldness, and ask with confidence. God has engaged to hear him. Think of this. Is this not an encouragement?

There is an Advocate and Intercessor always waiting to present the prayers of those who come to God through him. That advocate is Jesus Christ. He mingles our prayers with the incense of his own almighty intercession. So mingled, they go up as a sweet savor before the throne of God. Poor as they are in

themselves, they are mighty and powerful in the hand of our High Priest and Elder Brother. The bank-note without a signature at the bottom is nothing but a worthless piece of paper. The stroke of a pen confers on it all its value. The prayer of a poor child of Adam is a feeble thing in itself, but once endorsed by the hand of the Lord Jesus it avails much. There was an officer in the city of Rome who appointed to have his doors always open, in order to receive any Roman citizen who applied to him for help. Just so the ear of the Lord Jesus is ever open to the cry of all who need mercy and grace. It is his office to help them. Their prayer is his delight. Think of this. Is this not an encouragement?

There is the Holy Spirit ever ready to help our infirmities in prayer. It is one part of his special office to assist us in our endeavors to speak to God. We need not be cast down and distressed by the fear of not knowing what to say. The Spirit will give us words if we seek his aid. The prayers of the Lord's people are the inspiration of the Lord's Spirit, the work of the Holy Ghost who dwells within them as the Spirit of grace and supplication. Surely the Lord's people may well hope to be heard. It is not merely they that pray, but the Holy Ghost pleading in them. Think of this. Is not this an encouragement?

There are exceeding great and precious promises to those who pray. What did the Lord Jesus mean when he spoke such words as these: "Ask and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened unto you: for every one that asks, receives; and he that seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened." Matthew 7:7,8. "All things whatsoever you shall ask in prayer believing, you shall receive ." Matthew 12:22. "Whatsoever you shall ask in my name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you shall ask anything in my name I will do it." John 14:13,14. What did the Lord mean when he spoke the parables of The friend at midnight and The importunate widow? Luke 11:5, 18:1. Think over these passages. If this is not an encouragement to pray, words have no meaning.

There are wonderful examples in the Scripture of the power of prayer. Nothing seems to be too great, too hard, or too difficult for prayer to do. It has obtained things that seemed impossible and out of reach. It has won victories over fire, air earth, and water. Prayer opened up the Red Sea . Prayer brought water from the rock and bread from heaven. Prayer made the sun stand still. Prayer brought fire from the sky on Elijah's sacrifice. Prayer turned the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. Prayer overthrew the army of Sennacherib. Well might Mary Queen of Scots say, "I fear John Knox's prayers more than an army of ten thousand men." Prayer has healed the sick. Prayer has raised the dead. Prayer has procured the conversion of souls. "The child of many prayers," said an old Christian to Augustine's mother, "shall never perish." Prayer, pains, and faith can do anything. Nothing seems impossible when a person has the spirit of adoption. "Let me alone," is the remarkable saying of God to Moses when Moses was about to intercede for the children of Israel. Exodus 32:10. So long as Abraham asked mercy for Sodom, the Lord went on giving. He never ceased to give till Abraham ceased to pray. Think of this. Is this not an encouragement?

What can a person need to lead them to take any step in religion, than the things I have just told you about prayer? What more could be done to make the path to the mercy seat easy, and to remove all occasions of stumbling from the sinners way? Surely if the devils in hell had such a door set before them, they would leap for gladness and make the very pit ring with joy.

But where will the person hide their head at the last who neglects such glorious encouragements? What can possibly be said for the person who, after all, dies without prayer? Surely I may feel anxious that you should not be that person. Surely I may well ask-DO YOU PRAY?

V. I ask whether you pray, because diligence in prayer is the secret of eminent holiness.

Without controversy there is a vast difference among true Christians. There is an immense interval between the foremost and the hindermost in the army of God.

They are all fighting the same good fight but how much more valiantly some fight than others. They are all doing the Lord's work but how much more some do than others. They are all light in the Lord; but how much more brightly some shine than others. They are all running the same race; but how much faster some get on than others. They all love the same Lord and Saviour; but how much more some love him than others. I ask any true Christian whether this is not the case. Are these things not so?

There are some of the Lord's people who seem never able to get on from the time of their conversion. They are born again, but they remain babies all their lives. You hear from them the same old experience. You remark in them the same lack of spiritual appetite, the same lack of interest in anything beyond their own little circle, which you remarked ten years ago. They are pilgrims indeed, but pilgrims like the Gibeonites of old; their bread is always dry and moldy, their shoes always old, and their garments always rent and torn. I say this with sorrow and grief; but I ask any real Christian, Is it not true?

There are others of the Lord's people who seem to be always advancing. They grow like grass after rain; they increase like Israel in Egypt; they press on like Gideon, though sometimes faint, yet always pursuing. They are ever adding grace to grace, and faith to faith, and strength to strength. Every time you meet them their hearts seems larger, and their spiritual stature taller and stronger. Every year they appear more, and feel more in their religion. They not only have good works to prove the reality of their faith, but they are zealous of them. They are not only do well, but they are unwearied in well doing. They attempt great things, and they do great things. When they fail they try again, and when they fall they are soon up again. And all this time they think themselves poor, unprofitable servants, and fancy that they do nothing at all. These are those who make religion lovely and beautiful in the eyes of all. They wrest praise even from the unconverted and win golden opinions even from the selfish people of the world. It does one good to see. to be with them, and to hear them. When you meet them, you could believe that like Moses, they had just come out from the presence of God. When you part with them you feel warmed by their company, as if your soul had been near a fire. I know such people are rare. I only ask, Are there not many such?

Now how can you account for the difference which I have just described? What is the reason that some believers are so much brighter and holier than others? I believe the difference, in nineteen cases out of twenty, arises from different habits about private prayer. I believe that those who are not eminently holy pray little, and those who are eminently holy pray much.

I dare say this opinion may startle some hearers. I have little doubt that many look on eminent holiness as a kind of special gift, which none but a few must pretend to aim at. They admire it at a distance in books. They think it beautiful when they see an example near themselves. But as to its being a thing within the reach of any but a very few, such a notion never seems to enter their minds. In short, they consider it a kind of monopoly granted to a few favored believers, but certainly not to all.

Now I believe that this is a most dangerous mistake. I believe that spiritual as well as natural greatness depends in a high degree on the faithful use of means within everybody's reach. Of course I do not say we have a right to expect a miraculous grant of intellectual gifts; but I do say, that when a person is once converted to God, his progress in holiness will be much in accordance with their own diligence in the use of God's appointed means. And I assert confidently that the principle means by which most believers have

become great in the church of Christ is the habit of diligent private prayer. Look through the lives of the brightest and best of God's servants, whether in the Bible or not. See what is written of Moses and David and Daniel and Paul. Mark what is recorded of Luther and Bradford the Reformers. Observe what is related of the private devotions of Whitefield and Cecil and Venn and Bickersteth and McCheyne. Tell me of one of the goodly fellowship of saints and martyrs, who has not had this mark most prominently-they were men of prayer. Depend on it, prayer is power.

Prayer obtains fresh and continued outpourings of the Spirit. He alone begins the work of grace in a persons heart. He alone can carry it forward and make it prosper. But the good Spirit loves to be entreated. And those who ask most will have most of his influence.

Prayer is the surest remedy against the devil and besetting sins. That sin will never stand firm which is heartily prayed against. The devil will never long keep dominion over us which beseech the Lord to cast forth. But then we must spread out all our case before our heavenly Physician, if he is to give us daily relief.

Do you wish to grow in grace and be a devoted Christian? Be very sure, if you wish it, you could not have a more important question than this-DO YOU PRAY?

VI. I ask whether you pray, because neglect of prayer is one of the greatest causes of backsliding.

There is such a thing as going back in religion after making a good profession. People may run well for a season, like the Galatians, and then turn aside after false teachers. People may profess loudly while their feelings are warm, as Peter did, and then in the hour of trial deny their Lord. People may cool down in their zeal to do good, like John Mark the companion of Paul. People may follow an apostle for a season, and like Demas go back to the world. All these things people may do.

It is a miserable thing to be a backslider. Of all unhappy things that can befall a person, I suppose it is the worst. A stranded ship, a broken-winged eagle, a garden overrun with weeds, a harp without strings, a church in ruins, all these are sad sights, but a backslider is a sadder still. A wounded conscience-a mind sick of itself-a memory full of self-reproach-a heart pierced through with the Lord's arrows- a-spirit broken with the inward accusation-all this is a taste of hell. It is hell on earth. Truly that saying of the wise man is solemn and weighty, "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways." Proverbs 14:14.

Now what is the case of most backslidings? I believe, as a general rule, one of the chief causes is neglected private prayer. Of course the secret history of falls will not be know till the last day. I can only give my opinion as a minister of Christ and a student of the heart. That opinions, I repeat distinctly, that backsliding generally first begins with neglect of private prayer.

Bibles read without prayer; sermons heard without prayer; marriages contracted without prayer; journeys undertaken without prayer; residences chosen without prayer; friendships formed without prayer; the daily act of prayer itself hurried over, or gone through without heart: these are the kind of downward steps by which many a Christian descends to a condition of spiritual palsy, or reaches the point where God allows them to have a tremendous fall.

This is the process which forms the lingering Lots, the unstable Samsons, the innocent Asas, the pliable Jehoshaphats, the over-careful Marthas, of whom so many are to be found in the church of Christ. Often the simple history of such cases is this: the became careless about private prayer.

You may be very sure people fall in private long before they fall in public. They are backsliders on their knees long before they backslide openly in the eyes of the world. Like Peter, they first disregard the Lord's warning to watch and pray, and then like Peter, their strength is gone, and in the hour of temptation they deny their Lord.

The world takes notice of their fall, and scoffs loudly. But the world knows nothing of the real reason. The heathen succeeded in making a well-known Christian offer incense to an idol, by threatening them with a punishment worse than death. They triumphed greatly in the sight of their cowardice and apostasy. But the heathen did not know the fact of which history informs us, that on that very morning he had left his bed-chamber hastily, and without finishing his usual prayers.

If you are a Christian indeed, I trust you will never be a backslider. But if you do not want to be a backsliding Christian, remember the question I ask you: DO YOU PRAY?

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