

The Ministry of Comfort - Part 2

by J.R. Miller

J.R. Miller's sermon emphasizes the profound comfort found in Jesus and God during times of grief and sorrow, highlighting the importance of personal relationship over mere belief in promises.

Scripture: John 11:25

Topics: "The Presence of God", "Comfort in Grief"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes Jesus as the ultimate Comforter, illustrating His profound ability to comfort those in grief, particularly through the story of Lazarus. He explains that while Jesus offered the hope of resurrection, He also provided immediate comfort through His presence and sympathy, demonstrating that true solace comes from a personal relationship with God. Miller encourages believers to seek God Himself for comfort rather than merely relying on His gifts, asserting that God's love is the only true source of healing in times of sorrow. He concludes by urging Christians to remember their sorrows but not to dwell on them, instead focusing on the blessings and duties that lie ahead.

Transcript

The Ministry of Comfort

J. R. Miller, 1898

Jesus as a Comforter

It is interesting to study Jesus as a comforter. The comfort He gave to His friends was strong and true. We have an illustration of this in the Bethany home. The sorrow was very great. Lazarus was dead, and Jesus came, not as other friends came, merely to mourn with the sisters--but to comfort their hearts in their overwhelming grief.

First, He lifted the veil and gave them a glimpse of what lies beyond death. "Your brother shall rise again." "I am the resurrection, and the life--he who believes on Me, though he dies, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes on Me, shall never die." Thus He opened a great window into the eternal world. This is all plainer to us than it could be at that time to Martha and Mary; for a little while after Jesus had spoken these words, He Himself passed through death, coming again from the grave in immortal life. To those who sorrow over the departure of a Christian friend, it is a wonderful comfort to know the true teaching of the New Testament on the subject of dying. Death is not the end; it is a door which leads into fullness of

eternal glory.

Many in bereavement, though believing the doctrine of the future resurrection, fail to get present comfort from it. Jesus assured Martha that her brother should rise again. "Yes, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day," she said. The hope was too distant to give her much comfort. Her sense of present loss outweighed every other thought and feeling. She craved back again, the companionship she had lost. Who that has stood by the grave of a precious friend, has not experienced the same feeling of inadequateness in the consolation which comes from even the strongest belief in a far off rising again of those who are in their graves?

The Master's reply to Martha's hungry heart cry is very rich in its comfort. "I am the resurrection." This is one of the wonderful present tenses of Christian hope. To Martha's thought the comfort of resurrection was a dim far away consolation. "I am the resurrection," said Jesus. The resurrection was something present, not remote. His words embraced the whole blessed truth of immortal life. "Whoever lives and believes on Me shall never die." There is no death for those who are in Christ. The body dies--but the person lives on. The resurrection may be in the future--but there is no break whatever in the life of the believer in Christ. He is not here, our eyes see Him not, our ears hear not His voice, we cannot touch Him with our hands; but He still lives, thinks, feels, remembers and loves. No power in His being has been quenched by dying; no beauty dimmed, no faculty destroyed.

This is a part of the comfort which Jesus gave to His friends in their bereavement. He assured them, that for the believer there is no death. There remains for those who stay behind, the pain of separation and of loneliness--but for those who have passed over we need have no fear.

How does Jesus comfort the friends who are left? As we read over the story of the sorrow of this Bethany home, we find the answer to our question. You say, "He brought back their dead, thus comforting them by the literal undoing of the work of death and grief. If only He would do this now, in every case where love cries to Him--that would be comfort indeed." But we must remember that the return of Lazarus to his home, was only a temporary restoration. He came back to his old life of mortality, temptation, sickness, pain and death. He came back, too, only for a season. It was not a resurrection to immortal life; it was only a restoration to mortal life. He must pass again through the mystery of dying, and the second time his sisters must experience the agony of separation and loneliness. We can scarcely call this comfort--it was merely a postponement for a little while, of the final separation.

But Jesus gave the sisters true comfort besides this. His own presence with them brought them comfort. They knew that He loved them. Many times before, when He had entered their home, He had brought benedictions. They had a feeling of security and peace in His presence. Even their great grief lost something of its poignancy when the light of His face fell upon them. Every strong, tender and true human love, has comforting power. We can pass more easily through a sore trial, if a trusted friend is beside us. The believer can endure any sorrow, if Jesus is with him.

The trouble with us too often, is that we do not realize the presence of our Master though, He is close beside us, and miss altogether the comfort of His love. Mary stood with breaking heart by the empty grave, crying out for her Lord, who even then was close behind her--but unrecognized, "she supposed Him to be the gardener." A moment later, however, the speaking of her name in the old familiar tone of voice, revealed Him to her, and instantly her sorrow was turned into joy. Likewise, we stand oftentimes in the deep shadows of grief, longing for comfort, yearning for love, while Christ is close beside us, closer than any

human friend can be. If only we will dry our tears and look up into His face, believing--our soul shall be flooded with His wonderful love, and our sorrow shall be swallowed up in fullness of joy. There is never the least doubt about the presence of Christ in our times of trouble; it is only because we remain unaware of that presence, that we are not comforted.

Another element of comfort for these sorrowing sisters, was in the sympathy of Jesus. There was a wonderful gentleness in His manner, as He received first one and then the other. Mary's grief was deeper than Martha's, and when Jesus saw her weeping, He groaned in spirit and was troubled. Then, in the shortest verse in the Bible, we have a window into the very heart of the Master, and we find there the most wonderful sympathy.

"Jesus wept." It is a great comfort in time of sorrow, to have even human sympathy, to know that somebody cares, that someone feels with us. It would have added something--very much indeed--of comfort for the sisters--if John, or Peter, or James, had wept with them beside their brother's grave. But the tears of the Master meant incalculably more. They told of the holiest sympathy this world ever saw--the Son of God weeping with two sisters in a great human sorrow.

This shortest verse in the Bible, was not written merely as a fragment of the narrative--it contains a revealing of the heart of Jesus for all time. Wherever a believer in Christ is sorrowing, One stands by, unseen, who shares the grief. There is immeasurable comfort in the revealing that the Son of God--suffers with us in our suffering, is afflicted in all our affliction, and is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. We can endure our trouble more quietly, when we know this.

There is yet another feature in the manner of Christ's comforting His friends, which are suggestive. Too often human sympathy is nothing but a sentiment. Our friends weep with us--and then pass by on the other side. They tell us they are sorry for us, yet they do nothing to help us. But the sympathy of Jesus at Bethany was very practical. Not only did He reveal His affection for His friends in coming all the way from Peraea, to be with them in their trouble; not only did He show His love by speaking to them words of divine comfort, which have made a shining track through the world ever since; not only did He weep with them in their grief--but He also wrought the greatest of all His miracles to restore to them their heart's joy.

No doubt thousands of other friends of Jesus, in bereavement have wished that He would comfort them in like manner, by giving back their beloved one. Ofttimes He does what is in effect the same--in answer to the prayer of faith, He spares the lives of those who are dear and who seem about to be taken away. When we pray for the recovery of our friends who are sick, our prayer, if we pray acceptably, always ends with, "Not my will--but Yours, be done." Even the most passionate longing of our affection, we subdue in the quiet confidence of faith. If it is not best for our loved one, if it would not be a real blessing, if it is not God's way, then, "Not my will--but Yours, be done." If we pray thus, we must believe that the issue, whatever it may be, is God's best for us. If our friends are taken away, there is unspeakable comfort in the confidence that this was God's will for them. If they recover, it is Christ who has given them back to us, as He gave back Lazarus to Martha and Mary.

The problem of sorrow in a Christian life is a very serious one. It is important that we have a clear understanding upon the subject, in order that when it falls to our lot to suffer, we may receive blessing, and not hurt, from our experience. Every sorrow which comes into our life brings us something good from God. But we may reject the good, and if we do, we not only miss blessing--but receive harm instead. There is in Jesus Christ, an infinite resource of consolation, and we have only to open our heart to receive it. Then we

shall pass through sorrow sustained by divine help and love, and shall come from it enriched in character and blessed in all our life. Our griefs set lessons for us to learn, and we should diligently seek to get into our life, whatever it is that our Master would teach us. In every pain is folded the seed of blessing--we should make sure that the seed shall have an opportunity to grow, and that we may gather its fruit. In every tear, a rainbow hides--but only when the sunshine falls upon the crystal drop, is the splendor revealed.

God Himself, the Best Comfort

After all, the most heart satisfying comfort in time of trouble, is found in God Himself, and not in anything God says or does. The Christian revelation concerning death brings comfort, when we learn to think of it as really only a process in which the life passes out of limitation, imperfection, and unattainment; emerging into rich beauty and wondrous enlargement. The truth of immortality also gives comfort, as we think of our godly friends entering upon an existence in blessedness which shall never have an end. There is comfort, too, in the assurance that God makes no mistakes in any of His dealings with us, and that in time, we shall see beauty and good--where now we see only what seems to be marring and hurt. We get a measure of comfort, also, in the divine assurance that "all things work together for good to them that love God," that sorrow has a mission, and that within every trial, God sends a blessing.

But the comfort which means most to the heart which is bruised or broken, is that which comes in the personal revealing of God, and in the experiences of communion with Him. One of the common failures of Christian faith, is in being satisfied with God's gifts and not then going on to find God Himself. God is always better than His best gifts. Always it is true that "the gift without the giver is bare." Especially is this true of God and His gifts.

We have illustrations of this in human friendships. One comes into our life, who does many things for us. His words encourage, cheer, and strengthen us. His kindness adds to our pleasure. His helpfulness in many ways, makes our burdens lighter. But we have never yet entered into close relations with Him. There has been no occasion in our life, no time of need, to draw Him near to us in those revealings in which the heart gives its best. We know Him only through what He has done for us in a general way. But at length there comes an experience of common kindness and helpfulness, the man gives us part of himself. We often hear it said of some friend: "I knew him for years, and he did a great deal for me; but I never learned what nobleness there was in his nature, what treasure of good there was in his friendship, until the time of my great need a few months since, when he came into my life with all his marvelous power of personal helpfulness." No longer was it merely the things the man did, which gave help--it was now the man himself who poured out the wealth of his own life, and this was better than the best of all his gifts, and of his services.

It is the same with God. There are many people who receive countless blessings from Him and who rest on His promises, who yet do not get to know God Himself in a personal way. There are many who for a time trusted Christ and found great comfort in the assurances of His love--but who at length, in some season of trial, entered into close relations of personal friendship with Him. In this revealing they found treasures of love, of sympathy, and of comfort, far surpassing the best they had ever experienced before. In seeking, therefore, for help in sorrow, we should never be content with the gifts of God alone, or with the comforts which come in His words of promise; we should pass beyond all these to God Himself and seek satisfaction in the infinite blessedness of His love.

It is thus that the Scriptures represent God. He is ever, with lavish hand, dispensing His mercies and benefits--but He would not have us content with these. "He makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." But He desires to manifest Himself to His children as He does not to the world. The great Bible saints found their satisfaction and their help, not in God's gifts--but in God himself. Thus the reason for David's sublime assurance, "I shall not want," was not because he had great stores of God's gifts laid up--but because "the Lord is my Shepherd." His confidence was not in the wealth which God had given him, which would cover all his wants for the future--but in God Himself.

In another psalm, the writer's intense longing is not for any mere tokens of divine goodness, any mere benefits or favors--but for God Himself. "As a deer longs for streams of water, so I long for You, God. I thirst for God, the living God!" Psalm 42:1-2 His thirst was unappeasable in any way--but in fellowship with God. Nothing that God could have given him of the richest of His gifts, of the sweetest blessings of His hand, would have satisfied him. It was for God Himself, the living God that he thirsted. The human soul was made for God, and God alone can meet its need.

The only heart-filling comfort, therefore, in time of sorrow is that which is in God Himself. It is thus, too, that our Father desires to bless us; He asks for our fullest trust, and He would reveal Himself to us in tenderest personal ways. After Horace Bushnell's death, there were found, dimly penciled on a sheet of paper, laid in his Bible, these words: "My mother's loving instinct was from God, and God was in her love to me first--which love was deeper than hers and more protracted. Long years ago she vanished--but God stays by me still, embracing me in my grey hairs as tenderly and carefully as she did in my infancy, and giving to me as my joy and the principal glory of my life, that He lets me know Him, and helps me, with real confidence, to call Him my Father."

That is very beautiful. Mother love is God coming to us in an incarnation which even infancy soon learns to understand. What the mother is to her baby, God is to His child unto the end. The Scriptures strive continually to make the truth of the divine nearness real to us. We are taught to call God our Father--but there is something about the mother's relation to her child which is even closer and tenderer than a father's. So when God is seeking most earnestly to make His people understand the tenderness of His love and yearning for them, He says, "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you."

Jesus went straight to His Father with all His troubles. He was not content with any logic of comfort, or any promise of divine good in the final outworking of events. He believed all this--but in His trial He wanted the blessing of His Father's presence, the warmth of the Father's embrace. Continually we find Him fleeing away from the throng, from hatred and persecution, to commune with God. In the hour of His extremist sorrow, while He sought also human sympathy, it was to His Father that He turned for real comfort. "Being in an agony--He prayed." Our Master's example should be our guide in every experience of grief or trial.

Persuasions, arguments, and promises, however true, precious, and divine they may be, will never bring perfect quiet to a heart in its anguish. We may listen to all that earth's most skillful comforters can tell us, even of the consolations of the word of God--but our lonely spirit will be lonely still. There may be an assent to all that is said to us, and our mind may acquiesce, finding a measure of rest; yet still in the depths of our being we remain uncomfited. Something is lacking. But if we creep into God's bosom, and nestle there like a tired child in the mother's arms, and let God's love enfold and embrace us, and flow into our heart, however deep the sorrow may be--we shall be comforted, satisfied. And even if every source of human joy has been cut off, and we are left utterly bereft--we can still find in God that which will suffice.

There is a blessing in true human sympathy. God sends our friends to us to bring us little measures of His own love--little cupfuls of His grace. But He Himself is the only true comforter. His love alone is great enough to fill our heart, and His hand alone has skill to bind up our wounds.

The Duty of Forgetting Sorrow

Sorrow makes deep scars; it writes its ineffaceable record on the heart which suffers; we really never get over our great griefs; we are never altogether the same after we have passed through them as we were before.

In one sense, sorrow never can be forgotten. The cares of a long, busy life may supervene--but the memory of the first deep sorrows in early youth, lives on in perpetual freshness, as the little flowers live on beneath the cold snowdrifts, through all the long winter. The old woman of ninety years remembers her grief and sense of loss seventy years ago, when God took her first baby out of her bosom. We never can actually forget our sorrows--nor is it meant that we should do so.

There is a way of remembering grief which is not wrong, which is not a mark of lack of submission, and which brings rich blessing to your heart and life; there is a tender and nourishing influence in sorrow, which has been rightly accepted and cheerfully borne.

"The memory of things precious, keeps warm the heart that once did hold them." Recollections of losses, if sweetened by faith, hope, and love--are blessings to the lives which they overshadow. Indeed, they are poor--who have never suffered, and have none of sorrow's marks upon them; they are poorer far who, having suffered, have forgotten their sufferings and bear in their life no beautifying traces of the experiences of pain through which they have passed.

Yet there is a way of remembering sorrow, which brings no blessing, no enrichment--which does not soften the heart, nor add beauty to the life. There is an unsubmitive remembering which brings no joy, which keeps the heart bitter, which shuts out the sunshine, which broods over losses and trials. Only evil can result from such memory of grief. In a sense, we ought not to remember our sorrow. We certainly ought not to stop in the midst of our duties and turn aside and sit down by the graves of our losses, staying there while the tides of busy life sweep on. We should leave our griefs behind us, while we go on reverently, faithfully, and quietly in our appointed way of duty.

There are many people, however, who have not learned this lesson; they live perpetually in the shadows of the trials and losses of their bygone days. Nothing could be more unwholesome or more untrue to the spirit of Christian faith, than such a course. What would be said or thought of the man who should build a house for himself out of black stones, paint all the walls black, hang black curtains over the dark stained windows, put black carpets on every floor, festoon the chambers with funeral crape, have only sad pictures on the walls and sad books on the shelves, and would have no lovely plants growing and no sweet flowers blooming anywhere about his home? Would we not look upon such a person with pity, as one into whose soul the outer darkness had crept, eclipsing the beauty of life?

Yet that is just the way some people do live. They build for their soul, houses just like that; they have a memory like a sieve, which lets all the bright and joyous things flow away while it retains all the sad and bitter things; they forget the pleasant incidents and experiences, the happy hours, the days that came laden with gladness as ships come from distant shores with cargoes of spices; but there has been no painful event in all their life, which memory is not kept ever vivid. They will talk for hours of their griefs and

bereavements in the past, dwelling with a strange, morbid pleasure on each sad incident. They keep the old wounds ever unhealed in their heart; they keep continually in sight pictures and reminisces of all their lost joys--but none of the joys that are not lost; they forget all their ten thousand blessings, in the abiding and absorbing recollections of the two or three sorrows which have come amid the multitudes and unremembered joys.

So it is with these people who live perpetually in the shadows and glooms of their own sorrows. The darkness has crept into their soul, and all the joyous brightness has passed out of their life, until their very vision has become so blurred that they can no more even discern the glad and lovely colors in God's universe.

Few perversions of life could be sadder than this dwelling ever in the glooms and shadows of past griefs. It is the will of God that we should turn our eyes away from our sorrows, that we should let the dead past bury its dead, while we go on with reverent earnestness to the new duties and the new joys that await us. By standing and weeping over the grave where it is buried, we cannot get back what we have lost. When David's child was dead, he dried his tears and went at once to God's house and worshiped, saying, "Now he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?" Instead of weeping over the grave--he turned all the pressure of his grief into the channel of holy living.

That is the way every believer in Christ should deal with his sorrows. Weeping inconsolably beside a grave can never give back loves' vanished treasure. Nor can any blessing come out of such sadness. It does not make the heart any softer; it develops no feature of Christ-likeness in the life; it only embitters our present joys and stunts the growth of all beautiful things. The graces of the heart are like flowers--they grow well only in the sunshine.

There was a mother who lost by death, a godly daughter. For a long time the mother had been a consistent Christian--but when her child died she refused to be comforted. Her pastor and other Christian friends sought by sympathy to draw her thoughts away from her grief, yet all their effort were vain. She would look at nothing but her sorrow; she spent a portion of nearly every day beside the grave where her dead daughter was buried; she would not listen to words of consolation; she would not lift an eye toward the heaven into which her child had gone; she went back no more to the sanctuary, where in the days of her joy she had loved to worship; she shut out of her heart every conception of God's love and kindness--and thought of Him only as a powerful Being who had taken her sweet child away from her bosom. Thus dwelling in the darkness of inconsolable grief, the joy of her religion failed her. Hope's bright visions no longer cheered her, and her heart grew cold and sick with despair. She refused to leave her sorrow, and to go on to new joys and toward the glory in which for Christian faith, all earths' lost things wait.

There was another mother who lost a child--one of the rarest and sweetest children God ever sent to this earth. Never was a heart more completely crushed than was the heart of this bereft mother--yet she did not, like the other woman, sit down in the gloom and dwell there; she did not shut out the sunshine and thrust away the blessing of divine comfort. She recognized her Father's hand in the grief that had fallen so heavily upon her, and bowed in sweet acquiescence to God's will; she opened her heart to the glorious truth of the immortal life, and was comforted by the simple faith that her godly child was with Christ. She remembered, too, that she had duties to the living, and turned away from the grave where her little one slept in such security, requiring no more any service of earthly affection, to minister to those who still lived and needed her care and love. The result was that her life grew richer and more beautiful beneath its

baptism of sore grief. She came from the deep shadow--a lovelier Christian, and her home and the whole community shared the blessing which she had found in her sorrow.

It is easy to see which of these two ways of enduring sorrow, the true one is. We should forget what we have suffered. The joy set before us should shine upon our grief--as the sun shines through clouds, glorifying them. We should cherish sacredly and tenderly the memory of our Christian dead--but should train ourselves to think of them as not in the grave--but in the home of the blessed with Christ, safely folded, waiting for us. Thus the bright and blessed hopes of immortality should fill us with tranquility and healthy gladness, as we move over the waves of trial.

We should remember that the blessings which have gone away, are not all that God has for us. This summer's flowers will all fade by and by, when winter's cold breath smites them--we shall not be able to find one of them in the fields or gardens during the long cold dreary months to come--yet we shall know all the while that God is preparing other flowers, which are just as fragrant and as lovely as those which have perished. Spring will come again, and under its warm breath the earth will be covered once more with floral beauty as rich as that which faded in the autumn. So the joys that have gone from our home and our heart, are not the only joys; God has others in store just as rich as those we have lost, and in due time He will give us these to fill our emptied hands.

One of the most serious dangers of inconsolable sorrow, is that it may lead us to neglect our duty to the living, in our mourning for the dead. This we should never do. God does not want us to give up our work, because our heart is broken. We may not even pause long with our sorrows; we may not sit down beside the graves of our dead and linger there, cherishing our grief. "Let the dead bury their own dead," said the Master, to one who wished to bury his father, and then follow Him; "but you go and publish abroad the kingdom of God." Not even the tender offices of love, might detain him who was called to the higher service. The lesson is for all, and for all time. Duty ever presses, and we have scarcely laid our dead away out of our sight, before its earnest calls that will not be denied, are sounding in our ears, bidding us hasten to new tasks.

A distinguished general related this moving incident of his own experience in time of war. The general's son was a lieutenant of artillery. An assault was in progress. The father was leading his division in a charge; as he pressed on in the field, suddenly his eye was caught by the sight of a dead artillery officer lying just before him. One glance showed him it was his own son. His fatherly impulse was to stop beside the loved form and give vent to his grief--but the duty of the moment demanded that he should press on in the charge; so, quickly snatching one kiss from the dead lips, he hastened away, leading his command in the assault.

Ordinarily the pressure is not so intense, and we can pause longer to weep and do honor to the memory of our dead. Yet in all sorrow the principle is the same. God does not desire us to waste our life in tears. We are to put our grief into new energy of service. Sorrow should make us more reverent, more earnest, and more helpful to others. God's work should never be allowed to suffer, while we stop to weep. The fires must still be kept burning on the altar, and the worship must go on. The work in the household, in the school, in the store, in the field, must be taken up again--the sooner the better.

Ofttimes, indeed, the death of one in the circle is a divine voice calling the living to new duty. Thus, when a father dies, the mother is ordained to double responsibility. If there is a son of thoughtful age, his duty is not bitter grieving--but prompt taking up of the work that has fallen from the father's dead hands. When our

friends are taken from us, our bereavement is a call, not to sad weeping--but to new duty.

Sometimes it is care only, which is laid down when death comes, as when a mother puts her baby away into the grave; no work drops out of the little hands for the mother to take up. But may we not then say that, since God has emptied her hands of the care and duty which had filled them, He has some other work for them to do? He has set them free from their own tasks, that with their trained skill and their enriched sympathies they may serve others.

In a sick room, there was a little rose bush in a pot in a window. There was only one rose on the bush, and its face was turned fully toward the light. This fact was noticed and spoken of, when one said that the rose would look no other way but toward the light. Experiments had been made with it; it had been turned away from the window, its face toward the shadow of the interior--but in a little time it would resume its old position. With wonderful persistence it refused to face the darkness, and insisted on ever looking toward the light.

The flower has its lesson for us. We should never allow ourselves to face toward life's glooms; we should never sit down in the shadows of any sorrow, and let the night darken over us into the gloom of despair; we should turn our face away toward the light and quicken every energy for braver duty and truer, holier service. Grief should always make us better and give us new skill and power; it should make our heart softer, our spirit kindlier, our touch more gentle; it should teach us its holy lessons, and we should learn them, and then go on, with sorrow's sacred ordination upon us, to new love and better service. It is thus, too, that lonely hearts find their sweetest, richest comfort.

Sitting down to brood over our sorrows--the darkness deepens about us and our little strength changes to weakness; but if we turn away from the gloom and take up the tasks of comforting and helping others--the light will come again and we shall grow strong.

Effectual Prayer

We kneel how weak, we rise how full of power!

Why therefore should we do ourselves this wrong,

Or others--that we are not always strong,

That we are ever overborne with care,

That we should ever weak or heartless be,

Anxious or troubled, when with us is prayer,

And joy and strength and courage are with Thee?

--Trench

Effectual prayer--is prayer which avails. A Scripture word tells us that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." In the Revised Version there is a suggestive change in the rendering, making it read, "The supplication of a righteous man avails much in its working." So prayer works. There are those who tell us that the effect of prayer is only subjective. You are in some trouble and plead with God to take away that which is so hard to bear. The trouble is not removed--but through your supplication you are

brought into the spirit of acquiescence and no longer plead for relief. Your prayer has changed nothing in your circumstances--it has only brought your mind into accord with your condition.

No doubt there are many prayers whose answer seems to come in this way. David pleaded for his sick child that it might live. The child died. But when David knew it was dead, he rose from his place of penitent pleading, washed away his tears, and went to God's house and worshiped. Then, returning to his home, he astonished the members of his household by the way he bore himself. His prayer had not kept his child in life--but it had brought into the king's heart such divine comfort, that his sorrow was turned into joy.

Paul earnestly and importunately besought the Lord to take away his "thorn in the flesh." The painful affliction was not removed, and yet there is evidence that the prayer availed in its working. There came to the apostle a word of assurance--"My grace is sufficient for you--for My power is made perfect in weakness." Immediately afterward we hear the triumphant rejoicing, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the strength of Christ may rest upon me." It is evident that while the prayer was not answered in the removing of the trouble, it was answered in the coming into the apostle's heart of such an accession of divine strength, that he was able now to keep his thorn and rejoice, not merely in spite of it--but even on account of it. The answer which came was indeed a greater manifestation of the power of prayer, than if the trial had been wholly taken away.

In our Lord's experience in Gethsemane, we have another example of a like working of prayer. The cup for whose taking away the Holy Sufferer pleaded with strong crying and tears, was not withdrawn, and yet the anguish of his heart grew less and less intense until we hear the word of victory, "The cup which the Father has given Me--shall I not drink it?" The supplication availed in its working, not in saving Him from the bitter experiences on which He was entering--but in the giving of help which enabled Him to pass through all the terrible fifteen hours which followed, without murmuring.

In all these cases, there was more than a subjective influence, bringing the suppliant into a spirit of acquiescence to that which was inevitable: there was an actual divine working in the heart, imparting grace for the hour. If you have a friend carrying a heavy load, there are two ways in which you may help him--you may take part of his burden and carry it for him--or you may put into his heart cheer and courage, making him stronger, so that he can bear his burden gladly himself. The latter way of helping is quite as effective as the former, and oftentimes it is a great deal wiser. We have a very inadequate conception of prayer--if we think of our Father as always, or even usually, at every cry of ours, hastening to lift away the burden we think too heavy, or to give us the pleasure or gratification we ask Him to give. In very many instances, such answering of prayer would be unkindness, not love. Then God answers, not by giving us what we cry for--but by imparting to us strength to do without it and to rejoice in His will. But the prayer as really avails in its working--as if the thing we sought had been granted.

Then there are many prayers which bring the answer in the very form which is sought. Elijah prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. He prayed again; and the heaven gave rain and the earth brought forth her fruit. The Bible is full of such illustrations. Every devout Christian has many examples in his own personal experience. We may say, therefore, that all true prayer is effectual, avails in its working. There are supposed prayers which get no answer--prayers, those who make them, perhaps wondering why nothing comes of them. The Master tells us that there are those who pray--in order that men may think them devout. Their petitions ascend not upward. James says there are those who ask and receive not, because they ask amiss, that they may spend it in their pleasures. But every true prayer is effectual, avails in its working.

What, then, is effectual prayer? It is easy to gather from the teachings of Holy Scripture, the answer to this question. Jesus Christ is our great Teacher, and He spoke many words about prayer. He Himself was a man of prayer and knew perfectly how to pray so as to receive an answer. Perhaps most of us altogether underestimate the value of what we call the Lord's Prayer, as definite instruction concerning the manner in which we should pray. It was given by the Master to His Disciples, in answer to their request that He would teach them to pray. We may study it therefore, as the divine ideal of acceptable and effectual prayer.

To begin with, we must enter at the right gate, the children's gate. We must approach God, saying, "Our Father." This means that we must come to God in prayer as His children. It is thus that we should come always to God in prayer. Whenever we do, we need not doubt that as quickly as the words "Abba, Father," are spoken, the door will open to us.

Much instruction is found in the order of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. We are apt to think first of our own frets and worries, our own needs and desires, when we come to God, and to begin at once to pour these into His ear. But it is not thus, that we are taught by our Master to do. Half of the Lord's Prayer is finished, before there is a word about the earthly needs of him who is praying.

We are to pray first for the hallowing of our Father's name. It is a great deal more important that we in our own life shall be glorifiers of God--than that our burden shall be lifted away, our business prospered, our sorrows comforted. Next we are to pray for the coming of our Father's kingdom. This desire should be dearer to our heart than anything which concerns merely our own comfort, pleasure or advancement. Then we are to ask that God's will may be done in earth as it is in heaven. Of course it is the will of God as it concerns our own personal life, that we have to do with immediately. We are to seek that our will may be lost in His; that the law of heaven shall become the law within the realm of our own heart. This, too, must come before any mention of need of ours.

It is not a mere accident that the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are arranged as they are. The order certainly teaches us that the first things in prayer, are not to be the affairs of our own personal life--but the great matters which concern the name, the kingdom, and the will of God.

It is very comforting, however, as we go on, to find that there is a place in the Master's model of prayer, for the commonest needs of daily life; that we may ask our Father even for the bread which our body needs. Only we should never forget to keep SELF and all personal needs and troubles in their true place--far secondary to our longing and asking for the things of God. Only that prayer is effectual in the largest measure--which puts the honor of God and the interests of God and His cause above all else in its desire. SELF creeps into our praying so easily and so insidiously, that we need always to be on our guard lest we dishonor God. If we do, our prayer cannot avail.

Another condition of effectual prayer suggested in our Lord's model form, is the spirit of forgiveness. "Forgive us--as we forgive those who have sinned against us." So important did Jesus regard this petition, that He returned to it again, saying: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." It is very clear that forgiveness of others, is one of the essentials in the prayer which God will hear and answer. Supplications breathed out of a bitter, resentful heart do not find their way to heaven.

Indeed the whole of the Lord's Prayer is a strong protest against selfishness. We are not to go to God with our own needs only. All the petitions require us to unite with others. We must come to God as "Our Father," and when we ask for daily bread--we must think of all who are hungry; and when we plead for the

forgiveness of our sins--we must ask forgiveness for others as well. Selfishness at the throne of grace vitiates the most eloquent pleading. Love is a condition of effectual prayer.

There are other elements in the prayer which avails in its working. Our Lord teaches us that we must be importunate. "Men ought always to pray and not to faint." Ofttimes the reason no answer comes to our supplication, is because we lack earnestness. It is the pleading which will not give up until it gets the blessing, which prevails with God. Faith is essential. Prayer without faith has no power. Faith as a grain of mustard seed, said the Master, will move mountains; that is, will overcome the greatest difficulties and obstacles. To pray in faith is to pray as seeing Him who is invisible, entering into closest fellowship with Him. Such believing attaches us to Christ, so that His life flows through us. Nothing is impossible to him who believes.

To the lowliest and feeblest of God's children, is given the privilege of prevailing prayer. We may lay hold upon God's strength. We may make intercession for others and call down upon them the most gracious blessing. We may unlock storehouses of divine goodness, and gather treasures at will. All things in earth and heaven are within the reach of him who prays.

The Effacement of SELF

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men--to be seen by them." Matthew 6:1

"Everything they do is done for men to see." Matthew 23:5

One of the most difficult lessons to learn, is self-effacement. SELF always dies hard. It seems to us that we have a right to put our name on every piece of work we do, and to get full honor for it. We like people to know of the good and virtuous things we do, the kindnesses we show, of our benevolences, our sacrifices, our heroism and services.

Yet we all know that this is not the attitude towards ourselves and our own work, which our Lord approves. Jesus expressly bids His followers to take heed that they do not perform their good works before men--to be seen by them. The last phrase is the emphatic one--"to be seen by men." We must often do our good works before men; indeed we are commanded to let our light shine before men--that they may see our good works and glorify our Father. It is not doing worthy things before men which is condemned--but doing them in order to be seen by men. We are not to live for the eye of men and for human praise--but for the eye of God and for His approval.

Jesus proceeded in the same connection to say that when we give alms, we should not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing, that our alms may be in secret. Then God alone can recompense us--and He will. Regarding prayer, too, the same counsel is given. There were those who made a show of their private devotions, performing them in some conspicuous place, in order that they might be seen by men, that men might regard them very devout. "They have their reward," said Jesus. They get what they seek--they are seen by men--but they are not heard by God. Jesus exhorts that, avoiding this display of devoutness to attract men's attention, His disciples should enter into their inner chamber when they pray and should shut their door and pray to the Father who sees in secret. We are not to infer from this, that no prayer ever should be made in public--public prayer is an important duty; the teaching is that all acts of devotion should never do anything in order to get human notice and commendation.

We may apply this teaching to all life. We are to live only to please God. Jesus said of Himself--and His mode of life was a pattern for us--"I do always those things which please My Father." He never wrought for human eye--but always for the divine approval. It mattered not to Him, therefore, whether any but God knew what He was doing. The prophet said of Him, "He shall not cry out, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street," and His life fulfilled this foretelling. If we can learn this lesson of living and working for God's eye only, it will give us a wonderful sense of freedom; it will exalt our ideal of life and duty, and will inspire us always to the best that we can do.

There is another phase of the same lesson. Not only should we do all our work for the divine approval--but we should not be careful to get our own name on what we do. If it is done solely for the honor of Christ, why should we be solicitous to have everybody know our part in it? Should it not be honor enough to have Christ accept our work and use it?

John the Baptist, in his life and ministry, illustrated the grace of self-effacement as few other men have done. When he first began to preach, great throngs flocked about him. When Jesus came and began to preach, the crowds melted away from John and went after the new preacher. It was not easy for John to see this and not be disturbed by it. But it caused him no bitter pang. He rejoiced in seeing Jesus thus honored, though at the cost of his own fame. "He must increase--but I must decrease," was his answer, when his disciples grew envious of the Galilean Rabbi. He understood that the highest use to which his life could be put was to add to the honor of his Master. He was glad to be unnoticed, to have his own name extinguished, that the glory of Christ might shine the more brightly.

The same renunciation of self should characterize all who follow Christ. They should seek only to get recognition for Him, willing themselves to be unrecognized and unhonored. Yet not always are the Master's friends content to be nothing--that the praise may be given to Christ. Too often do they insist upon having their own name written in bold letters on their work. It would be the mark of a higher degree in spiritual attainment, if we were willing to be anonymous in every service for Christ. Even in the things men do which are necessarily conspicuous, in which it is impossible to hide the hand that works, there should always be in the heart the paramount desire to please and honor Christ. If in what they do, however beautiful and worthy it may be in itself, the wish is "to be seen by men," the beauty is blotted, and the worthiness vitiated. Only what we do for the honor of Christ--is really gold and silver and precious stones in the building; all the rest is but wood, hay, and stubble, which cannot abide.

Another practical application of this lesson is to the way we do the common deeds of love in our everyday life. We should seek to obliterate self altogether, and every thought of what is to come to us, from the thing we do. The faintest trace of a mercenary spirit in any service we may be rendering to another, leaves a blot upon the deed and spoils its beauty. The true reward of kindness or self denial is that which comes from the act itself, the joy of helping another, of relieving distress, of making the heart a little braver and stronger for the toil or struggle which we cannot make easier.

Are we willing to go about ministering blessing to others--and then forget what we have done? Are we willing to be as the dew which loses itself as it sinks away into the bosom of the rose, only to be remembered in the added sweetness of the flower? Are we willing to do deeds of love, and then keep absolutely quiet about what we have done? Is there not among us too much of the spirit which our Lord so severely condemned--sounding a trumpet before us when we are going out to do some deed of charity, some act of kindness? We all are quite ready to note the blemish in others--when they talk about their own piety and devoutness, or about their good deeds and their acts of self denial and helpfulness. We say the

desire to have people know how holy he is and how useful, dims the luster of a man's graces. Moses knew not that his face shone, and the truest and divinest godliness is always unaware of its shining. We say this when we are speaking of others' self praise--but are we different from them? Do we do our deed of love and straightway hide the knowledge of it away in our heart?

Henry Drummond puts the lesson well in these short sentences: "Put a seal upon your lips and forget what you have done. After you have been kind, after love has stolen forth into the world and done its beautiful work, go back into the shade again and say nothing about it. Love hides even from itself." We could not do better than write out these words and place them where we must see them every day, and then make them the rule of our life, until we have indeed learned to seal our lips and be silent about ourselves and what we have done; to steal forth quietly on errands of love, do our errands, then hurry back into the quiet whence we set out, and to hide even from ourselves the things we have done to help others, never thinking of them again. Talking about these gentle and sacred ministries is like handling lovely flowers--it spoils their beauty.

Tell no one of the kindness you have been doing. Do not keep a diary, writing therein a minute record of your charities, your words and deeds of love. Let them be forgotten on the earth, even by yourself. There is a place where they all will be written down. That is record enough.

One Day

Time is given to us in days. It was so at the beginning. We need not puzzle or perplex ourselves trying to understand just when the day was, in which God wrought in creating the universe. But it is interesting to know that each day had its particular apportionment in the stupendous work. At the end of the creative periods we read, "There was evening and there was morning--one day." So it has been ever since. Time is measured to us not by years--but by days. Each day has its own particular section of duty, something that belongs, that is to be done, in between sunrise and sunset, that cannot be done at all if not done in its own hours. "There was evening and there was morning--one day, a second day, a third day."

This breaking up of time into little daily portions, means a great deal more than we are accustomed to think. For one thing, it illustrates the gentleness and goodness of God. It would have made life intolerably burdensome, if a year instead of a day had been the unit in the division of time. It would have been hard to carry a heavy load, or to endure a great sorrow, or to keep on at a hard duty, for such a long stretch of time. How dreary our common task work would be--if there were no breaks in it, if we had to hold our hands to the plough for a whole year! We never could go on with our struggles, our toils, our suffering, if night did not mercifully settle down at such brief intervals with its darkness, bidding us rest and renew our strength.

We do not understand what a blessing here is for us, in the shortness of our days. If they were even twice as long as they are, life would be intolerable. Many a time when the sun goes down we feel that we could scarcely have gone another step. We would have fainted in failure and defeat--if the summons to rest had not come just when it did.

Night with its darkness seems to be a blot on the whiteness of day. It seems to fall across our path as an interruption to our activity, compelling us to lay down our work when we are in the very midst of it, leaving it only half done. It seems to be a waster of precious time, eating up half the hours. How much more we could accomplish, we sometimes say, if the sun did not go down, if we could go on without pause!

Night throws its heavy veil over the lovely things of this world, hiding them from our view. Yet its deep shadow is no stain on the splendor of the day. It is no thief of time, no waster of golden hours, no obscurer of beauty. It reveals as much loveliness as it hides, for no sooner is the sun set, leaving earth's splendor of landscape, garden and forest swallowed up in gloom--than there bursts upon our vision the other splendor of the sky filled with glorious stars.

When the privilege of work is interrupted by the coming of the night, God has another blessing ready for us--the blessing of sleep. One may figure out with a fair show of mathematical certainty, that it is a waste of time to spend one third of each twenty four hours in the unconsciousness of idleness of sleep. But these hours which seem to be lost, in which we appear to be doing nothing, bring us new gifts from God.

"He gives His beloved sleep." We lie down with our vitality exhausted in the toils, tasks, and struggles of the day. We could not have gone another hour. Then, while we sleep, God comes to us in the silence and refills the emptied fountains. It is really a new creation which takes place in us, while we sleep a nightly miracle of renewal and restoration. We die, as it were--and are made to live again.

So night, which seems to us a waste of precious hours, is a time of God's working in us. He draws the veil of darkness that none may see Him when He visits us in loving ministry. He folds us in the unconsciousness of sleep, that we ourselves may not know when He comes or how He gives to us the marvelous blessings. When then morning returns and we awake strong and filled with new life, we learn that God has visited us, though we knew it not.

Thus we get hints of the graciousness of the divine thoughtfulness in giving us time in periods of little days, which we can easily get through with, and not in great years in which we would faint and fall by the way.

It makes it possible for us to go on through all the long years and not be overwrought, for we never have given to us at any one time, more than what we can do between the morning and the evening.

Not only are the days short, so that we can go on to eventide with our work or our burden--but they are separated as by an impassable wall so that there may be no overflowing of one day's care or responsibility into the field of another. Night drops down its dark curtain between the days, so that we cannot see today, anything which is in tomorrow. Our Lord taught us that we sin if we let ourselves try to carry the load of any but this one little day.

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Matthew 6:34. If we allow ourselves to borrow anxiety from tomorrow, we shall find that we have a greater load than we can carry. There is just enough for our full measure of strength--in the duty and the responsibility of the one day. If then we add to this the burden also of tomorrow, our strength will fail. We do great wrong to ourselves, therefore, when we go out of today--to get burdens which do not belong to us.

The only true way to live, therefore, is one day at a time. This means that we should give all our strength to the work of the present day, that we should finish each day's tasks by nightfall, leaving nothing undone at setting of the sun which we ought to have done that day. Then, when a new morning dawns, we should accept its duties, the bit of God's will it unrolls for us, and do everything well which is given us to do. We may be assured, too, that there is something for each moment, and that if we waste any portion of our day, we shall not make it complete. We should bring all the energy and all the skill of mind, heart, and hand to

our duty as we take it up, and do nothing carelessly or negligently. Then we can lay our day back into God's hand at nightfall with confidence, saying, "Father, I have finished the work You gave me to do today."

Robert Falconer's creed gathers into its four articles a very clear summary of our Lord's teaching concerning the whole duty of man: "First that a man's business is to do the will of God. Second, That God takes upon Himself the care of the man. Third, Therefore, that a man must never be afraid of anything. Fourth, and so be left free to love God with all his heart, and his neighbor as himself."

So, we should never be anxious about either yesterday or tomorrow. Yesterday is gone, and we can never get it back to change anything in it. It is idle, therefore, to waste a moment of time or a particle of strength fretting over it. Tomorrow is not yet ours, and we should not touch its life until it becomes our today. God means us to put our undivided energy, into the doing of the present day's work. If we do this, we shall have quite enough to keep our heart and our hands full from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same.

In this way, too, doing faithfully the work of this day, we shall best prepare for tomorrow. One day's duty slighted or neglected, prepares confusion or overburdening for the next day. The days are all woven together in God's plan, each one following the one before, and fitting into the one coming after it. Each takes up the work which the day before brought to its feet, and carries it forward to deliver it to the one which waits. A marred or empty day anywhere spoils the web, losing its thread.

If we learn well this lesson of living just one day at a time, without anxiety for either yesterday or tomorrow, we shall have found one of the greatest secrets of Christian peace. That is the way God teaches us to live. That is the lesson both of the Bible and of nature. If we learn it--it will cure us of all anxiety, it will save us from all feverish haste, and it will enable us to live sweetly in any experience.

The Culture of the Spirit

In the true life, beauty is as important as strength. Strength at its best is always beautiful--but sometimes loveliness is sacrificed to vigor. In these days, we hear much about the strenuous life--but the phrase has in it a suggestion of abundant vitality, of an unwearied energy, which may lack the enrichment and refinement which are the ripe fruit of true self culture. At least, the emphasis is put upon the strenuousness, as if that were the dominant quality of the life.

On every hand, and enforced by the holiest sanctions, we are urged to make the most of our life and our opportunities. Again and again, we hear in the Bible the ringing exhortation, "Be strong." More than one of our Lord's parables teaches our responsibility for the development of every power of our being to its fullest possibilities, and the using of every particle of energy in our nature in worthy service. One who does not do one's best, fails. Paul, himself a magnificent type of the utmost strenuousness in living, calls for the most vigorous Christian life in the followers of the Master. He exhorts a young man to stir up the gift that is in him, probably seeing plainly that his friend was not doing his best, making the most of his life. He uses the figure of the runner in the race, bending every energy to reach the goal and win the prize, to incite every Christian to the most eager stretching toward the highest possibilities in spiritual attainment. He employs the illustration of the soldier as the type of true manhood, and bids his friends be courageous like men, and to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. If we would realize the scriptural thought of the worthiest life, we must call out all the latent power that is in us, and develop it to its highest degree of vitality.

The lesson is strongly emphasized in the spirit of the days in which we are living. Every man is now called to do his best. No patience is exercised toward one who takes life easily. The man who works leisurely, is left behind in the race. Literature is full of homilies on "success" and how to attain it. The men who are held up as examples to youth, are those who began with nothing and by their own energy have risen to wealth or power. Strenuousness is everywhere praised.

But not so universally nor so urgently is the duty of self culture taught. Yet the lesson is equally important. There are many people who are giants in strength--but are lacking in the qualities of refinement which belong to the truest character. Strength is sometimes crude. Too often it is ungentle and thoughtless. It is aggressive and resistless--but stops not to look what fair flowers it is trampling under its feet.

It is well that we pause, therefore, in the pressure under which we are striving, to give thought to self culture. The beginning of it lies in self mastery. There are many men who have prodigious strength, and yet never have achieved self control. We are truly strong, not merely when we have great forces of energy--but when we can command these forces at will. "He who rules his own spirit--is greater than he who takes a city."

There is much of bad temper even among Christian people. Many are quick to speak, flying into a passion at the slightest provocation. They are overly sensitive, even to the point of touchiness. They have capacity for strenuous life--but they are weak, driven by every wind and tossed, because their bark is without a helm. Under momentary impulses, they do rash and foolish things which grieve their friends and do irreparable harm to their own life.

Few faults mar the beauty and the influence of a life, more than the habit of ill temper. One writes: "Losing the temper takes all the sweet, pure feeling out of life. You may get up in the morning with a clean heart, full of song, and start out as happy as a bird; and the moment you are crossed and you give way to your temper, the clean feeling vanishes and a load as heavy as lead is rolled upon your heart, and you go through the rest of the day feeling like a culprit, unless you promptly confess your fault and seek forgiveness of God and man."

We all admire a self controlled person, one who is not irritated by irritating experiences, who is not disturbed in his equanimity by confusing or annoying circumstances, who is not vexed nor fretted by life's trials. This power of self control is a higher mark of royalty, than crown or scepter. Self culture includes self mastery. It holds the reins of the life and restrains every crude impulse, every wayward desire. It sits on the throne, and every feeling, every passion, every energy, every emotion, is ruled by it.

The thought of culture always implies also refinement, grace of spirit, beauty of soul. That is, it is gentle as well as strong. It is more than knowledge, for one may know all the worlds' literature and yet lack this culture. In the ordinary sense, it is the final result of true education and study. One may be very learned, and yet lack the refinement of spirit which the thought of culture suggests. Self culture is defined as what a man does upon himself; mending his defects, correcting his mistakes, chastening his faults, tempering his passions.

Always, love must be the ruling element in Christian culture. Fine manners may be the result of the study of the rules of etiquette--but no manners are really beautiful, which are not the fruit of love in the heart. Gentleness belongs to culture, and gentleness is love in exercise. The word "gentleman" as a designation of one who has reached the finest things in manliness, is very suggestive. No man, however masterly his strength, however wide his knowledge, however high his rank, however splendid his achievements, is

manly in the fullest sense--if he is not gentle--a gentleman.

In a summary of the things which make up a worthy Christian character, Paul puts first, whatever things are true, honorable, just and pure, and whatever things are lovely and of good report. The sterner qualities alone do not make the character complete, while loveliness is lacking. The word "grace" which is used to describe the divine favor and is applied to all spiritual work wrought in a life, means primarily that which is pleasing and agreeable, beauty of form, manner, or movement. As applied to the disposition, it means sweetness, amiability, courtesy. To grow in grace is not only to become more devout, obedient, and holy--but also to grow more loving--more gentle, kindly, thoughtful, patient, unselfish.

It is evident, therefore, that we should pay heed to the culture of our spirit, as well as to the development of our energies. Success which takes account only of one's worldly life and its affairs, and does not also consider one's attainments in character, in heart qualities, in the spiritual elements of one's being, will not stand the test of life's most serious o

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