

When Prayer Is Not the Duty

by J.R. Miller

Prayer is not always the duty of the hour, and we must balance prayer with action to receive God's blessing.

Scripture: Exodus 14:15, Matthew 25:35, James 2:17

Topics: "Faith in Action", "The Role of Prayer"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes that while prayer is essential, it should not replace our active duty in serving others. He illustrates that there are moments when action is required instead of continued supplication, as seen in the story of Moses at the Red Sea. Miller argues that prayer should inspire us to take action, rather than serve as an excuse for inaction, and that God often calls us to be the answer to our own prayers. He warns against selfish prayers that focus solely on personal needs, urging believers to respond to the needs of others with tangible help. Ultimately, Miller concludes that true faith is demonstrated through action, and we must rise from our prayers to fulfill our responsibilities.

Transcript

There are many commands to pray. We are taught in everything to make our requests known to God. We are bidden to be instant in prayer, to cast our burden on the Lord. Yet prayer is not all of a pious life. Committing our way unto the Lord, rolling it upon him, does not absolve us from duty. There are prayers of indolence and prayers of selfishness, and with neither of these prayers is God pleased.

Prayer, then, is not always the duty of the hour. It would seem that once Moses was rebuked for continuing in prayer. It was when the Hebrews were shut in beside the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's army pressing behind them. "Why do you cry unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward." Clearly, duty for Moses that moment, was not to stay on his knees, crying to God for deliverance and help. Rather it was to cease praying, to rise up and lead the people forward.

We are commanded to wait for the Lord--but there is an over-waiting which loses the blessing. Faith is not all reclining trust; part of it always is action. To trust and do nothing--will win no victories. We must rise from our praying--and go forward.

There are many common illustrations of this truth. Your neighbor is in some trouble. You hear of it, and, being a believer in prayer, you go to your place of devotion and plead that God would send him the help that is needed. Almost certainly, however, prayer is not the duty in this case. Rather it is to cease your supplication and go quickly to your neighbor to do for him what he needs.

If a friend is taken suddenly very ill, or is injured in an accident, your duty is not to go to your closet and spend a season in prayer for him--but to hasten for a physician.

A city missionary tells of an experience in London. He was hurrying on his rounds one bitter January day, when he heard cries of little children in a house he was passing. He listened for a moment and knocked at the door--but no one answered his knocking. Then he opened the door and went in. He found himself in a miserable apartment, without furniture, without fire. In one corner, on a pile of straw, lay a woman, dead, with two children clinging to her and crying piteously. At a moment's glance the missionary saw the sadness of the case, and, falling upon his knees, began to call upon God. He believed in prayer, and pleaded with intense earnestness that heaven would send help to these orphaned children in their great distress. So importunate did he become in his pleading, that he spoke rashly, and said: "O God, send your angel to care for these poor, motherless children. Send at once, or my faith this instant dies." Immediately he seemed to hear, plainly and clearly, as if a divine voice were speaking to him, the words, "You are my angel; for this very purpose did I send you here." He saw now that he had no right to ask God to send any other messenger to minister to these needy little ones, that prayer was but a waste of God's time, and presumptuous. Taking the children by the hand, he quickly led them to a place of shelter, where they were cared for.

Sometimes when we pray we draw a little narrow circle about ourselves. We ask only for health, happiness, and comforts for our own lives, giving no thought to the world of suffering, sorrow, and need outside. Such prayers do not rise to heaven as incense.

It is always right to pray for the advancement of Christ's kingdom--but if we only pray and do nothing to set forward the cause for which we plead, our praying does not please God. We must be ready always to do with our own hand, that which we ask God to do. When God desires to help, bless, deliver, or save a man--he usually sends another man to do it. Ordinarily, when God puts it into our hearts to desire to do good to someone--we are the messengers he would send with the blessing. Our aspirations are first inspirations. We may pray God to give help--but we must be ready at once to rise and go ourselves with the help.

Far more than we realize it, does God wish us to answer our own prayers. If we have plenty, and hear of one who is hungry, our duty is not to pray for him, asking God to send him bread, or to incline some good man to supply his wants; rather our duty is to hasten to share our plenty with him. It is little less than mockery to ask that help be sent from heaven or by some divine agency, to one in need--when we have in our own hands that which would meet and supply the need. God gave us our plenty--that we might help our brother.

We can imagine the priest, as he passed the wounded man, lying by the wayside, almost certainly--since he was a devout man--offering a prayer for him, asking God to help him. But his prayer availed not, for God had seen the man stricken down and had sent the priest that way, at that particular hour, for the very purpose of caring for him. Not prayer, then--but ministry, was the priest's duty just then, and no most earnest praying would be accepted in place--of the human help the man was in need of, and the priest could have rendered.

There is a great deal of such failure in duty, making prayer an easy substitute for service which would cost effort, or self-denial, or money, asking the Lord to do in some supernatural way, or through other helpers, the things which he has sent us expressly to do. Men beseech God to have pity upon certain people who

are living in sin, to send them the gospel and to save them. God does not do what they ask, because it is not thus, that the blessings sought can be given. Indeed, he has already long had pity upon these very people. His heart has gone out to them in yearning love and compassion. More than that, the very people who now pray so earnestly that he would show pity, God has sent to be his messengers of pity and mercy to these very lost ones, to tell them of Jesus Christ and to lead them to his cross. Instead, however, of fulfilling their commission, doing what they have been sent to do, they pause before their tasks and indolently ask God to do their work for them.

Good people come together in their church meetings and pray for the sick, the poor, the sorrowing, the fallen, the heathen--and then do nothing themselves to carry to a sad world, the blessings which they so persistently implore God to send. No doubt the divine answer to many a pastor, as he leads his people in importunate prayer for help and blessing for the needy or troubled, for the extension of the kingdom of Christ, for the saving of souls, is, "Why do you cry unto me? Speak unto the people that they go forward." God is ready to do all that is asked of him, but he does it only through his people's faith, and their faith can be shown only in going forth to try to do the things that need to be done. When we pray for the sick and the suffering, we must go with our love and sympathy to do what we can for them. When we pray for the saving of the lost, we must go straight to them to tell them of the love of Christ, or to find some way, at least, to get the message to them.

Much praying for the blessing of the Holy Spirit is made powerless and unavailing by the same lack of faith and obedience. God is ever ready to give his Spirit, but such prayer always implies action. We have something to do if the blessing is to come. It was "as they went" that the ten lepers were cleansed. If they had not set out at once, in obedience to the command of the Master, healing would not have come to them. It is thus, too, with the giving of all spiritual blessings--they come not through prayer alone, but through our rising up from our knees and going forward in the path of duty, in the way of obedience, in the effort to attain the thing longed for. When we have asked God to give us his Spirit, we are to believe that we have the gift desired, and are to enter at once upon the life which the Spirit would have us live.

There is a duty of prayer, most sacred and holy, but prayer is by no means the only duty. The answer will never come while we stay on our knees--but only when we rise up and go forward!

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