

The Ceaselessness of Prayer

by P.T. Forsyth

Prayer is the effective work of a religion that hangs upon the living God, and it is the application of faith to a concrete actual and urgent situation.

Scripture: Matthew 6:8, John 15:7, Romans 8:26, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, James 5:16, 1 John 5:14

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Holy Spirit"

Description

P.T. Forsyth preaches on the moral freedom achieved in prayer, emphasizing that prayer is the effective work of a religion centered on the living God, requiring faith in action and cooperation with God's freedom. He highlights that prayer is the momentary function of the Eternal Son's communion with the Eternal Father, integrating believers into the final Christ. Forsyth also delves into prayer as the expression of the perennial new life of faith in the Cross, stressing the importance of praying without ceasing as a continuous bent and drift of the soul towards God, cultivating the habit of praying audibly, and being specific and detailed in prayer. He encourages believers to pray in Christ's name, as an answer to God's gift in Christ, and to learn the art of conversing with God through practice and association with the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

Prayer as Christian freedom, and prayer as Christian life--these are two points I would now expand.

I. First, as to the moral freedom involved and achieved in prayer.

Prayer has been described as religion in action. But that as it stands is not a sufficient definition of the prayer which lives on the Cross. The same thing might be said about the choicest forms of Christian service to humanity. It is true enough, and it may carry us far; but only if we become somewhat clear about the nature of the religion at work. Prayer is certainly not the action of a religion mainly subjective. It is the effective work of a religion which hangs upon the living God, of a soul surer of God than of itself, and living not its own life, but the life of the Son of God.

To say prayer is faith in action would be better; for the word "faith" carries a more objective reference than the word "religion." Faith is faith in another. In prayer we do not so much work as interwork. We are fellow workers with God in a reciprocity. And as God is the freest Being in existence, such co-operant prayer is the freest things that man can do. It we were free in sinning, how much more free in the praying which

undoes sin! If we were free to break God's will, how much more free to turn it or to accept it!

Petitionary prayer is man's cooperation in kind with God amidst a world He freely made for freedom. The world was made by a freedom which not only left room for the kindred freedom of prayer, but which so ordered all things in its own interest that in their deepest depths they conspire to produce prayer. To pray in faith is to answer God's freedom in its own great note. It means we are taken up into the fundamental movement of the world. It is to realize that for which the whole world, the world as a whole, was made.

It is an earnest of the world's consummation. We are doing what the whole world was created to do. We overleap in the spirit all between now and then, as in the return to Jesus we overleap the two thousand years that intervene. The object the Father's loving purpose had in appointing the whole providential order was intercourse with man's soul. That order of the world is, therefore, no rigid fixture, nor is it even a fated evolution. It is elastic, adjustable, flexible, with margins for freedom, for free modification in God and man; always keeping in view that final goal of communion, and growing into it be a spiritual interplay in which the whole of Nature is involved.

The goal of the whole cosmic order is the "manifestation of the sons of God," the realization of complete sonship, its powers and its confidences. Thus we rise to say that our prayer is the momentary function of the Eternal Son's communion and intercession with the Eternal Father. We are integrated in advance into the final Christ, for whom, and to whom, all creation moves. Our prayer is more than the acceptance by us of God's will; it is its assertion in us. The will of God is that men should pray everywhere.

He wills to be entreated. Prayer is that will of God's making itself good. When we entreat we give effect to His dearest will. And in His will is our eternal liberty. In this will of His our finds itself, and is at home. It ranges the liberties of the Father's house. But here prayer must draw from the Cross, which is the frontal act of our emancipation as well as the central revelation of God's own freedom in grace. The action of the Atonement and of its release of us is in the nature of prayer. It is the free return of the Holy upon the Holy in the Great Reconciliation.

II. Then, secondly, as to prayer being the expression of the perennial new life of faith in the Cross. The Christian life is prayer without ceasing.

When we are told to pray without ceasing, it seems to many tastes to-day to be somewhat extravagant language. And no doubt that is true. Why should we be concerned to deny it? Measured language and the elegant mean is not the note of the New Testament at least. Mhoen zyan, said the Greek--too much of nothing. But can we love or trust God too much? Christian faith is one that overcomes and commands the world in a passion rather than balances it. It triumphs in a conclusive bliss, it does not play off one part against another.

The grace of Christ is not but graciousness of nature, and He does not rule His Church by social act. The peace of God is not the calm of culture, it is not the charm of breeding. Every great forward movement in Christianity is associated with much that seems academically extravagant. Erasmus is always shocked with Luther. It is only an outlet of that essential extravagance which makes the paradox of the Cross, and keeps it as the irritant, no less than the life of the world--perhaps because it is the life of the world.

There is nothing so abnormal, so unworldly, so supernatural, in human life as prayer, nothing that is more of an instinct, it is true, but also nothing that is less rational among all the things that keep above the level of the silly. The whole Christian life in so far as it is lived from the Cross and by the Cross is rationally an

extravagance. For the Cross is the paradox of all things; and the action of the Spirit is the greatest miracle in the world; and yet it is the principle of the world.

Paradox is but the expression of that dualism which is the moral foundation of a Christian world. I live who die daily. I live another's life. To pray without ceasing is not, of course, to engage in prayer without break. That is an impossible literalism. True, "They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who wert, and art, and art to come." But it is mere poverty of soul to think of this as the iteration of a doxology. It is deep calling unto deep, eternity greeting eternity.

The only answer to God's eternity is an eternal attitude of prayer. Nor does the phrase mean that the Church shall use careful means that the stream and sound of prayer shall never cease to flow at some spots of the earth, as the altar lamp goes not out. It does not mean the continuous murmur of the mass following the sun round the world, incessant relays of adoring priests, and functions going on day and night. But it means the constant bent and drift of the soul--as the Word which was from the beginning (John i. 1) was hroe ton Qesn.

All the current of its being set towards Him. It means being "in Christ," being in such a moving, returning Christ--reposing in this godward, and not merely godlike life. The note of prayer becomes the habit of the heart, the tone and tension of its new nature; in such a way that when we are released from the grasp of our occupations the soul rebounds to its true bent, quest, and even pressure upon God. It is the soul's habitual appetite and habitual food. A growing child of God is always hungry.

Prayer is not identical with the occasional act of praying. Like the act of faith, it is a whole life thought of as action. It is the life of faith in its purity, in its vital action. Eating and speaking are necessary to life, but they are not living. And how hidden prayer may be--beneath even gaiety! If you look down on Portland Race you see but a shining sea; only the pilot knows the tremendous current that pervades the smiling calm. So far this "pray without ceasing" from being absurd because extravagant that every man's life is in some sense a continual state of prayer.

For what is his life's prayer but its ruling passion? All energies, ambitions and passions are but expressions of a standing nisus in life, of a hunger, a draft, a practical demand upon the future, upon the unattained and the unseen. Every life is a draft upon the unseen. If you are not praying towards God you are towards something else. You pray as your face is set--towards Jerusalem or Babylon. The very egotism of craving life is prayer. The great difference is the object of it.

To whom, for what, do we pray? The man whose passion is habitually set upon pleasure, knowledge, wealth, honour, or power is in a state of prayer to these things or for them. He prays without ceasing. These are his real gods, on whom he waits day and night. He may from time to time go on his knees in church, and use words of Christian address and petition. He may even feel a momentary unction in so doing. But it is a flicker; the other devotion is his steady flame. His real God is the ruling passion and steady pursuit of his life taken as a whole.

He certainly does not pray in the name of Christ. And what he worships in spirit and in truth is another God than he addresses at religious times. He prays to an unknown God for a selfish boon. Still, in a sense, he prays. The set and drift of his nature prays. It is the prayer of instinct, not of faith. It is prayer that needs total conversion. But he cannot stop praying either to God or to God's rival--to self, society, world, flesh, or even devil. Every life that is not totally inert in praying either to God or God's adversary.

What do we really mean, whom do we mean, when we say, "My God"? In what sense mine? May our God not be but an idol we exploit, and in due course our doom? There is a fearful and wonderful passage in Kierkegaard's Entweder-Oder which, if we transfer it to this connection, stirs thoughts deeper than its own tragedy. The seduced, heart-broken, writes to the seducer. "John! I do not say my John. That I now see you never were. I am heavily punished for ever letting such an idea be my joy.

Yet--yet, mine you are--my seducer, my deceiver, my enemy, my murderer, the spring of my calamity, the grave of my joy, the abyss of my misery. I call you mine, and I am yours--your curse for ever. Oh, do not think I will slay you and put a dagger into you. But flee where you will, I am yours, to the earth's end yours. Love a hundred others but I am yours. I am yours in your last hour, I am yours, yours, yours--your curse." Beware lest the whole trend of the soul fix on a diety that turns a doom.

There is the prayer which makes God our judgment as well as one which makes Him our joy. Prayer is the nature of our hell as well as our heaven. Our hell is ceaseless, passionate, fruitless, hopeless, gnawing prayer. It is the heart churning, churning grinding itself out in misery. It is life's passion and struggle surging back on itself like a barren, salt, corroding sea. It is the heart's blood rising like a fountain only to fall back on us in red rain. It is prayer which we cannot stop, addressed to nothing, and obtaining nothing.

It calls into space and night. Or it is addressed to self, and it aggravates the wearing action of self on self. Our double being revolves on itself, like two millstones with nothing to grind. And prayer is our heaven. It goes home to God, and attains there, and rests there. We are "in Christ," whose whole existence is prayer, who is wholly prsz tsn Qesn for us. He is there to extinguish our hell and make our heaven--far more to quench our wrath and our seething than God's. To cultivate the ceaseless spirit of prayer, use more frequent acts of prayer.

To learn to pray with freedom, force yourself to pray. The great liberty begins in necessity. Do not say, "I cannot pray, I am not in the spirit." Pray till you are in the spirit. Think of analogies from lower levels. Sometimes when you need rest most you are too restless to lie down and take it. Then compel yourself to lie down, and to lie still. Often in ten minutes the compulsion fades into consent, and you sleep, and rise a new man. Again, it is often hard enough to take up the task which in half an hour you enjoy.

It is often against the grain to turn out of an evening to meet the friends you promised. But once you are in their midst you are in your element. Sometimes, again, you say, "I will not go to church. I do not feel that way." That is where the habit of an ordered religious life comes in aid. Religion is the last region for chance desires. Do it as a duty, and it may open out as a blessing. Omit it, and you may miss the one thing that would have made an eternal difference. You stroll instead, and return with nothing but appetite--when you might have come back with an inspiration.

Compel yourself to meet your God as you would meet your promises, your obligations, your fellow men. So if you are averse to pray, pray the more. Do not call it lip-service. That is not the lip-service God disowns. It is His Spirit acting in your self-coercive will, only not yet in your heart. What is unwelcome to God is lip-service which is untroubled at not being more. As appetite comes with eating, so prayer with praying. Our hearts learn the language of the lips. Compel yourself often to shape on your lips the detailed needs of your soul.

It is not needful to inform God, but to deepen you, to inform yourself before God, to enrich that intimacy with ourself which is so necessary to answer the intimacy of God. To common sense the fact that God knows all we need, and wills us all good, the fact of His infinite Fatherhood, is a reason for not praying.

Why tell Him what He knows? Why ask what He is more than willing to give? But to Christian faith and to spiritual reason it is just the other way. Asking is polar cooperation.

Jesus turned the fact to a use exactly the contrary of its deistic sense. He made the all-knowing Fatherhood the ground of true prayer. We do not ask as beggars but as children. Petition is not mere receptivity, nor is it mere pressure; it is filial reciprocity. Love loves to be told what it knows already. Every lover knows that. It wants to be asked for what it longs to give. And that is the principle of prayer to the all-knowing Love. As God knows all, you may reckon that your brief and humble prayer will be understood (Matt. vi. 8).

It will be taken up into the intercession of the Spirit stripped of its dross, its inadequacy made good, and presented as prayer should be. That is praying in the Holy Ghost. Where should you carry your burden but to the Father, where Christ took the burden of all the world? We tell God, the heart searcher, our heavy thoughts to escape from brooding over them. "When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, Thou knewest my path." (Ps. cxlii. 3). So Paul says the Spirit intercedes for us and gives our broken prayer divine effect (Rom. viii. 26).

To be sure of God's sympathy is to be inspired to prayer, where His mere knowledge would crush it. There is no father who would be satisfied that his son should take everything and ask for nothing. It would be thankless. To cease asking is to cease to be grateful. And what kills petition kills praise. Go into your chamber, shut the door, and cultivate the habit of praying audibly. Write prayers and burn them. Formulate your soul. Pay no attention to literary form, only to spiritual reality.

Read a passage of Scripture and then sit down and turn it into prayer, written or spoken. Learn to be particular, specific, and detailed in your prayer so long as you are not trivial. General prayers, literary prayers, and stately phrases are, for private prayer, traps and sops to the soul. To formulate your soul is one valuable means to escape formalizing it. This is the best, the wholesome, kind of self-examination. Speaking with God discovers us safely to ourselves. We "find" ourselves, come to ourselves, in the Spirit.

Face your special weaknesses and sins before God. Force yourself to say to God exactly where you are wrong. When anything goes wrong, do not ask to have it set right, without asking in prayer what is was in you that made it go wrong. It is somewhat fruitless to ask for a general grace to help specific flaws, sins, trials, and griefs. Let prayer be concrete, actual, a direct product of life's real experiences. Pray as your actual self, not as some fancied saint. Let it be closely relevant to your real situation.

Pray without ceasing in this sense. Pray without a break between your prayer and your life. Pray so that there is a real continuity between your prayer and your whole actual life. But I will bear round upon this point again immediately. Meantime, let me say this. Do not allow your practice in prayer to be arrested by scientific or philosophic considerations as to how answer is possible. That is a valuable subject for discussion, but it is not entitled to control our practice.

Faith is at least as essential to the soul as science, and it has a foundation more independent. And prayer is not only a necessity of faith, it is faith itself in action. Criticism of prayer dissolves in the experience of it. When the soul is at close quarters with God it becomes enlarged enough to hold together in harmony things that oppose, and to have room for harmonious contraries. For instance: God, of course, is always working for His Will and Kingdom. But man is bound to pray for its coming, while it is coming all the time.

Christ laid stress on prayer as a necessary means of bringing the Kingdom to pass. And it cannot come without our praying. Why? Because its coming is the prayerful frame of soul. So again with God's freedom. It is absolute. But it reckons on ours. Our prayer does not force His hand; it answers His freedom in kind. We are never so active and free as in prayer to an absolutely free God. We share His freedom when we are "in Christ." If I must choose between Christ, who bids me pray for everything, and the servant, who tells me certain answers are physically and rationally impossible, must I not choose Christ?

Because, while the savant knows much about nature and its action (and much more than Christ did), Christ knew everything about the God of nature and His reality. He knew more of what is possible to God than anybody has ever known about what is possible in nature. On such a subject as prayer, anyone is a greater authority who wholly knows the will of God than he who only knows God's methods, and knows them but in part. Prayer is not an act of knowledge but of faith. It is not a matter of calculation but of confidence--"that our faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."

Which means that in this region we are not to be regulated by science, but by God's self-revelation. Do not be so timid about praying wrongly if you pray humbly. If God is really the Father that Christ revealed, then the principle is--take everything to Him that exercises you. Apart from frivolity, such as praying to find the stud you lost, or the knife, or the umbrella, there is really no limitation in the New Testament on the contents of petition. Any regulation is as to the spirit of the prayer, the faith it springs from.

In all distress which mars your peace, petition must be the form your faith takes--petition for rescue. Keep close to the New Testament Christ, and then ask for anything you desire in that contact. Ask for everything you can ask in Christ's name, i.e. everything desirable by a man who is in Christ's kingdom of God, by a man who lives for it at heart, everything in tune with the purpose and work of the kingdom in Christ. If you are in that kingdom, then pray freely for whatever you need or wish to keep you active and effective for it, from daily bread upwards and outwards.

In all things make your requests known. At least you have laid them on God's heart; and faith means confidences between you and not only favours. And there is not confidence if you keep back what is hot or heavy on your heart. If prayer is not a play of the religious fantasy, or a routine task, it must be the application of faith to a concrete actual and urgent situation. Only remember that prayer does not work by magic, and that stormy desire is not fervent, effectual prayer.

You may be but exploiting a mighty power; whereas you must be in real contact with the real God. It is the man that most really has God that most really seeks God. I said a little while ago that to pray without ceasing also meant to pray without a breach with your actual life and the whole situation in which you are. This is the point at which to dwell on that. If you may not come to God with the occasions of your private life and affairs, then there is some unreality in the relation between you and Him.

If some private crisis absorbs you, some business or family anxiety of little moment to others but of much to you, and if you may not bring that to God in prayer, then one of two things. Either it is not you, in your actual reality, that came to God, but it is you in a pose--you in some role which you are trying with poor success to play before Him. You are trying to pray as another person than you are,--a better person, perhaps, as some great apostle, who should have on his worshipping mind nothing but the grand affairs of the Church and Kingdom, and not be worried by common cares.

You are praying in court-dress. You are trying to pray as you imagine one should pray to God, i.e. as another person than you are, and in other circumstances. You are creating a self and a situation to place

before God. Either that or you are not praying to a God who loves, helps, and delivers you in every pinch of life, but only to one who uses you as a pawn for the victory of His great kingdom. You are not praying to Christ's God. You are praying to a God who cares only for the great actions in His kingdom, for the heroic people who cherish nothing but the grand style, or for the calm people who do not deeply feel life's trials.

The reality of prayer is bound up with the reality and intimacy of life. And its great object is to get home as we are to God as He is, and to win response even when we get no compliance. The prayer of faith does not mean a prayer absolutely sure that it will receive what it asks. That is not faith. Faith is that attitude of soul and self to God which is the root and reservoir of prayer apart from all answer. It is what turns need into request. It is what moves your need to need God.

It is what makes you sure your prayer is heard and stored, whether granted or not. "He putteth all my tears in His bottle." God has old prayers of yours long maturing by Him. What wine you will drink with Him in His kingdom! Faith is sure that God refuses with a smile; that He says No in the spirit of Yes, and He gives or refuses always in Christ, our Great Amen. And better prayers are stirred by the presence of the Deliverer than even by the need of deliverance. It is not sufficiently remembered that before prayer can expect an answer it must be itself an answer.

That is what is meant by prayer in the name of Christ. It is prayer which answers God's gift in Christ, with Whom are already given us all things. And that is why we must pray without ceasing, because in Christ God speaks without ceasing. Natural or instinctive prayer is one thing; supernatural prayer is another; it is the prayer not of instinct but of faith. It is our word answering God's. It is more the prayer of fullness even than of need, of strength than of weakness--though it be "a strength girt round with weakness."

Prayer which arises from mere need is flung out to a power which is only remembered, or surmised, or unknown. It is flung into darkness and uncertainty. But in Christian prayer we ask for what we need because we are full of faith in God's power and word, because need becomes petition at the touch of His word. (I always feel that in the order of our public worship prayer should immediately follow the lesson, without the intrusion on an anthem. And for the reason I name--that Christian prayer is our word answering God's).

We pray, therefore, in Christ's name, or for His sake, because we pray as answering the gift in Christ. Our prayer is the note the tremulous soul utters when its chords are smitten by Him. We then answer above all things God's prayer to us in His cross that we would be reconciled. God so beseeches us in Christ. So that, if we put it strongly, we may say that our prayer to God in Christ is our answer to God's prayer to us there. "The best thing in prayer is faith," says Luther.

And the spirit of prayer in Christ's name is the true child-spirit. A certain type of religion is fond of dwelling on faith as the spirit of divine childhood; and its affinities are all with the tender and touching element in childhood. But one does not always get from the prophets of such piety the impression of a life breathed in prayer. And the notion is not the New Testament sense of being children of God. That is a manlier, a maturer thing. It is being sons of God by faith, and by faith's energy of prayer.

It is not the sense of being as helpless as a child that clings, not the sense of weakness, ignorance, gentleness, and all that side of things. But it is the spirit of a prayer which is a great act of faith, and therefore a power. Faith is not simply surrender, but adoring surrender, not a mere sense of dependence, but an act of intelligent committal, and the confession of a holiness which is able to save, keep, and bless for ever. How is it that the experience of life is so often barren of spiritual culture for religious people?

They become stoic and stalwart, but not humble; they have been sight, but no insight. Yet it is not the stalwarts but the saints that judge the world, i.e. that take the true divine measure of the world and get to its subtle, silent, and final powers. Whole sections of our Protestantism have lost the virtue of humility or the understanding of it. It means for them no more than modesty or diffidence. It is the humility of weakness, not of power. To many useful, and even strong, people no experience seems to bring this subtle, spiritual intelligence, this finer discipline of the moral man.

No rebukes, no rebuffs, no humiliations, no sorrows, seem to bring it to them. They have no spiritual history. Their spiritual biography not even an angel could write. There is no romance in their soul's story. At sixty they are, spiritually, much where they were at twenty-six. To calamity, to discipline of any kind, they are simply resilient. Their religion is simply elasticity. It is but lusty life. They rise up after the smart is over, or the darkness fades away, as self-confident as if they were but seasoned politicians beaten at one election, but sure of doing better at the next.

They are to the end just irrepressible, or persevering, or dogged. And they are as juvenile in moral insight, as boyish in spiritual perception, as ever. Is it not because they have never really had personal religion? That is, they have never really prayed with all their heart; only, at most, with all their fervour, certainly not with strength and mind. They have never "spread out" their whole soul and situation to a god who knows. They have never opened the petals of their soul in the warm sympathy of His knowledge.

They have not become particular enough in their prayer, faithful with themselves, or relevant to their complete situation. They do not face themselves, only what happens to them. They pray with their heart and not with their conscience. They pity themselves, perhaps they spare themselves, they shrink from hurting themselves more than misfortune hurts them. They say, "If you knew all you could not help pitying me." They do not say, "God knows all, and how can He spare me?" For themselves, or for their fellows, it is the prayer of pity, not of repentance.

We need the prayer of self-judgment more than the prayer of fine insight. We are not humble in God's sight, partly because in our prayer there is a point at which we cease to pray, where we do not turn everything out into God's light. It is because there is a chamber or two in our souls where we do not enter in and take God with us. We hurry Him by the door as we take Him along the corridors of our life to see our tidy places or our public rooms. We ask from our prayers too exclusively comfort, strength, enjoyment, or tenderness and graciousness, and not often enough humiliation and its fine strength.

We want beautiful prayers, touching prayers, simple prayers, thoughtful prayers; prayers with a quaver or a tear in them, or prayers with delicacy and dignity in them. But searching prayer, humbling prayer, which is the prayer of the conscience, and not merely of the heart or taste; prayer which is bent on reality, and to win the new joy goes through new misery if need be--are such prayers as welcome and common as they should be? Too much of our prayer is apt to leave us with the self-complacency of the sympathetically incorrigible, of the benevolent and irremediable, of the breezy octogenarian, all of whose yesterdays look backward with a cheery and exasperating smile.

It is an art--this great and creative prayer--this intimate conversation with God. "Magna ars est conversari cum Deo," says Thomas a Kempis. It has to be learned. In social life we learn that conversation is not mere talk. There is an art in it, if we are not to have a table of gabblers. How much more is it so in the conversation of heaven! We must learn that art by practice, and by keeping the best society in that kind. Associate much with the great masters in this kind; especially with the Bible; and chiefly with Christ.

Cultivate His Holy Spirit. He is the grand master of God's art and mystery in communing with man. And there is no other teacher, at least, of man's art of communion with God.

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