

The Moral Reactions of Prayer

by P.T. Forsyth

Prayer is the essential and supreme exercise of the Christian personality, and it is through prayer that we acquire the power and vision to see the world in a new way.

Scripture: Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, James 5:16

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Christian Spirituality"

Description

P.T. Forsyth preaches on the profound significance of prayer in religion, emphasizing that prayer is the foundation and measure of all faith. He highlights that true theology is encapsulated in sincere prayer, which leads to communion with God and a deep understanding of His nature. Forsyth stresses that prayer is essential for spiritual growth, moral development, and understanding of Christian truth, as it connects us to the core of Christian reality and the source of Christian power. He explains that through prayer, we experience atonement with God and participate in Christ's perpetual intercession, allowing our prayers to be transformed into true communion and power with God.

Transcript

All religion is founded on prayer, and in prayer it has its test and measure. To be religious is to pray, to be irreligious is to be incapable of prayer. The theory of religion is really the philosophy of prayer; and the best theology is compressed prayer. The true theology is warm, and it steams upward into prayer. Prayer is access to whatever we deem God, and if there is no such access there is no religion; for it is not religion to resign ourselves to be crushed by a brute power so that we can no more remonstrate than resist.

It is in prayer that our real idea of God appears, and in prayer that our real relation to God shows itself. On the first levels of our religion we go to our God for help and boon in the junctures of our natural life; but, as we rise to supernatural religion, gifts becomes less to us than the Giver; they are not such as feed our egoism. We forget ourselves in a godly sort; and what we court and what we receive in our prayer is not simply a boon but communion--or if a boon, it is the boon which Christians call the Holy Spirit, and which means, above all else, communion with God.

But lest communion subside into mere meditation it must concentrate in prayer. We must keep acquiring by such effort the grace so freely given. There is truly a subconscious communion, and a godliness that forgets God well, in the hourly life of taxing action and duty; but it must rise to seasons of colloquy, when our action is wholly with the Father, and the business even of His kingdom turns into heart converse, where the yoke is easy and the burden light. Duty is then absorbed in love--the deep, active union of souls

outwardly distinct.

Their connection is not external and (as we might say) inorganic; it is inward, organic, and reciprocal. There is not only action but interplay, not only need and gift but trust and love. The boon is the Giver Himself, and its answer is the self of the receiver. Cor ad cor loquitur. All the asking and having goes on in a warm atmosphere, where soul passes into soul without fusion, person is lost in person without losing personality, and thought about prayer becomes thought in prayer.

The greatest, deepest, truest thought of God is generated in prayer, where right thought has its essential condition in a right will. The state and act of true prayer contains the very substance and summit of Christian truth, which is always there in solution, and becomes increasingly explicit and conscious. To grow in grace is to become more understanding in prayer. We make for the core of Christian reality and the source of Christian power. Our atonement with God is the pregnant be-all and end-all of Christian peace and life; and what is that atonement but the head and front of the Saviour's perpetual intercession, of the outpouring of His sin-laden soul unto death?

Unto death! That is to say, it is its outpouring utterly. So that His entire self-emptying and His perfect and prevailing prayer is one. In this intercession our best prayer, broken, soiled, and feeble as it is, is caught up and made prayer indeed and power with God. This intercession prays for our very prayer, and atones for the sin in it. This is praying in the Holy Ghost, which is not necessarily a matter either of intensity or elation. This is praying "for Christ's sake."

If it be true that the whole Trinity is in the gospel of our salvation, it is also true that all theology lies hidden in the prayer which is our chief answer to the gospel. And the bane of so much theology, old and new, is that it has been denuded of prayer and prepared in a vacuum. Prayer draws on our whole personality; and not only so, but on the whole God. And it draws on a God who really comes home nowhere else. God is here, not as a mere presence as He is in Nature, nor is He a mere pressure as He closes in upon us in the sobering of life.

We do not face Him in mere meditation, nor do we cultivate Him as life's most valuable asset. But He is here as our Lover, our Seeker, our Visitant, our Interlocutor; He is our Saviour, our Truth, our Power, nay, our Spiritual World. In this supreme exercise of our personality He is at once our Respondent and our Spiritual Universe. Nothing but the experience of prayer can solve paradoxes like these. On every other level they are absurd. But here deep answers deep. God becomes the living truth of our most memorable and shaping experience, not its object only but its essence.

He who speaks to us also hears in us, because He opens our inward ear (Rom. viii. 15; Gal. iv. 6). And yet He is Another, who so fully lives in us as to give us but the more fully to ourselves. So that our prayer is a soliloquy with God, a monologue a deux. There is no such engine for the growth and command of the moral soul, single, or social, as prayer. Here, above all, he who will do shall know. It is the great organ of Christian knowledge and growth. It plants us at the very centre of our own personality, which gives the soul the true perspective of itself; it sets us also at the very centre of the world in God, which gives us the true hierarchy of things.

Nothing, therefore, develops such "inwardness" and yet such self-knowledge and self-control. Private prayer, when it is made a serious business, when it is formed prayer, when we pray audibly in our chamber, or when we write our prayers, guided always by the day's record, the passion of piety, and above all the truths of Scripture, is worth more for our true and grave and individual spirituality than

gatherings of greater unction may be. Bible searching and searching prayer go hand in hand.

What we receive from God in the Book's message we return to Him with interest in prayer. Nothing puts us in living contact with God but prayer, however facile our mere religion may be. And therefore nothing does so much for our originality, so much to make us our own true selves, to stir up all that is in us to be, and hallow all we are. In life it is not hard work; it is faculty, insight, gift, talent, genius. And what genius does in the natural world prayer does in the spiritual.

Nothing can give us so much power and vision. It opens a fountain perpetual and huminous at the centre of our personality, where we are sustained because we are created anew and not simply refreshed. For here the springs of life continually rise. And here also the eye discerns a new world because it has second sight. It sees two worlds at once. Hence, the paradoxes I spoke of. Here we learn to read the work of Christ which commands the world unseen. And we learn to read even the strategy of Providence in the affairs of the world.

To pray to the Doer must help us to understand what is done. Prayer, as our greatest work, breeds in us the flair for the greatest work of God, the instinct of His kingdom and the sense of His track in Time. Here, too, we acquire that spiritual veracity which we so constantly tend to lose; because we are in contact with the living and eternal reality. Our very love is preserved from dissimulation, which is a great danger when we love men and court their love. Prayer is a greater school and discipline of divine love than the service of man is.

But not if it is cut off from it. And no less also is it the school of repentance, which so easily can grow morbid. We are taught to be not only true to reality, but sincere with ourselves. We cannot touch God thus without having a light no less searching than saving shed upon our own hearts; and we are thus protected from Pharisaism in our judgment of either self or friend or foe--especially at present of our foe. No companion of God can war in His name against man without much self-searching and self-humiliation, however reserved.

But here humility turns into moral strength. Here we are also regathered in soul from the fancies that bewilder us and the distractions that dissolve us into the dust of the world. We are collected into peace and power and sound judgment, and we have a heart for any fate, because we rest in the Lord whose judgments are salvation. What gives us our true stay gives us our true self; and it protects us from the elations and despairs which alternate in ourselves by bringing home to us a Saviour who is more to us than we are to ourselves.

We become patient with ourselves because we realize the patience of God. We get rid of illusions about ourselves and the world because our intimacy is with the real God, and we know that we truly are just what we are before Him. We thus have a great peace, because in prayer, as the crowning act of faith, we lay hold of the grace of God the Saviour. Prayer alone prevents our receiving God's grace in vain. Which means that it establishes the soul of a man or a people, creates the moral personality day by day, spreads outward the new heart through society, and goes to make a new ethos in mankind.

We come out with a courage and a humanity we had not when we went in, even though our old earth remove, and our familiar hills are cast into the depth of the sea. The true Church is thus co-extensive with the community of true prayer. It is another paradox that combines the vast power of prayer both on the lone soul and on the moral life, personal and social, with the soul's shyness and aloofness in prayer. Kant (whose genius in this respect reflected his race) has had an influence upon scientific thought and its

efficiency far greater than upon religion, though he is well named the philosopher of Protestantism.

He represent (again like his race) intellectual power and a certain stiff moral insight, but not spiritual atmosphere, delicacy, or flexibility, which is rather the Catholic tradition. Intellectualism always tends to more force than finish, and always starves or perverts ethic. And nowhere in Kant's work does this limitation find such expression as in his treatment of prayer, unless it be in his lack of any misgivings about treating it at all with his equipment or the equipment of his age.

Even his successors know better now--just as we in England have learned to find in Milton powers and harmonies hidden from the too great sagacity of Dr. Johnson or his time. Kant, then, speaks of prayer thus. If we found a man (he says) given to talking to himself we should begin to suspect him of some tendency to mental aberration. Yet the personality of such a man is a very real thing. It is a thing we can be more sure of than we can of the personality of God, who, if He is more than a conclusion for intellectual thought, is not more than a postulate for moral.

No doubt in time of crisis it is an instinct to pray which even cultivated people do not, and need not, lose. But if any such person were surprised even in the attitude of private prayer, to say nothing of its exercise, he would be ashamed. He would think he had been discovered doing something unworthy of his intelligence, and would feel about it as educated people do when found out to be yielding to a superstition about the number thirteen. A thinker of more sympathy and delicacy would have spoken less bluntly.

Practical experience would have taught him discrimination. He would have realized the difference between shame and shyness, between confusion at an unworthy thing and confusion at a thing too fine and sacred for exposure. And had his age allowed him to have more knowledge and taste in history, and especially the history of religion, he would have gone, not to the cowardice of the ordinary cultivated man, but to the power and thoroughness of the great saints or captains of the race--to Paul, to Thomas a Kempis, to Cromwell with his troops, or Gustavus Adolphus with his.

I do but humbly allude to Gethsemane. But Kant belonged to a time which had not realized, as even our science does now, the final power of the subtler forces, and the overwhelming effect in the long run of the impalpable and elusive influences of life. Much might be written about the effect of prayer on the great history of the world.

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