

The Vicariousness of Prayer

by P.T. Forsyth

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer in the life of the minister, highlighting its role in shaping personality, interceding for others, and bringing reconciliation and redemption.

Scripture: Romans 8:26, 1 Corinthians 9:16, 2 Corinthians 3:5, Ephesians 6:18, Colossians 4:2

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Ministerial Calling"

Description

P.T. Forsyth delivers a sermon on the challenges and solemn responsibilities of ministry, emphasizing the constant sense of insufficiency and unworthiness that comes with handling the gospel. He highlights the need for ministers to convey Christ effectively, understanding the sacramental nature of their work and the judgment and salvation that comes with presenting the gospel. Forsyth stresses the importance of prayer in deepening faith, recovering evangelical experience, and maintaining the minister's spiritual vitality amidst the difficulties of public and private prayer. He calls for a reconstruction of theology and a restoration of faith through prayer, emphasizing the transformative power of true prayer in shaping the minister's personality and ministry.

Transcript

The work of the ministry labours under one heavy disadvantage when we regard it as a profession and compare it with other professions. In these, experience brings facility, a sense of mastery in the subject, self-satisfaction, self-confidence; but in our subject the more we pursue it, the more we enter into it, so much the more are we cast down with the overwhelming sense, not only of our insufficiency, but of our unworthiness. Of course, in the technique of our work we acquire a certain ease.

We learn to speak more or less freely and aptly. We learn the knack of handling a text, of conducting church work, or dealing with men, and the life. If it were only texts or men we had to handle! But we have to handle the gospel. We have to lift up Christ--a Christ who is the death of natural self-confidence--a humiliating, even a crushing Christ; and we are not always alive to our uplifting and resurrection in Him. We have to handle a gospel that is a new rebuke to us every step we gain in intimacy with it.

There is no real intimacy with the gospel which does not mean a new sense of God's holiness, and it may be long before we realize that the same holiness that condemns is that which saves. There is no new insight into the Cross which does not bring, whatever else come with it, a deeper sense of the solemn holiness of the love that meets us there. And there is no new sense of the holy God that does not arrest His name upon our unclean lips. If our very repentance is to be repented of, and we should be forgiven

much in our very prayers, how shall we be proud, or even pleased, with what we may think a success in our preaching?

So that we are not surprised that some preachers, after what the public calls a most brilliant and impressive discourse, retire (as the emperor retired to close his life in the cloister) to humble themselves before God, to ask forgiveness for the poor message, and to call themselves most unprofitable servants--yea, even when they knew themselves that they had "done well." The more we grasp our gospel the more it abashes us. Moreover, as we learn more of the seriousness of the gospel for the human soul, we feel the more that every time we present it we are adding to the judgment of some as well as to the salvation of others.

We are not like speakers who present a matter that men can freely take or leave, where they can agree or differ with us without moral result. No true preacher can be content that his flock should believe in him. That were egoism. They must believe with him. The deeper and surer our gospel is the more is our work a judgment on those to whom it is not a grace. This was what bore upon the Saviour's own soul, and darkened His very agony into eclipse. That He, who knew Himself to be the salvation of His own beloved people, should, by His very love, become their doom!

And here we watch and suffer with Him, however sleepily. There is put into our charge our dear people's life or death. For to those to whom we are not life we are death, in proportion as we truly preach, not ourselves, but the real salvation of Christ. How solemn our place is! It is a sacramental place. We have not simply to state our case, we have to convey our Christ, and to convey Him effectually as the soul's final fate. We are sacramental elements, broken often, in the Lord's hands, as He dispenses His grace through us.

We do not, of course, believe that orders are an ecclesiastical sacrament, as Rome does. But we are forced to realize the idea underlying that dogma--the sacramental nature of our person, work, and vocation for the gospel. We are not saviours. There is only one Saviour. But we are His sacraments. We do not believe in an ecclesiastical priesthood; but we are made to feel how we stand between God and the people as none of our flock do. We bring Christ to them, and them to Christ, in sacrificial action in a way far more moral, inward, and taxing than official priesthood can be.

As ministers we lead the sacerdotal function of the whole Church in the world--its holy confession and sacrifice for the world in Christ. We ought, indeed, to feel the dignity of the ministry; we must present some protest against the mere fraternal conception which so easily sinks into an unspiritual familiarity. But still more than the dignity of the ministry do its elect feel its solemnity. How can it be otherwise? We have to dwell much with the everlasting burnings of God's love.

We have to tend that consuming fire. We have to feed our life where all the tragedy of life is gathered to an infinite and victorious crisis in Christ. We are not the fire, but we live where it burns. The matter we handle in our theological thought we can only handle with some due protection for our face. It is one of the dangerous industries. It is continually acting on us, continually searching our inner selves that no part of us may be unforgiven, unfed, or unsanctified. We cannot hold it and examine it at arm's length.

It enters into us. It evokes the perpetual comment of our souls, and puts us continually on self-judgment. Our critic, our judge, is at the door. Self-condemnation arrests denunciation. And the true apostle can never condemn but in the spirit of self-condemnation. But, after all, our doom is our blessing. Our Judge is on our side. For if humiliation be wrung from us, still more is faith, hope, and prayer. Everything that

rebukes our self-satisfaction does still more to draw out our faith.

When we are too tired or doubtful to ask we can praise and adore. When we are weary of confessing our sin we can forget ourselves in a godly sort and confess our Saviour. We can say the creed when we cannot raise the song. He also hath given us the reconciliation. The more judgment we see in the holy cross the more we see it is judgment unto salvation. The more we are humbled the more we "roll our souls upon Christ." And we recover our self-possession only by giving our soul again and again to Christ to keep.

We win a confidence in self-despair. Prayer is given us as wings wherewith to mount, but also to shield our face when they have carried us before the great white throne. It is in prayer that the holiness comes home as love, and the love is established as holiness. At every step our thought is transformed to prayer, and our prayer opens new ranges of thought. His great revelation is His holiness, always outgoing in atoning love. The Christian revelation is not "God is love" so much as "love is God."

That is, it is not God's love, but the infinite power of God's love, its finality, omnipotence, and absoluteness. It is not passionate and helpless love, but it has power to subdue everything that rises against it. And that is the holiness of love--the eternal thing in it. We receive the last reconciliation. Then the very wrath of God becomes a glory. The red in the sky is the new dawn. Our self-accusation becomes a new mode of praise. Our loaded hearts spring light again. Our heavy conscience turns to grave moral power.

A new love is born for our kind. A new and tender patience steals upon us. We see new ways of helping, serving, and saving. We issue into a new world. We are one with the Christ not only on His cross, but in His resurrection. Think of the resurrection power and calm, of that solemn final peace, that infinite satisfaction in the eternal thing eternally achieved, which filled His soul when He had emerged from death, when man's worst had been done, and God's best had been won, for ever and for all.

We have our times of entrance into that Christ. As we were one with Him in the likeness of His death, so we are in the likeness of His resurrection. And the same Eternal Spirit which puts the preacher's soul much upon the cross also raises it continually from the dead. We overcome our mistakes, negligences, sins; nay, we rise above the sin of the whole world, which will not let our souls be as good as they are. We overcome the world, and take courage, and are of new cheer. We are in the Spirit.

And then we can preach, pray, teach, heal. And even the unclean lips then put a new thrill into our sympathy and a new tremor into our praise. If it be not so, how shall our dangerous work not demoralize us, and we perish from our too much contact with holy things. The minister's holiest prayer is hardly lawful to utter. Few of his public would comprehend it. Some would dismiss it with their most opprobrious word. They would call it theological. When he calls to God in his incomprehensible extremity they would translate it into an appeal to Elijah (Matt. xxvii. 47).

For to them theology is largely mythology. We are called at the present day to a reconstruction of the old theology, a restatement of the old gospel. We have to reappropriate and remind the truth of our experienced Christianity. But what a hardship it is that this call should search us at a time when the experimental power of our Christianity has abated, and the evangelical experience is so low and so confused as it often is! It must be the minister's work to recover and deepen this experience for the churches, in the interest of faith, and of the truth in which faith renders account of itself.

Theological inadequacy, and especially antagonism to theology, means at root religious defect. For the reformation of belief we must have a restoration of faith. And a chief engine for such recovery of faith is for us what it was for Luther and his like--prayer. And it is not mindless prayer, but that prayer which is the wrestling of the conscience and not merely the cry of the heart, the prayer for reconciliation and redemption and not merely for guidance and comfort, the prayer of faith and not merely of love.

I saw in a friend's house a photograph from (I think) Durer--just two tense hands, palms together, and lifted in prayer. It was most eloquent, most subduing. I wish I could stamp the picture on the page here and fit it to Milton's line:

The great two-handed engine at our door.[5]

II

Public prayer is, on the whole, the most difficult part of the work of the minister. To help the difficulty I have always claimed that pulpit notes of prayer may be used. "The Lord's Prayer" itself is of this nature. It is not a prayer, but a scheme of prayer, heads of prayer, or buoys in the channel. But even with the use of all helps there are perils enough. There are prayers that, in the effort to become real, are much too familiar in their fashion of speech. A young man began his prayer, in my own hearing, with the words, "O God, we have come to have a chat with Thee."

It was gruesome. Think of it as a sample of modern piety for the young! No prayers, certainly no public prayers, should be "chats with God." Again, other prayers are sentimental prayers. George Dawson's volume has this fault. The prayers of the Church should not be exposures of the affectional man. The public prayer of the Church, as the company of grace, is the saved soul returning to God that gave it; it is the sinner coming to the Saviour, or the ransomed of the Lord returning to Zion; it is the sanctified with the sanctifier; it is not primarily the child talking to the Father--though that note may prevail in more private prayers.

We are more than stray sheep reclaimed. We are those whose defiant iniquity has lain upon Christ for us all. But the root of the difficulty of public prayer lies further back than in the matter of style. It lies in the difficulty of private prayer, in its spiritual poverty, its inertia, its anemia. What culture can deal with the rooted difficulty that resides there, out of sight, in the inner man of the heart, for lack of the courage of faith, for sheer spiritual fecklessness?

Yet the preparation for prayer is to pray. The prayer is the practice of prayer. It is only prayer that teaches to pray. The minister ought never to speak before men in God's name without himself first speaking to God in man's name, and making intercession as for himself so for his people. Intercession! We are properly vigilant that the minister do not sever himself from his people in any sacerdotal way. But for all that, is the minister's personal and private prayer on exactly the same footing as a layman's?

It is a question that leads to the distinction between intercessory and vicarious prayer. The personal religion of the minister is vicarious even when it is not intercessory. Great indeed is the spiritual value of private intercession. The intercessory private prayer of the minister is the best corrective of the critical spirit or the grumbling spirit which so easily besets and withers us to-day. That reconciliation, that pacification of heart, which comes by prayer opens in us a fountain of private intercession, especially for our antagonists.

Only, of course, it must be private. But the minister is also praying to his people's good even when he is not interceding on their behalf, or leading them in prayer. What he is for his Church he is with his whole personality. And so his private and personal prayers are vicarious for his people even when he does not know it. No Christian man lives for himself, nor believes for himself. And if the private Christian in his private prayers does not pray, any more than he lives, unto himself alone, much more is this true for the minister.

His private prayers make a great difference to his people. They may not know what makes his spell and blessing; even he may not. But it is his most private prayers; which, thus, are vicarious even where not intercessory. What he is for his Church, I have said, he is with his whole personality. And nothing gives us personality like true prayer. Nothing makes a man so original. We cannot be true Christians without being original. Living faith destroys the commonplaceness, the monotony of life.

Are not all men original in death? "Je mourrai seul." Much more are they original and their true selves in Christ's death, and in their part and lot in that. For true originality we must be one, and closely one, with God. To be creative we must learn with the Creator. The most effectual man in history was he who said, "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." What a reflection on our faith that so much piety should be humdrum, and deadly dull! Private prayer, when it is real action, is the greatest forge of personality.

It places a man in direct and effective contact with God the Creator, the source of originality, and especially with God the Redeemer as the source of the new creation. For the minister personality is everything--not geniality, as it is the day's fashion to say, but personality; and prayer is the spring of personality. This impressive personality, due to prayer, you may often have in "the peasant saint." And in some cases its absence is as palpable. Hence comes vulgarity in prayer, essential vulgarity underlying much possible fineness of phrase or manner.

Vulgarity in prayer lies not so much in its offenses to good taste in style as in its indications of the absence of spiritual habit and reality. If the theology of rhetoric destroys the theology of reality in the sermon, how much more in prayer! Prayer is for the religious life what original research is for science--by it we get direct contact with reality. The soul is brought into union with its own vaster nature--God. Therefore, also, we must use the Bible as an original; for indeed, the Bible is the most copious spring of prayer, and of power, and of range.

If we learn to pray from the Bible, and avoid a mere cento of its phrases, we shall cultivate in our prayer the large humane note of a universal gospel. Let us nurse our prayer on our study of our Bible; and let us, therefore, not be too afraid of theological prayer. True Christian prayer must have theology in it; no less than true theology must have prayer in it and must be capable of being prayed. "Your theology is too difficult," said Charles V to the Reformers; "it cannot be understood without much prayer."

Yes, that is our arduous puritan way. Prayer and theology must interpenetrate to keep each other great, and wide, and mighty. The failure of the habit of prayer is at the root of much of our light distaste for theology. There is a conspiracy of influences round us whose effect is to belittle our great work. Earnest ministers suffer more from the smallness of their people than from their sins, and far more than from their unkindness. Our public may kill by its triviality a soul which could easily resist the assaults of opposition or wickedness.

And our newspapers will greatly aid their work. Now, to resist this it is not enough to have recourse to prayer and to cultivate devotion. Unfortunately, there are signs in the religious world to show that prayer

and piety alone do not save men from pettiness of interest, thinness of soul, spiritual volatility, the note of insincerity, or foolishness of judgment, or even vindictiveness. The remedy is not prayer alone, but prayer on the scale of the whole gospel and at the depth of searching faith.

It is considered prayer--prayer which rises above the childish petitions that disfigure much of our public pietism, prayer which issues from the central affairs of the kingdom of God. It is prayer with the profound Bible as its book of devotion, and a true theology of faith for half of its power. It is the prayer of a mind that moves in Bible passion, and ranges with Bible scope, even when it eschews Bible speech and "the language of Canaan." And yet, with all its range, it is prayer with concentration.

It has not only thought but will in it. The great reason why so many will not decide for Christ is that Christ requires from the world concentration; not seclusion and not renunciation merely, but concentration. And we ministers have our special form of that need. I am speaking not of our share in the common troubles of life, but of those specially that arise from the ministerial office and care. No minister can live up to his work on the casual or interjectional kind of prayer that might be sufficient for many of his flock.

He must think, of course, in his prayers--in his private prayers--and he must pray his faith's thought. But, still more, in his praying he must act. Prayer is not a frame of mind, but a great energy. He must rise to conceive his work as an active function of the work of Christ; and he must link his faith, therefore, with the intercession which covers the whole energy of Christ in His kingdom. In this, as in many ways, he must remember, to his great relief and comfort, that it is not he who is the real pastor of his church, but Christ, and that he is but Christ's curate.

The final responsibility is not his, but Christ's, who bears the responsibility of all the sins and frets, both of the world and, especially, of the Church. The concentration, moreover, should correspond to the positivity of the gospel and the Bible. Prayer should rise more out of God's Word and concern for His kingdom than even out of our personal needs, trials, or desires. That is implied in prayer in Christ's name or for Christ's sake, prayer from His place in the midst of the Kingdom.

Our Prayer-book, the Bible, does not prescribe prayer, but it does more--it inspires it. And prayer in Christ's name is prayer inspired by His first interest--the gospel. Do not use Christ simply to countersign your egoist petition by a closing formula, but to create, inspire, and glorify it. Prayer in Christ's name is prayer for Christ's object--for His Kingdom, and His promise of the Holy Ghost. If we really pray for that and yet do not feel we receive it, probably enough we have it; and we are looking for some special form of it not ours, or not ours yet.

We may be mistaking the fruits of the Spirit for His presence. Fruits come late. They are different from signs. Buds are signs, and so are other things hard to see. It is the Spirit that keeps us praying for the Spirit, as it is grace that keeps us in grace. Remember the patience of the missionaries who waited in the Spirit fifteen years for their first convert. If God gave His Son unasked, how much more will He give His Holy Spirit to them that ask it! But let us not prescribe the form in which He comes.

The true close of prayer is when the utterance expires in its own spiritual fullness. That is the true Amen. Such times there are. We feel we are at last laid open to God. We feel as though we "did see heaven opened, and the holy angels, and the great God Himself." [6] The prayer ends itself; we do not end it. It mounts to its heaven and renders its spirit up to God, saying, "It is finished." It has its perfect consummation and bliss, its spiritually natural close and fruition, whether it has answer or not.

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