

Some Mental Difficulties in Prayer

by T. Austin-Sparks

Prayer is a training school where we learn to overcome by subjecting, triumphing over, and by deliberate, strenuous, devoted and persistent application, and where we obtain spiritual knowledge through importunate prayer and travail of our souls before God.

Scripture: Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 18:1-8, Romans 8:28, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6-7, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Hebrews 4:16, James 1:5, 1 John 5:14-15

Topics: "Prayer", "Understanding God's Will"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the mental difficulties in prayer, emphasizing the importance of understanding the will of God, which can be absolute or relative. He explores the tension between submission and importunity in prayer, arguing that both can coexist and are essential for spiritual growth. Sparks highlights that prayer serves as an education and training ground, where believers learn moral virtues and gain spiritual knowledge through persistent engagement with God. He also stresses the collective aspect of prayer, noting that individual struggles contribute to the broader purpose of the Church. Ultimately, he encourages believers to see prayer as a means of cooperation with God's will, leading to personal and communal transformation.

Transcript

Having considered the five phases of prayer, namely, communion, submission, petition, co-operation and conflict, we shall now go on a little further to consider some of the problems which are related to prayer. As we have said, very often an undefined sense of contradiction or uncertainty in the background of our minds has the effect of crippling or paralyzing prayer, and we are sometimes hindered by certain mental difficulties which we have never seriously set ourselves to analyze or define. Our object now is to seek to define some of these things, to analyze them, and to nail them down, by way of clearing the ground for prayer in certainty and confidence.

Prayer and the Will of God

In this connection one of the primary difficulties in prayer arises in relation to the will of God. That, of course, is a very wide sphere of contemplation and consideration, and includes a very large number of different phases, aspects and points, but we shall seek to narrow it down, and as we go on we shall see a great deal more wrapped up in what we say.

As to the will of God, the basic question seems to me to be this: Is it absolute or is it relative? What we are dealing with is that question as to whether the will of God for us is absolute or relative. When it is put like that you may not be helped very much. It sounds very academic, but I will explain what I mean.

Does God permit things because they are His absolute will, or because He would draw us out by them to some position? In the latter case the will of God is relative and not absolute, that is, things do not represent what is absolutely the will of God, but He has permitted them for other purposes, and, therefore, they represent the relative will of God. Now you have your foundation and basis for a very comprehensive consideration of the will of God in relation to prayer. If we are dealing with the relative will of God, the issue will be either that those things, having fulfilled their purpose, are set aside and cease to have any place at all in the will of God, or they are allowed to remain but we are in a place of ascendancy over them and they become our servants. They are there, not because God in the fullness of His will and purpose wants them to be there, but because He sees they are things which are necessary to maintain us in a certain position. If we were perfect creatures the will of God would always be absolute. There would be no place for the relative will of God, for it would be unnecessary for Him to permit things to get us to new positions. But, being imperfect, fallen creatures, the will of God for us is more often relative than otherwise.

Conflict Between Submission and Importunity

So the problem arises for us along the line of submission and importunity. Those two things seem to be antagonistic to one another, to represent conflict and contradiction. How can you reconcile importunity with submission? Does not importunity rule out submission? Does not submission rule out importunity? These seem mutually against each other, and yet that is not so. The problem which comes up in prayer is to keep on hammering at the door, to continue knocking, and yet to know submission. Does not submission take the driving force out of your knocking? Does not the force of your knocking imply that you have not learned submission? It may not always be defined in that way in the mind, but it creeps in, remaining in the background, and very often tends to draw that positiveness, certainty and definiteness out of prayer so that you find yourself in a no-man's-land.

Well, that is a problem, and we have to settle it as definitely as we possibly can. The solving of that problem, I think, is along the line of recognizing that the moral element comes in, and God is largely concerned with moral elements and questions. There is something which has to be got over, or got through, in us, and that means that in the relative will of God there will be many things which are only allowed, or may even be sent by the Lord, with the object of, and for the purpose of, getting over certain things in us, or getting us through certain things in ourselves because moral factors are in view. (I am using the word 'moral' in its broadest sense now, and not in any narrow sense.) We must recognize that the new creation is a moral matter and is not complete so far as we are concerned. It is perfect and complete in itself, but it is not complete in us. The old creation still exists. It is objective and external to the new creation, but it has great influence which it exercises upon the new. Sin is not extinct for the believer, nor is the world as something which registers itself upon the believer. And you do not need me to tell you that the devil is not extinct for the believer! But right at the centre of that old creation is the new creation, which is a moral thing. But it is a moral thing - we may say - in its infancy, and all its moral elements and factors have to be developed to make us moral creatures, in the full sense of the word - that is, responsible creatures, intelligent creatures, and creatures with a new conscience, a new standard of values and a new recognition of principles. A whole new heavenly world has come in, and its knowledge and wisdom have to be possessed intelligently. Its secrets have to be known and its virtues have to be inwrought. By regeneration the Lord has not made us mere automatons or machines, to be acted upon

from without, irrespective of our will, our feelings, our desires, our reason or our intelligence, to be carried hither and thither and caused to do things, or made to do things, without reference to ourselves. That is altogether contrary to Scriptures.

But what the Lord has constituted us is moral creatures after a new morality, a new heavenly system and an entirely new intelligence which is not the natural man. We have an entirely new system of judgments, values and appraisements, and in everything the Lord will now refer to us. He will call upon us to exercise ourselves in relation to the new creation impression, consciousness, conviction and intimation from within. Thus the new creation is a moral thing, but because the old creation is still circling and wrapping it round, the new creation will grow by conquest, by conflict, and by strenuous exercise to overcome by subjecting, triumphing over, and by deliberate, strenuous, devoted and persistent application. The renewed will, energized by the Holy Spirit, will not be mechanically operated but will be called to exercise itself in the Lord. Praying in the will of God does not mean that the Holy Spirit comes and holds your will and your volition and makes you say things without your intelligence. That is an entirely false realm. There is a good deal today where man's intelligence is swept on one side and he begins to flow out with all kinds of things that neither he nor anyone else can understand, but that is not the new creation. The Holy Spirit does not suspend the intelligence and understanding of anyone He uses in this way, but He calls upon the exercise of understanding. 'I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also,' said the Apostle, and prayer in the Holy Spirit is not that we so abandon ourselves to Him that we lose all our own moral life (using that word again in the fullest sense).

Prayer as Educative

Seeing, then, that moral questions are pre-eminent in the Lord's mind where we are concerned, prayer becomes an education and a training. We speak of 'the school of prayer,' and that is a very right designation. Education and training are not the same thing. Education has to do with obtaining knowledge, and training has to do with moral worth in practical expression. Get that definition, for it is an important one. We speak of an 'educated person,' and we mean someone who knows a lot, but speak of a 'well-trained person' and we think of someone who is worth something in practical value. There are a lot of educated people who are perfectly useless. We are, therefore, drawn out in prayer, and the Lord sees to it that we are drawn out and extended in prayer, and that represents, on the one hand, the acquiring of spiritual knowledge. We do not get that unless we are drawn out in prayer. It is remarkable how, when there is a full extending in prayer, we learn things, we get secrets and come into knowledge of things. And then, on the other hand, that drawing out in prayer has the effect of training, bringing us into a moral position and on to a higher level morally. We will see what that means presently. Prayerless people will be both ignorant and weak, uneducated and untrained. They will not know God's mind nor be able to do according to His mind.

So we must recognize further that prayer is not merely individual advantage, but it is the prosecuting of a campaign. There is a Divine scheme of things to be entered into. Prayer is not merely for personal and subjective value. It is objective, collective and relative, even in the moral values which result from individual prayer.

The Nature of Importunity

Now we will seek to summarize things a little. There are three sides to importunate prayer - but do you see why importunity is demanded, is necessary and is right? And do you see that there is no contradiction

between subjection and importunity? Subjection, as we pointed out earlier, is an active thing, a positive thing and not a passive thing. It is coming into line with the Divine mind; and then importunity follows for the development of moral features.

The Moral Excellencies of Christ Inwrought

As we have just said, there are three sides to importunate prayer. Firstly, there is the moral side, and that has its own two aspects. We spoke of the ingredients of the incense to be offered upon the golden altar, and we pointed out that these ingredients represented the moral virtues of Christ. On the one hand, these have to be apprehended and appropriated by faith, and that is one aspect of the moral side of importunate prayer: that faith deliberately, persistently, apprehends and appropriates the moral virtues and glories of the Lord Jesus. That is exercise, and it very often represents putting back the intrusion of those arguments which arise from our natural selves and which would discourage prayer. When we come into the presence of the Lord, we should certainly come in with a sense of our own unworthiness, emptiness and weakness, but that is not the ground of our exercise, for that should be settled. Yet often positive, effectual prayer is interfered with, arrested and even checked by persistent obsession with our own sinfulness, weakness and helplessness, and there is a need for positive exercise over the moral virtues and excellencies of Christ in order that we should get them into both of our hands to get before God.

The enemy will thrust in convictions, condemnations and accusations in the presence of God, but we must with both hands lay hold of the excellencies of the Lord Jesus, and until we have done that we shall not get through to the throne, because we cannot get there apart from those excellencies. There has to be a deliberate refusal to take that condemnation on. We know of some whose prayer-life has become an almost far-off, impossible thing, because immediately they cut themselves off for prayer there is such an inrush of introspection, self-analysis, and consciousness of themselves and the wrong things about themselves that they never get through to anything positive at all.

On the one hand, then, there is faith's exercise, the persistence of faith in the appropriation of those ingredients, those excellencies and virtues of the Lord Jesus, to bring us through to God.

Then there is the other side of the moral factor: those excellencies and virtues have to be wrought in our own souls by the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus in the presence of God is the representative Man after God's own heart, but He is not only the representative Man, He is the Man from Whom all the members of the new creation in Christ are to take their character, and His full content of virtues and excellencies as perfect Man - and perfected Man - have to be distributed to all His members, so that they take their character from Him and become themselves partakers of His nature in their own souls. These virtues of Christ were tested virtues, tried virtues, proved virtues, and triumphant virtues, and they are now energetic virtues, and not merely passive. The Lord Jesus (may I say this reverently) has not been put in a museum as a model, the supreme specimen just to be looked at and to be admired, but there is generic force and reality in Him. He lives. He is not a model, or a statue. He is the living Christ Who imparts Himself, and is ministered by the Holy Spirit, to us, His members. His faith is not just something that has been rounded off, perfected and polished, something to be looked at as we look at a beautiful specimen. It is a faith by which we have to live. His patience is of the same character. We are called to be fellows and partakers in the patience of Christ. As we just mention these things you will have a lot of Scripture rushing into your mind: "Add to your faith...." Add, add, add - and these are virtues of Christ being added to us

We are called, says the Apostle, to be "partakers of Christ." So His faith, His patience, His devotion, His obedience, His suffering and His love have all been tested out, tried, proved, and are triumphant, but not as things apart from us but in relation to us. "He hath granted unto us His precious and exceeding great promises; that through these ye may become partakers of the divine nature...."

The moral side of importunate prayer, then, is that the virtues and excellencies of Christ are wrought in us. When importunity represents the demand for patience because God does not answer at once, today, tomorrow, for a week, a month, or a year, what is He doing? He is working into us the moral excellencies of His Son, a perfected and triumphant faith, a perfected and triumphant patience, a perfected and triumphant devotion and an obedience to Him which has no foundation other than that He has required it. Prayer is a training school indeed! These virtues come by exercise. Let us remember that God has an end in view, and that our partnership with Christ to which we are called at length will be moral. It will have to do with character; hence the relative will of God. Sin is not God's absolute will, but He has permitted it. Ah, yes, but the relationship is with our conquest, and with the development of the new creation moral life. Suffering is not God's absolute will, but He has permitted it, and He does permit it. It is, therefore, His relative will, which means that His permission and His allowing is for a purpose. When that purpose is reached the suffering may go, or it may still be allowed to remain to keep us in a position, but the position for which it has been permitted has been reached so that the relative will of God has been done. And that applies to everything else. Circumstances, for instance. Many circumstances that come into our lives are not God's absolute will. A breakdown is not God's absolute will, but inasmuch as nothing can come to any child of His without His consent, it is His permissive will.

Spiritual Understanding Secured

Now that raises for us the whole question of seeking, in prayer, to know what God means by things. That is our education. Coming to know what God means by things through deep heart exercise and travail is our training. We have reached a higher standard of life. So the second thing in importunate prayer is knowledge. In the first place the moral life, and knowledge in the second place. There are those who put themselves wholly into God's hands, and they are led into strange experiences of apparent contradiction. There may be a clear sense of what the Lord wants to do, but the absolute impossibility of doing it! No way is open and all the doors are closed. Delay after delay! What is the Lord doing? The first effect should be to draw us out in prayer, fully extend us in importunity. We cannot let it go. We may decide that we will leave it all with the Lord, but we find ourselves coming back to it again and again, and the Lord will not allow us to be indifferent. Well, He is after fuller knowledge and understanding on our part. That is bound up with all the Lord's ways with us, and one thing, which, of course, we know in experience but which perhaps it will be as well for us to have more clearly defined in our minds, is that we cannot learn Divine principles, or obtain spiritual knowledge from books or lectures. They can only be known as they follow the process of generation. First of all there must be conception, which is an inward thing; then there must be formation, and then there must be travail leading to birth. It is a life process. We cannot learn Divine and spiritual things from manuals, not even the Bible. We can only learn what is in the Bible along the line of living experience. The Bible is not a gramophone; it is a microphone. What is the difference? A gramophone is a thing stored up in itself. A microphone is that which transmits something beyond. The Bible is not a gramophone. There has to come through our reading of the Word something from beyond for our understanding. We can have the gramophone kind of knowledge of the Bible, that is, we may know the Bible as a book through and through, we can have the most wonderful analyses and diagrams, and we may still remain - for all practical and spiritual purposes in a living way - very little use to the Lord.

But if we have a microphone apprehension of the Word, we have the Scriptures, yes, but, more than that, God speaks through the Scriptures to us and we have the living thing. We have all, as children on the sea-shore, taken up shells and put them to our ears to hear the sea roaring. We have brought the shells home to the city, put them to our ears, and have still heard the sea roaring. Is that true? It is a childish delusion. We think when we are children and have the shell in a town that we hear the roaring of the sea, that the roaring of the sea is all stored up in that shell and we have only to put it to our ear and there it is - we hear it. That is a child's thought about that shell, but it is nothing of the kind. That shell is only acting like a funnel which is collecting the vibrations of the atmospheric sounds and causing us to hear what we would not hear with the naked ear. The shell is nothing but a transmitter of the larger thing.

The Word of God taken as a book is just like that shell. If we are in the Spirit it will bring to us the mind of the Lord, but, apart from the Holy Spirit's operation through it to us, it may be just like any other book and we may read it and get no more light from it than we get from any other book. The necessity is for spiritual knowledge, but many make the Bible just a manual.

Now what we are saying is that we cannot know Divine principles or obtain spiritual knowledge from books or from lectures. These principles only come to us along the line of life and experience. Something of a living character is done in us, a life is formed in us and developed, and then it brings us into travail for its full outworking. That is how we get spiritual knowledge. That comes in importunate prayer, and that is why God demands and makes importunate prayer necessary. We get to know spiritual things from the travail of our souls before God, in the long drawn-out experience of anguish. Very often hurry - in the long run - only means loss of time, and we have to come back to get fuller knowledge because we were in too great a hurry. The Lord has to bring many back and tie them up so that they cannot move, and keep them there in deep exercise for an extended period. Then they learn what in the mind of the Lord was indispensable. There are those who are made to know before they go out, but whether it is before you go, or in your having to come back, the same thing is in view with the Lord - that you should know.

So the Lord's delays are His times of drawing out in importunate prayer for the sake of spiritual knowledge.

Taking Responsibility in Prayer

Then, thirdly, there is the collective aspect. Nehemiah spoke of the prayer which he prayed day and night, but that prayer was relative, for it had to do with the Lord's people. Christ's prayers were of the same character. They were not just for Himself, but they were related to His own and were drawn out day and night for them. Paul's prayers were clearly of the same order: "...do not cease to pray for you"; "praying always with all prayer and supplication... for all saints." There is persistence and importunity, but it is a collective, relative thing. The woman who is in the back of our minds as we use the word 'importunate,' or 'importunity,' is the one who confronts the unjust judge, and she represents the Church. Christ's comment upon that word was: "And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him...."

What is the avenging of the saints of their adversary? Well, it is the great collective thing at the end, the great issue when the accuser of the brethren is cast down, the one who accused them before God, day and night. The great Judge will avenge of the accuser, the harasser of the Church, and this has its collective aspect. The incident of the friend at midnight was again a relative thing, not merely a personal thing. The man got up because his friend would keep on knocking. The man was fetched out of bed by his friend's importunity, but it was in relation to others. All this represents a scheme, a plan, a campaign, in which all the Lord's people are involved. God is not only getting us individually to a place, but He is getting

us relatedly to a place with all His people: "till we all come..." Our travail, our moral training, these contradictions and delays which draw us out and extend us fully are working in us in relation to the whole Body. It becomes a relative thing, for it is on behalf of the Body.

The Lord is seeking to have His whole Body perfected, and every part must have a due working in it in relation to the whole. One day the cumulative effect of our trials, difficulties and perplexities will be seen in the whole perfect Body, and we shall see then that when we suffered we did not suffer in isolation, that our sufferings were not detached things but collective, related, a part of the whole, and they contributed to a much bigger thing than our own personal interests. We must allow God's full end to give colour to our personal experience. That which we go through is not simply because the Lord has marked us out to be sufferers alone, but because the whole Body is His end and we suffer in relation to the Body. For the Body's sake we fill up that which is lacking of the sufferings of Christ. The sufferings are relative, you see. They are not the absolute will of God, but relative in this further sense that they are moving on to a larger purpose of God. When that larger purpose is reached then that relative will of God in the sufferings will go, and there will be no more pain and no more suffering. We must see the whole plan of God and find that our required, demanded persistence and importunity in prayer affects these three things. The personal moral life of the believer on the heavenly pattern, and the increase of spiritual knowledge are behind the delays which call us out to importunate prayer. There is something that we are going to know that we do not know now. We are going to learn something that we know nothing about, and this drawing of us out is the way by which we come to know what we do not know.

This exercise, this travail, is related to the whole purpose of God and has its place in relation to all His saints. There is no such thing as coercion in God's will. That is foreign to the thought of importunity. Importunity is - although it may not seem like it - co-operation with God. We may think that the effect of it is to coerce God and persuade Him to do things, but God has only drawn us into that way to draw us into cooperation with His will. That is what I meant when I said there were things to be overcome in us, and all kinds of old creation things that have to be got over - our desires, our feelings, our preferences, our judgments, our conceptions, our estimates. In the exercise, activity and travail of prayer we have come into co-operation with God, and we have found that in the long run what we thought was trying to persuade the Lord to do things was His way of getting us to a place where He could do what He wanted. The Lord has strange ways, but in the end He is justified and "Wisdom is justified of her children".

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