

DISCOURSES ON PRAYER.

OF THE NATURE OF PRAYER IN GENERAL; WITH THE IMPORT OF PRAYING WITHOUT CEASING.*

1 THESS. v. 17,

Pray without ceasing.

THESE words are an exhortation briefly delivered, as laws use to be; and therein we have, 1. A duty proposed, "Pray." 2. The manner of it, "without ceasing."

1. We have the duty itself, "Pray." It may be asked, What is prayer? I answer, It is "an offering up of our desires to God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies." Here I shall consider,

1. The object of prayer, or whom we are to pray to.
2. The parts of prayer.
3. The matter of it.
4. In whose name we are to pray.
5. The several kinds of prayer.

First, I am to consider the object of this duty, or whom we are to pray to; that is, God: not to saints and angels, as the Papists do; for prayer is a part of religious worship, and therefore due to God only, Matth. iv. 10; and he only knows all things, and is present everywhere to hear us, Isa. lxiii. 16. To all the three persons in the Trinity prayer is due. That it is so to the Father, nobody doubts. That it is due to Christ, the Son, appears from Stephen's calling upon him in his last moments, and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," Acts vii. 59. Even Christ the Mediator is to be worshipped, though his divine nature is the reason why he is worshipped, Heb. i. 6, "And let all the angels of God worship him." The Holy Ghost also is to be worshipped, as appears from the apos-

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tolical benediction, 2 Cor. xiii. 14, "The communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all."

In respect of the object of worship, people would do well to satisfy themselves, in their addresses to God, with the belief of the Trinity of persons in the Godhead, who are but one object of worship, and not think to comprehend God, but to make use of the names and titles he has taken to himself in the word. Beware of imaginations of God or the three persons, and of dividing the object of worship, as if praying to the Father, you did not also pray to the Son and the Holy Ghost.

It is most necessary our prayers begin with such a description of God, as may both strike fear and dread in our hearts; and confidence of being heard; as, "Our Father which art in heaven;" "O, Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant, and mercy," &c., Dan. ix. 4. And this will readily be the case, if we have due thoughts of his glorious majesty and infinite excellency.

Secondly, The parts of prayer are three, (1.) Confession, (2.) Thanksgiving, and (3.) Petition.

1. Confession, Dan. ix. 4, 5, "I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant, and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments: we have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled," &c. It well becomes sinful dust and ashes, in addresses to God, to come with a blush in the countenance, and tears in the eye, and confession in the mouth. It is necessary to humble us in the sight of God, and it is the humble only that are heard, Psalm x. 17. Confession is the vomiting up of the sweet morsel, and God has joined pardon and confession together, 1 John i. 9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." God's ears are shut to those whose mouths are bound up from this. Some say they cannot pray: O can ye not confess what you are, have done, and daily are doing? How can ye want matter of prayer, while ye have so many sins to confess?

2. Thanksgiving, Phil. iv. 6, "In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." Every man is God's debtor for mercies, as well as sins; the least return ye can make, is to acknowledge debt. He that is unthankful for what he has got, cannot think to come speed in addresses for more.

3. Petition, wherein prayer properly consists. It is an offering up of our desires to God. Wherein we may note the act of prayer,

“offering up our desires.” The prayer that God makes account of is first in the heart, 1 Cor. xiv. 15, “I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also.” It is a pouring out of the heart to God, Psalm lxii. 8. The Spirit of God moves on the waters of our affections, and then they are poured out before the Lord, as the water of the well of Bethlehem was by David. Many times our prayers come as mud out of a vessel; but as water they should flow freely. Then

In prayer there are real desires of what we seek of God, which desires are offered to the Lord. The mouth must not speak out anything but what is the desire of the heart. It is dangerous to mock God, who knows the heart; to confess sin, and not have the heart affected with it; to seek supply of wants from him, and not have the heart impressed with a due sense of the want of them. There are two sorts of desires.

(1.) There are *natural* desires, which are the mere product of our own spirits, offered unto God, but not regarded as prayer (Hos. vii. 14.) by the Lord. These may be not only for temporal things but for spiritual also, as those who said to Christ, “Lord evermore give us this bread.” A natural man, from a gift of prayer, may seek grace and glory, as a bridge to lead him over the waters of wrath; but coming only from their own spirits, such a prayer is not acceptable.

(2.) There are *spiritual* desires, Zech. xii. 10; which the saints breathe out unto God, having them first breathed into them by the Spirit, Rom. viii. 26. And these may be for temporal things, as well as spiritual, accepted, seeing they are put up in a spiritual manner. These are always sincere and fervent, so as the soul earnestly craves the things sought.

Thirdly, The matter of prayer, or what we are to petition and seek for. These are, the things that are agreeable to God’s will. To pray for the fulfilling of unlawful desires, is horrid, Jam. iv. 3. But the will of God is the rule of our prayers, 1 John v. 14, “This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us.” We find the will of God in his commands and promises. Whatever God has commanded us to seek, whatever he has promised, that we may and ought to pray for. These are, (1.) Spiritual mercies, grace, glory, the increase of grace, comforts, &c. (2.) Temporal mercies, health, strength, &c., mercies relating to our bodies and temporal estate in the world.

Some have no freedom to bring their temporal concerns to their prayers. Ans. That we may and ought to do it, is plain.

1. In that God has given them a place in his covenant; they are

promised as well as spiritual mercies, 1 Tim. iv. 8, "Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." Isa. xxxiii. 16, "Bread shall be given him, his water shall be sure." Psalm i. 3, "Whatsoever he doth shall prosper."

2. It has been the practice of the saints in all ages. Memorable is Agur's prayer, Prov. xxx. 8, "Give me neither poverty, nor riches, feed me with food convenient for me."

3. Christ teaches us so to do in that pattern of prayer, Matth. vi. 9, &c., "Give us this day our daily bread," where we may observe, that they ought to have a place in our prayers daily.

4. God has commanded it, Phil. iv. 6, "Be careful for nothing: but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. Ezek. xxxvi. 37, "Thus saith the Lord God, I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them." Compare vers. 30, 33, &c., "I will multiply the fruit of the tree," &c. It is a general command, "In all thy ways acknowledge him," Prov. iii. 6.

5. Sin and duty are very large. Men are under a law as to their management of temporal concerns, and light and wisdom should be sought for the same from the Lord, Psalm cxii. 5, "A good man will guide his affairs with discretion." No doubt many things go the worse with us, that God is so little owned in them. If that be true, that "God doth instruct the plowman to discretion, and doth teach him," Isa. xxviii. 26, there is a good reason we pray, that "God may establish the work of our hands upon us," Psalm xc. ult. Surely those Christians that neglect it, deprive themselves of many experiences of the Lord's kindness. For the temporal mercies they meet with, were they answers of prayer, would be so many experiences of the Lord's love, Isa. xli. 11. Nay, I think it were a piece of Christian prudence, for the child of God, when he finds his heart not so affected as he would have it for spiritual mercies, to make an errand to God of a temporal mercy, whereby his heart may be the more fitted for asking spiritual blessings; as we have instances often in the Psalms, and also in the famous wrestling of Jacob. Only,

(1.) Pray for temporal mercies for the sake of spiritual, not contrariwise, Matth. vi. 33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. Prov. xxx. 8. 9, "Give me neither poverty, nor riches, feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain."

(2.) Keep within the bounds of the promise. Now, all promises

of temporal things have this condition, if they be for God's glory and his children's good. Pray so as you may be content to want them, if God see it meet. But as for grace, the favour of God, and communion with him here and hereafter, it can never be our duty to be content to want them, 1 Thess. iv. 3, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification.

Fourthly, In whose name are we to pray? In the name of Christ, John xiv. 13, 14, "Whatever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it." This is to plead the merits of Jesus Christ. We must come to God in the name of Christ, laying all the stress upon his merits. All things go by favour in the court of heaven; the Father hears us for the Son's sake. This implies that we must be in Christ, before we can pray acceptably. But I shall consider this particular more fully, when I come, in course, to speak of praying in the name of Christ.

Fifthly, There are several kinds of prayer. I shall speak a word to these three, ejaculatory, secret, and family.

1. Ejaculatory prayer, which is a sudden dispatch of the desires of the soul to heaven, upon any emergent occasion; sometimes with the voice, and sometimes without it. I will say of it,

(1.) It has been the practice of the saints. Thus Jacob, when making his testament, says, Gen. xlix. 18, "I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord." And when giving charge to his sons concerning Benjamin, chap. xliii. 14, "God Almighty give you mercy before the man," &c. Moses, when brought into a great strait at the approach of the Egyptians, Exod. xiv. 15, "The Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward." David, when told of Ahithophel's being among the conspirators with Absalom, says, 2 Sam. xv. 31, "O Lord, I pray thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness." And Nehemiah, when in the king's presence, and asked by him his request, says, chap. ii. 4, "I pray to the God of heaven."

(2.) Such prayers are very necessary. Light and strength for duty, against temptation, &c., are often needed, when we cannot get to our knees.

(3.) They are very useful for present help, and are notable means to keep the soul habitually heavenly and in a proper frame, when we make more solemn approaches to God.

(4.) It is no small mercy, that God's door stands always open, and that our prayers may be at heaven, before we can be at a secret place.

2. Secret prayer, wherein the man or woman goes alone to a secret place, and they pour out their souls before the Lord.

(1.) It is commanded expressly by our Lord, Matth. vi. 6, "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret," &c.

(2.) They will have much ado to evidence their sincerity, whose prayers are all before men, Matth. vi. 5, 6, "When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are : for they love to pray, standing in the synagogues, and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men," &c. A hypocrite may pray in secret ; but a sincere soul will be loath to neglect it.

(3.) As no man knows our case so well as ourselves, so it is a sign of little acquaintance with our own hearts, if we have not something to tell Christ, which we cannot tell before others, Cant. vii. 11, 12, "Come, my Beloved, let us go forth into the field : let us lodge in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards, let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth : there will I give thee my loves."

(4.) The greatest enjoyments of the people of God have been in secret prayer ; as in the case of Jacob, Daniel, &c.

3. Family prayer. God must be worshipped in our families, as well as in our closets.

(1.) God commands it, in so far as he requires every kind of prayer, Eph. vi. 18, "Praying always with all prayer." The scripture speaks of a church in Aquila's house, Rom. xvi. 5. Surely the family was not such a one that shut God out of doors. The family sacrifice was God's ordinance, Exod. xii. 21, "Draw out, and take you a lamb, according to your families, and kill the passover."

(2.) It was the practice of Christ, Matth. xxvi. 30, John xvii. and of the saints, as Job, chap. i. 5, Joshua, chap. xxiv. 15, and Cornelius, Acts x. 2. Elisha prayed with his servant, 2 Kings iv. 33.

(3.) The master of the family has the charge of the souls under his roof ; and surely the case of a family requires family prayer. Are there not family wants, sins, and mercies, that require such an exercise ?

O what a heavy vengeance abides families that are without the worship of God ! Jer. x. 25, "Pour out thy fury upon the heathen that know thee not, and upon the families that call not on thy name." That house that is not sanctified by prayer, is like to be the house of the wicked, where God's curse is. How will ye answer for the souls committed to your charge, who do not pray in your families ? No wonder godly persons should scare at your family ; though indeed it is to be lamented, that many professors like Jonah will flee from the presence of the Lord, out of a praying family to a prayerless one ; whom a storm sometimes pursues.

Before proceeding to the other head, the manner of praying, permit me to make a very brief improvement of what has been said.

1. Let me address myself to those that live in the total neglect of this duty of prayer. O repent and amend, and set about this necessary duty. Consider,

(1.) A prayerless person is a graceless person, in a state of wrath, in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity. No sooner is Paul converted, but, "behold, he prayeth." Still-born children cannot be heirs. The Spirit of grace is the Spirit of supplication. The Spirit makes us to cry, "Abba, Father."

(2.) A prayerless person is a thief and a robber of what he possesses in the world. How darest thou use God's creatures, and not ask his leave? 1 Tim. iv. 4, 5, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." Surely, thou prayerless one, a curse is on thy house, thy basket, and thy store. But, alas! many live like swine; they never look up to heaven, nor cry till the knife of death be at their throat.

(3.) It is a privilege that God will allow us to come so near him, and to pour out our hearts before him, a privilege bought by the blood of Christ. The prayerless person undervalues this rich privilege, trampling on that blood that bought it, which will be a worm in his conscience in hell that will gnaw it for ever.

(4.) Thy soul lies at stake. That dumb devil that possesses thee, must be cast out of thee, or thou art undone for ever. Thou art lost by nature; wilt thou not cry for the life of thy poor soul? God says to thee, as Pilate to Christ, John xix. 10, "Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not, that I have power to *damn* thee, and have power to save thee?" Thou canst not be saved, without calling on the Lord by prayer.

But perhaps one may say, I will pray on a deathbed. *Answ.* What if God cut thee off in a moment? what if thou die in the rage of a fever? how knowest thou that God will then hear thee? Ponder and seriously consider what the Lord says, Prov. i. 24—31, "Because I have called, and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord. They would none of my counsel: they despised all my

reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices." And remember that such a conduct will bring you to that miserable pass described, Isa. viii. 21, 22, "And they shall pass through it, hardly bestead and hungry: and it shall come to pass, that when they shall be hungry, they shall fret themselves, and curse their king, and their God, and look upward. And they shall look unto the earth: and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness."

Another may say, I cannot pray. *ANSW.* Will ye try, for God calls thee; thou mayst expect assistance, Exod. iv. 11, "Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord?" Seriously consider thy state and sins, and thou shalt have matter for confession; consider thy mercies, and thou shalt have matter for thanksgiving; consider thy wants, and thou shalt have matter for petition. Though thou canst not express thyself as some others, yet be sincere. Parents love to hear their babes that are learning to speak; and God will never refuse to hear the sincere language of a heart, though it is not expressed in the most proper words.

2. To praying persons I would say, Continue constantly in this duty of prayer, and never give it over as long as you live. Consider,

(1.) Your need, wants, temptations, snares, &c. never cease, nor will cease while ye are here; and why should ye cease to pray? God will have his people live from hand to mouth, because he loves to have them always about his hand.

(2.) Praying is a soul-enriching trade. It is a trade with heaven, and brings down temporal and spiritual mercies. He that drives this trade most diligently, will be found the most thriving Christian. Surely the leanness among professors is owing to this neglect in a great measure.

(3.) If ever a time called for prayer, this time does, while the ark of God is in hazard, and damnable errors are spreading. O then pray, and pray frequently, and ere long your prayers shall be turned to praises.

II. I proceed to consider the manner of praying, or to shew, in what respects we are to "pray without ceasing." This is not to be understood as if we should spend our whole time in the exercise of prayer: for there are many other duties, both of our station in life and as Christians, that we are bound to perform; and these must have their time; and God does not bind us to inconsistencies. But we must,

1. Pray frequently, as David did, Psalm cxix. 164, "Seven times a-day do I praise thee: because of thy righteous judgments."

The Christian should be no stranger to, but often at that work. It is a piece of walking with God, wherein the soul seeks communion with Heaven, and wherein he should abound, Col. ii. 6, 7. We find Daniel frequently at it, when it was death to pray, Dan. vi. 10. See Psalm lv. 17, "Evening and morning, and at noon will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice." Hereby may be known what case the soul is in; the more diligent one is in this duty, he will be the more thriving.

2. Pray statedly, without ceasing from the set times of prayer. These are evening and morning. The morning and evening sacrifice were called "the continual burnt-offering," Exod. xxix. 39, 41, 42., as being offered continually at these times. And these times were the times of prayer, Acts iii. 1. The light of nature itself teaches us to begin and end the day with the worship of God. And they should be reckoned lost days that are not so begun and ended.

3. Pray occasionally, without ceasing from embracing occasions of praying which the Lord puts in your hand. Do as David did, Psalm xxvii. 8, "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek." An observing Christian will sometimes find himself called to pray between hands; and it is dangerous to sit the motion of an occasional tryst that God sometimes sets a person. To such a tryst there concurs, (1.) An inward moving of the soul to converse with God by prayer, Psalm xxvii. 8, just cited; the Spirit of the Lord exciting to duty, by representing a particular need, or fit occasion of converse with God, and so pressing a man forward to the throne to supplicate. (2.) A fair opportunity for it, Gal. vi. 10. And forasmuch as there may be motions to prayer, that are not from the Spirit of God, they may thus be discerned by the unseasonableness of them; for the Spirit of God puts people to duty seasonably, Psalm i. 3.

4. Pray constantly, Eph. vi. 18, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance." There must be a persevering in this duty, in the several kinds thereof, as the Lord gives opportunity. And this imports a continuing the course of praying, never giving up with it while breath remains, nor giving it over for a time, Psalm cxix. 112. The latter makes way for the former, as swooning does for dying for good and all.

5. Pray "importunately," not fainting nor giving over your tabled petitions as long as your needs remain, but resolutely pursuing them before the throne; Luke xviii. 1, "And he spake a parable unto them, to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint." Pray till you get the answer of your prayers, if it should

be never so long delayed. God loves to have such petitioners about him as are resolute, and will not take a nay-say, as in the woman of Canaan's case; Matth. xv. 22—28.

6. Be *habitual* in the use of ejaculatory prayer; for this is a kind of prayer that can be mixed with whatever other good thing ye are about. There is an occasion for lifting up the heart to the Lord in an ejaculatory petition, in every business that is lawful, and in every company; and there is always an opportunity for it too. All our actions should be seasoned with it.

7. *Lastly*, Keep your hearts always in a praying frame; that whenever God calls you, you may be ready as the soldier at the sound of the trumpet; Eph. vi. 18. Hereto two things are necessary. (1.) That ye keep a clean conscience, watching against sin, having habitually recourse to the blood of sprinkling; Heb. ix. 14. (2.) That ye use moderation in all things, Phil. iv. 5. That joy or sorrow, eating or drinking, working or diversion, that unfits a man for prayer, is too much; for glorifying God is our chief end, to which all other ends must be subordinated; 1 Cor. x. 31, "Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

USE I. Of reproof to those that, being come to years of discretion,

1. Have not yet begun to pray; but live like beasts, eating, working, or playing, and sleeping, but have not begun to pray to the God that made them. Ah! know ye not that ye must die, and live eternally in another world? that ye are criminals, and have forfeited your life by your sin? that ye must be pardoned, or perish? And ye that have not set up God's worship in your families, will ye not give God house-room with you? Know your danger, and flee from the fury which the Lord will pour out on those who call not on his name.

2. Those that have left off praying. Sometimes they have prayed, but have given it over now; some in secret, and some in their families. Remember that this makes you apostates, and that apostasy is very dangerous. Consider the two following scripture-passages; 2 Pet. ii. 21, "It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them." Heb. x. 38, "If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him."

3. Those that pray now and then only, as it suits with their convenience. Some will pray on the Sabbath-day, when they have no other thing to do. Sometimes they are in a good mood, and take a start of praying; at other times they will rise from bed, and go to it, without ever bowing a knee to God. They will pray at even, but not at morn. Some cannot be got to set up the worship of God in

their families in the morning, others for several days in a week have no family worship, sometimes in the year in the throng of business. Let conscience say, if that be "praying without ceasing." Is it not a contempt of God in his worship, and like the hypocrite; Job xxvii. 10, of whom it is said, "Will he always call upon God?"

USE II. Pray without ceasing. For, (1.) Satan never ceases to seek your destruction, 1 Pet. v. 8. (2.) Your need of the Lord's help never ceaseth; ye need direction, protection, life, strength, mercies of all kinds, spiritual and temporal. (3.) *Lastly*, Time never ceases to run, and ye know not when it may run out. There is good reason we pray always, since we know no time wherein death may not overtake us.

OF THE SPIRIT'S HELP IN PRAYER.*

ROMANS viii. 26,

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

SOMEWHAT of the nature of prayer in general, with the import of praying without ceasing, has been explained to you; but it is not every kind of prayer that is acceptable to God. Among praying people there is a twofold cry that goes to heaven, (1.) The cry of strangers, not known and approved there. That is prayer wrought out by ourselves, in virtue of a natural sense of want, by a gift of knowledge and utterance. (2.) The cry of children; that is prayer wrought in us by the help of the Holy Spirit dwelling and acting in us, and is accepted of God. Of this our text speaks. In which,

1. The connection is to be noticed, "likewise." This chapter is an inventory of the privileges of believers. (1.) Freedom from condemnation, ver. 1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." (2.) Sanctification, ver. 5, "They that are after the Spirit, do mind the things of the Spirit." (3.) Comfort against death, ver. 10, "If Christ be in you, the body is dead, because of sin; but the Spirit is life, because of righteousness." (4.) Sonship to God, ver. 14, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." (5.) Glorification abiding them, ver. 18, "For I reckon, that the sufferings of this present time, are

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