

OF THE RULE OF DIRECTION IN PRAYER.

MATH. vi. 9.—*After this manner, therefore, pray ye, Our Father, &c.*

OUR Lord Jesus Christ, in his sermon on the mount, whereof this chapter is a part, retrieves religion from the false doctrines, and the corrupt and hypocritical practices, which the Scribes and Pharisees brought into it. They were not wanting in the matter of external duties, but they were far from the right manner of performing them. Wherefore, in the first four verses, he teaches them the right manner of doing alms. In the next place, he teaches them the right manner of praying. He taxes two faults in the manner of praying: (1.) Hypocritical ostentation, ver. 5. and points them to the right manner in this. (2.) Idle multiplying of words, ver. 7, 8. In the text, for remedy of this fault, and others about prayer, the Lord, being to give us a prayer to serve for a pattern, and to direct us in praying, bids us ‘pray after this manner;’ *i. e.* in the manner following in the form of prayer here set down; not binding us to the very words, but to the manner of it, that we must pray after this manner, and to this purpose.

The right manner of performing the duty of prayer, is what God requires, and we should be concerned for. The Lord knows his people’s weakness, and how ready they are to go wrong in this, and how much they need direction; and therefore gives this form and pattern of prayer, for their direction in that weighty duty: After this manner address yourselves to God in prayer. He had not left them without direction altogether before; they had the word formerly written, but this is added as a special rule of direction.

The text affords this doctrine:

Doct. ‘Though the whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer, yet the special rule of direction is that form of prayer, which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called *the Lord’s prayer.*’

Here I shall shew,

I. That we need direction in prayer.

II. What rule God hath given for our direction therein.

III. Whether these rules are sufficient to enable us to pray acceptably.

IV. Deduce some inferences.

I am to shew, that we need direction in prayer. This is evident from,

1. God’s greatness. It is to him who dwells in heaven that we

must address ourselves in prayer: therefore, 'be not rash with thy mouth (says Solomon), nor let thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few,' Eccl. v. 2. Rash and fearless approaches speak unbecoming thoughts of God, and low thoughts of the throne in heaven, which one presents himself before. And to such may be said, 'These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes,' Psal. l. 21. Who of us, approaching the presence of our prince, to present our petition before him, would not seek direction as to the right and acceptable manner of doing it? How much more should we, who have petitions to present to him who is God of gods, and King of kings, ask direction as to the right manner of presenting our petitions?

2. Our own guiltiness, Luke xviii. 13. Whoever would be rash or careless in approaching his prince's presence, one would think that a rebel, a traitor, and a criminal, would see well to the manner of his address, and would be very cautious. This is our case, and therefore that should be our way. Therefore the prodigal thinks before-hand what he will say to his offended father, Luke xv. 18, 19.

3. The weight of the matter we go upon. Our errand to the throne is, to worship God, who 'will be sanctified in them that come nigh him, and before all the people will he be glorified,' Lev. x. 3. which is awful and solemn work, and gives ground for that question, 'Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God,' Micah vi. 6. It is to present our supplications for our needs for time and for eternity. And if he help us not, all the world cannot do it. Our souls lie at stake, eternity is before us; and to entreat with God on the business of eternity, is business that needs direction.

4. Our weakness and aptness to mistake and miscarry in the approach, Job xxxvii. 19. 'Teach us what we shall pray unto him: for we cannot order our speech by reason of darkness.' We have no skill to manage the weighty matter; and we will be persuaded of it, if we know ourselves. We are ready to go wrong in the matter of prayer, Rom. viii. 26. to ask of God things not agreeable to his revealed will, being blinded with our own passions and prejudices, Luke ix. 54. And we are apt to go wrong in the manner of prayer, by insincerity, formality, and carnality, Jam. iv. 3. Isa. lxiv. 7.

5. *Lastly*, The danger of mistaking and miscarrying in prayer, either of the ways. It may provoke the Lord against us, and bring down a curse instead of a blessing upon us, Mal. i. ult. 'Cursed be

the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing : for I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen,' Exod. xx. 7. 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain : for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.' At least it will frustrate our prayers, so that they will be rejected and not heard, Jam. iv. 3. our petitions cast over the bar. Or what we seek not agreeable to his will, may be given us with a vengeance, Psal. cvi. 15.

II. The second head is, What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer ? Our gracious God has not left us without direction in that matter. We have from himself the rule which we are to walk by in our addresses to the throne : and how else could he know it ? who else could teach us how guilty creatures should present their supplications to the most high God ? And,

First, There is a general rule given us for that end ; and that is the whole word of God, the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, in which God's will is revealed, as to all things to be believed and done by us, 1 John v. 14. By our Bible we may learn to pray ; for there we are furnished with all sorts of helps and directions for this duty, as to matter, manner, and words ; and therefore it is a complete directory for prayer.

1. It furnishes us abundantly with matter of prayer, in all the parts of it, petition, confession, &c. Psal. li. 4, 5. Phil. iv. 6. And whoso has the word of God dwelling richly in him, will not want matter for prayer, for himself or for others. There is a storehouse of it there, of great variety ; and we are welcome to the use of it, agreeable to our own case.

2. It fully directs us as to the manner of prayer : as, for instance, that we must pray with sincerity, Heb. x. 22. with humility, Psal. x. 17. in faith, Jam. i. 6. and with fervency, Jam. v. 16. And there is no qualification necessary in prayer, but what we may learn from the holy word.

3. It furnishes us with the most fit words to be used in prayer. Do ye want words to express your desires before the Lord ? He has given us his own words in the Bible, that we may use them according to our needs, Hos. xiv. 2.

Secondly, There is a special rule given us by Jesus Christ for that end, namely, that form of words which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called 'the Lord's prayer;' that excellent pattern and example of prayer, composed by Jesus Christ himself for our direction in the text, which every Christian is obliged to receive with the utmost reverence, as the Lord's own word. But it was never imposed

by Jesus Christ, or his apostles, as a set form to which his church is bound to pray in *these very* words, and no other. It is true, in the year 618, the Council of Toledo imposed it on the Clergy, under the pain of deposition; but then Antichrist had mounted the throne, and the Papists since have superstitiously abused it to this day. I would all Protestants could plead, Not guilty. To clear this matter,

1. The Lord's prayer is given us as a directory for prayer, a pattern and an example, by which we are to regulate our petitions, and make other prayers. This is clear from the text, *After this manner pray ye, &c.* And it is a most ample directory in few words, to be eyed by all praying persons, if studied and understood. There we are taught to pray in a known tongue, and without vain repetitions, to God only, and for things allowed; to have chief respect to the glory of God and our own advantage.

2. It may also be used as a prayer, so that it be done with understanding, faith, reverence, and other praying graces. So we own the very words may lawfully be used, Matth. vi. 9. compared with Luke xi. 2. See Larger Catechism, quest. 137. and the Directory for Public Worship, under the title, *Of prayer after Sermon*, parag. 5. Who can refuse this, since it is a piece of holy scripture, of the Lord's own word? And they who are so weak, as that they cannot conceive prayer, do well to use this holy form; though they should endeavour to make further progress in prayer. And sometimes knowing Christians, under great desertions, not able to conceive prayer, have used it with good success. But,

3. Our Lord hath not tied us to this very form of words when we pray to God. This is evident,

(1.) Because the prayers afterwards recorded in the scripture, were neither this form of words, nor yet concluded with it. Christ himself used it not in his prayer at Lazarus's grave, John xi. 41; nor in his last prayer, John xvii. Nor did his apostles, Acts i. 24; nor the church, Acts iv. 24, &c.

(2.) This prayer is diversely set down by Matthew and Luke, the only two evangelists that make mention of it. And though it is obvious, that there is an entire harmony between them as to the matter and sense of the words; yet it is equally obvious, to all who compare them together, that there is some difference as to mode or manner of expression, particularly as to the fourth and fifth petitions; which certainly there would not have been, had it been designed for a form of prayer. In Luke, the fourth petition runs thus, 'Give us day by day our daily bread;' but in Matthew, it is thus expressed, 'Give us this day our daily bread.' The latter contains a petition for the supply of present wants; and the former for

the supply of wants as they daily recur upon us : so that both accounts being compared together, we are directed to pray for those temporal blessings which we want at present, and for a supply of those we stand in need of as they daily recur : which shews a considerable difference in the expressions. In Luke, the fifth petition is, 'Forgive us our sins ; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us ;' whereas, in Matthew the expression is very different, viz. 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.' Again, Luke leaves out the doxology, 'For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen ;' which Matthew adds. From whence it may be justly inferred, that our Lord's design in furnishing his disciples with this prayer, was not that they should confine themselves solely to the manner of expression used therein, without the least variation ; for then undoubtedly the two evangelists would have recorded it in the very same words ; but he rather intended it as a directory respecting the matter of prayer. So that it is impossible to keep by the form of words precisely, since it is not one. It is said, Luke xi. 2. 'When ye pray say, &c. Here we are tied to the form of words, say our adversaries. *Ans.* By this phrase is to be understood the manner, viz. Say this on the matter, pray after this manner. Compare Matth. vi. 9. If it is to be understood otherwise, then, (1.) According to Matth. x. 7. 'Go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand ;' the disciples' preaching was confined to these very words, which we are sure it was not. (2.) It would be unlawful to pray in any other words, which no Christian dare assert. (3.) Neither Papists nor Episcopalians stick to these words in Luke, but use the words in Matthew ; by which they give up the cause.

Further, it may be observed, that our Saviour chiefly intended this prayer as a directory, respecting the matter of our petitions, rather than a form ; because it does not explicitly contain all the parts of prayer, particularly confession of sin, and thankful acknowledgement of mercies. Again, there is no explicit or direct mention of the Mediator, in whose name we are to pray ; nor of his obedience, sufferings, and intercession, on which the efficacy of our prayers is founded, and their success depends : which things are to be supplied from other parts of scripture ; all which, taken together, give us a complete directory for prayer.

From the whole, I think it is evident, that a prayer formed upon the model of this excellent pattern, having the substance of the several petitions interspersed through it, though expressed in other words, is a true scriptural prayer ; and that there is no necessity to conclude with the Lord's prayer. And therefore, I cannot but

think, that Papists, and many Protestants, who conclude their prayers with the very words of the Lord's prayer, make a very superstitious use of it; causing people imagine, that the bare recital of the words of the Lord's prayer sanctifies their other prayers; and that no prayer can be accepted of God where this, I cannot but call it vain, repetition is omitted.

III. Whether are these rules sufficient to enable us to pray acceptably? *Ans.* They are sufficient in their kind, i. e. as external directions and helps. But besides, the inward grace and assistance of the Spirit are necessary for that end, Rom. viii. 26.*

I shall conclude with a few inferences.

Inf. 1. How gracious and ready to hear prayer is our God, who has been pleased himself to direct us how to pray to him! We ought to be duly thankful to him for his great goodness in this matter, and diligently attend to the excellent rules he has given us on this head.

2. Let us acquaint ourselves with the blessed word, that contains such a full rule of practice as well as faith; and study the holy scriptures, that we may be the better instructed to pray. The bible is a noble guide for prayer, both for the matter and manner thereof; and if we diligently study it, we will not be in hazard of uttering any thing contrary to or inconsistent with it, or of using the words he has given us without knowledge or understanding.

3. Those who neglect prayer on any pretence, and particularly on that pretence that they cannot pray, or those who stick by a mere form, without endeavouring to improve in the duty, are highly culpable and inexcusable, as they have so many and such excellent helps scattered throughout the whole word of God. Herein they sin against God, and wrong their own souls.

Lastly, See the absolute necessity of prayer in the Christian life. Be convinced, that ye cannot be without that which the Lord is at so much pains to bring you to, by not only teaching you what to pray, but promising his Holy Spirit to assist you therein. Apply yourselves diligently to this duty, that you may be often with God, guiding yourselves therein by the direction of the word; and plead importunately for the quickening power and influence of the Holy Spirit, for his help and assistance. He will shew thee thy wants, to give thee matter of petition; thy sins, to give thee matter of confession; the mercies and blessings of God, to yield thee matter of thanksgiving; and the church's miseries and necessities, to furnish thee with matter of intercession.

* The author afterwards preached a course of excellent sermons on this subject, from the text here quoted, which since has been published, and forms a very proper appendix to this and the subsequent discourses.