

Prayer and Its Necessity

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The eyes of the Lord are upon the just, and His ears unto their prayers: but the countenance of the Lord against them that do evil things. – 1 Peter iii. 12.

That the petitions of the good should be received by God with greater favor than those of the bad, is but reasonable. It can excite no surprise, if the prayers of the obdurately wicked are ineffectual. The only wonder is, that he, who knows himself at enmity with his Maker, and is not resolved upon a speedy reconciliation, should dare to irritate him still further, with the mockery of homage. The prayers of the willful, hardened, and determined rebel can be but a mockery of that Omnipotent King, to whom he owes, but will not pay, allegiance. Hence, Jeremias laments the sins of his people in these words: We have done wickedly and provoked thee to wrath, therefore thou art inexorable. Thou hast set a cloud before thee, that our prayer may not pass through. And Isaias says to sinners: Your iniquities have divided between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you. And the Wise Man declares, He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, his prayer shall be an abomination. But only to the perverse and obdurate do these and similar declarations apply. They regard not the humbled sinner, who, sensible of his miseries and touched with remorse, cries aloud for mercy. His prayer will be heard, and the Scriptures abound in the most encouraging assurances to such. Seek ye the Lord, says the same Isaias, while he may be found, call upon him, while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way and the unjust man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he is bountiful to forgive. The examples of the humble publican, and of the prodigal son, show how ready the Almighty is to listen to the prayers of the greatest sinners, when they throw themselves, in a penitential spirit, upon his mercies.

Having made these remarks, which the text seemed to require, I will proceed to consider the duty of prayer, in a twofold point of view; first, as it regards mankind in general; secondly, in its relation to those who are engaged in the immediate intercourse and bustle of society.

Man is a dependent being. He comes into life helpless and destitute, ignorant of the past and the future, and unable to alter the lot which, without his concurrence, has been assigned him. Instantly a thousand dangers spring up around him, and attend him through life. The miseries and instability inseparable from the lot of man, the weakness and perils of infancy, the care and misfortunes incident to riper years, the decrepitude of age, are so many admonitions which, at every stage of his existence, remind him of his own insignificance and helplessness. The shortness of his views, the uncertainty attending his fondest projects, his thirst after happiness, and his inability to attain it, whatever, in fine, regards his present condition, whether we consider him as possessed of the goods of life, or as exempted from any of its evils, all things declare the insufficiency of man, and show him the necessity of recurring to some superior power. Hence, to offer supplication to beings of a supernatural order has, in all ages and all nations, even when men have been farthest removed from the light of truth, been found the natural dictate of the human heart. Yet, powerfully as the temporal wants of man force upon him the necessity of prayer, it is only in the view which revelation gives us of his spiritual necessities that this obligation appears in all its importance.

Created in innocence and destined for felicity, man has by sin enervated all the powers of his soul: he has expelled reason from her throne, and given up his heart to the anarchy of merciless passions, which distract him by the extravagance and contrariety of their demands, and continually divert his mind from the object for which it was made. Blasted by the ruthless influence of sin, the inferior parts of his nature, his bodily senses, now conspire against him, and by their importunate cravings, cease not to urge him to guilty excess. Around him he beholds the powers of hell, armed with superior strength and sagacity, eagerly bent on his destruction; while, leagued with Satan, the world, that dangerous enemy of virtue, smiles but to delude, and caresses but to destroy.

Such, my brethren, are the spiritual perils, which ceaselessly threaten us, and such the motives, which should induce a rational being to be earnest in seeking the protection of heaven. Yet, strongly calculated as are these reflections to enforce upon all men the duty of prayer, there is another no less powerful motive, regarding, unfortunately, a vast portion of those who have by baptism been numbered among the friends of God, and enrolled among the members of His Church. To the sinner, to him who has willfully offended his Creator, it

were surely vain to enforce the necessity of prayer, by any other consideration than that of an omniscient, just, and irritated God. To him, surely, who has made himself the object of the maledictions of heaven, the prospect of eternal desolation, of the worm that dieth not, and of the fire that is not extinguished, will offer stronger motives for deprecating the wrath of the Omnipotent, than any which human eloquence can suggest. For whither shall he, who is the enemy of God, look for support or consolation? Shall it be within himself? But a bitter experience has already demonstrated the blindness of his understanding, and the corruption of his heart. Shall it be in the society of those around him? But the world, like himself, stands condemned by heaven. Regardless of his misfortunes, it will see him and pass by; or, perhaps, with compassion more fatal than neglect, it will sear his cankered wounds, and render them incurable. Shall he then flee from the commerce of mankind? Alas, if it be not to commune with heaven, temptation will overpower his vacant mind, and passion will hurry him to fresh excesses. The specters of a guilty conscience will haunt his solitude, and the terrifying prospect of a miserable hereafter will disturb his repose, if not hurry him to despair. Thus, as all things threaten an early fall to him who neglects to pray; so, to him who has offended his Creator, all things, without prayer, preclude a return to grace.

For it is a truth coeval with human delinquency, and supported on nothing less than the authority of faith, that all the efforts of man are inadequate to obtain supernatural virtue, without the co-operation of heaven. The purification of the heart is a work to be effected only by the finger of God. To invoke heaven by frequent prayer is, therefore, a duty from which no one is exempted, and which is intimately connected with man's salvation. An entire and final desertion on the part of God can hardly fail of being the lot of that man who long neglects to invoke his aid. The pride of heart, or the obdurate perversity, which such conduct involves, cannot but meet with the severest punishment. And, indeed, it is but just, that he who asks not shall not receive, and that God should complete, in his anger, the separation which man in his impiety has begun.

In thus inculcating the necessity of prayer, I am not ignorant, fellow-Christians, that prayer itself is a gift of God; but I also know that, after the first impulse of grace upon the soul, prayer is the ordinary channel for obtaining all other benedictions. By this it is that we are enabled to obtain light in our doubts, strength and comfort in temptations, patience and resignation in distress. By this the good man is aided to persevere in virtue, and the sinner enabled to obtain the grace of pardon and repentance. Thus, possessing universal efficacy, prayer is capable of supplying all the deficiencies of nature: for itself, if neglected, no substitute can be found. How often do men complain of the asperity of the way of virtue? How often do they seek, by vain allegations, to exonerate themselves from the precepts of the gospel, and soften the rigors of a penitential life? But do they ever think of petitioning heaven, in earnest supplication, to remove that love of their own ease which gives to penance all its terrors? Where is the man, who, enslaved to riches, and possessing a heart corroded with the cares and anxieties of a dissipating world, ever thinks of earnestly exclaiming, with holy David, "Incline my heart into thy testimonies and not to covetousness. Turn away my eyes that they may not behold vanity: quicken me in thy way." Where is the man, who, feeling the energies of his soul paralyzed under the enervating sway of the demon of spiritual sloth, ever thinks of exclaiming, in the prayer of the same holy penitent? – "My soul hath slumbered through heaviness: strengthen thou me in thy words."

Oh! my brethren, let the zeal and earnestness with which the votaries of the world pursue the momentary advantages by which they are deluded, cover us with confusion. Wiser in their generation than the children of light, they toil with ceaseless anxiety for the acquisition of objects destitute alike of stability and value; while we, the candidates for an immortal crown, urged to exertion by the most alluring prospects, and stimulated by the most cheering promises of assistance, still refuse to comply with the easy condition of petitioning heaven for the boon.

Cease, then, to urge the difficulties of virtue, allege not the weakness of nature, or the peculiarity of your situation in life; complain no more of the public or private calamities with which you are visited, as long as you engage not, by prayer, the protection of heaven. It were impious to suppose that you could, alone and unsupported, withstand the assaults of temptation, or cure the diseases of a corrupted heart. Infinite and unrestrained as is the mercy of God, it is only in favor of the humble supplicant that this mercy will be exerted. He that hath said, narrow is the gate and strait is the way that leadeth to life, has only promised to give entrance to him that knocks, and to discover to him that seeks. And as there is not a blessing, which it is in the power of

man to ask, or of Providence to bestow, but may be obtained by humble and assiduous prayer; so, to pray is a duty from which no age or condition of life can claim exemption. On whom the obligation is most imperative, will form the next subject for our consideration.

Among the erroneous notions entertained by the world in relation to virtue, one of the most prevalent and pernicious regards the necessity of prayer. By those who are engaged in active occupations, whose hearts are engrossed by the cares of business, the toils of ambition, or the dissipations of vanity, the obligation of frequent prayer is often considered as attached only to the solitary inhabitant of the desert or the cell. Accustomed to follow the false notions which prevail around them, they fondly imagine that the gospel precept of prayer is not to be understood as strictly applicable to them. The remarks that would be made on the singularity of their conduct, were they to enter on a life of prayer, the want of proper leisure, but, above all, the utter distaste which they find in devotional exercises, are the excuses that aid them in their delusion.

In opposition to this fatal error, the testimony of revelation, of reason, and of experience, alike authorizes me in asserting that prayer is a duty incumbent upon all; and that the only difference between those who are engaged in immediate intercourse with the world, and those who live aloof from its cares, is, that the former are under a more strict obligation of frequently fleeing alone with Jesus to the mountain. For what is the world to the soul of a Christian? What are the objects which it offers to his view, but such as are calculated to wound his virtue?

Its maxims, its examples, its pleasures, all conspire to seduce his heart from the object for which it was made. While the man of retirement meets with few dangers beyond those to which the common corruption of nature exposes him, the man of active life feels his heart assailed on all sides. While the former, by the favor of his situation, is enabled to take a calm and correct survey of the sublime truths of God and eternity, of the vanity and littleness of all things that pass away with time, the latter, ceaselessly borne round in the whirl of pleasure or of business, sees every object in a false point of view. To the man of society, then, to him who daily mixes with the heedless throng, and breathes the contagious air of a dissipating world, emphatically is it said: Pray, lest you enter into temptation. To him, above all others, is it of importance frequently to direct his view towards the goal whither he is hastening, that, encouraged and refreshed by the sight, he may condemn the insidious allurements of ambition, of avarice, and of pleasure, by which he is in constant danger of being interrupted in his progress. He, too, stands in the greatest need of a lenitive (soothing medicine), on occasion of those sudden bursts of calamity and distress against which the busy part of mankind are in general so little prepared. My brethren, the world but ill knows how to alleviate affliction.

You yourselves can testify how vain have been its efforts whenever you have found yourselves the prey of sudden calamity; how little it could do towards lightening the burden that oppressed you; how far it was from removing the furrow which care had wrought upon your brow. Then were you made sensible of your own indigence and insufficiency; then your heart confessed its dependence, and, in accents not to be mistaken, admonished you to turn to Him who alone can soothe the troubled spirit. And, indeed, how different, in the hour of adversity, is the condition of the man of prayer from him who neglects this holy and consoling exercise! The one, when deserted by the fickle crowds that attend him in prosperity, confidently flees for refuge to the bosom of God, his tried and constant friend,--the other, alone and unconscious of any support beyond that which he derived from the adulation of an inconstant world, gives up his soul to utter desolation. While the former finds in prayer a comfortable resource for his agitated mind, the latter is incapable of any other occupation than despairingly brooding over his misfortunes, or drowning the recollection of them in oblivious excess.

If, then, my brethren, you prefer repose to agitation, hope and comfort to despair, be careful to nourish in your souls a spirit of devotion. Or, if your temporal well-being appears of slight importance, consult at least your eternal interest. The air which you breathe, and the food which you consume, are not more essentially necessary to preserve your corporal existence than prayer is for maintaining the health of the soul. As long as the taste and appetite are strong and undepraved, the fondest hopes, even in a dangerous distemper, may still be entertained; but when all nourishment is refused, when the very support and element of life is loathed and rejected, the appearance of such a symptom becomes alarming indeed. If it be true, that where our treasure is, there our hearts will also be, how is it possible to believe the heart of that man to be fixed and centered in heaven, whose every thought and exertion are directed to the mean objects around him? Can he love God above

all things who refuses to direct a thought or a petition to him? Can he be said to hate sin who refuses to adopt the most essential means by which sin is to be avoided?

It is a common error in the world to allege, as an excuse for the neglect of prayer, that the practice of it is irksome. Supposing the objection to rest upon truth, – supposing that the world were an adequate judge of what it cannot experience, should Christians be deterred from a salutary practice because it is attended with some degree of difficulty? Should a slight inconvenience, originating in the corruption of nature and the perverseness of the heart, be put in competition with the transcendent advantages that are found in devotion? But, my brethren, the testimony of the world in this, as in innumerable other instances, is erroneous. The unanimous declaration of all devout servants of God, in every age and of every condition of life, tends to evidence the consoling truth that, of all the delights of which human nature, in its present state of imperfection, is susceptible, none will admit even of a comparison with those that are to be found in piety. Taste and see, exclaims the holy penitent David, in a rapture of admiration, how sweet is the Lord, – a day in thy courts is above a thousand.

Yes, fellow Christians, the world – yourselves have again and again attested this truth – the world, the vain world, with all its pleasures, leaves your hearts empty and dissatisfied. Try, then, for once, the pleasures of devotion. Dispose your hearts to receive the divine communications; and peace, satisfaction, and happiness will be the reward of your choice. Say not that men will condemn your behavior, that the world will remark or censure your change. The opinions of men, which now appear of so much weight, will in the very experiment dwindle into insignificance, and the lost caresses of a vain world will be amply compensated by the smile of approving heaven.

Say not that you are withheld from communing with God by the endless distractions and evocations of mind to which you are subject. What can be more unjust than to charge upon prayer the vices of your own hearts? What more pernicious than to object against the application of a remedy, the very disease which it is intended to cure? True it is, that the world and its cares fill you with distractions; but why? Because you have given it ingress into your hearts. The only way to avoid its interruptions is frequently to ascend with Jesus into the mountain. There you will learn to defeat its attacks, disregard its caresses, and despise its frowns. The higher you ascend, the more diminutive will appear the terrestrial objects which at present seem of such magnitude. Secure on the tranquil summit, you will behold the clouds of adversity gather beneath your feet, and the storms of temptation roll harmless below. Thence will you be able to elevate your view even to the throne of God, and thence will you be able to take your flight towards your heavenly country, unimpeded by those obstructions which now confine you to the earth.

Such, then, fellow-Christians, being the value and obligation of prayer, let me exhort each of you seriously to revise his conduct. If any one feels his conscience upbraid him with past negligence, or with tepidity in this holy exercise, let me admonish him, as he values his salvation, to hasten to repair the injury which he has done to his Creator and to himself. Had his negligence occasioned only some temporal loss, the utmost diligence would be employed to repair the damage; and shall less attention be considered necessary, now that an eternal injury has been inflicted on the soul? Oh! my brethren, if we cannot emulate the fervor of the Antonies and Serapions, those angels of the desert, who, like their Lord, maintained an uninterrupted intercourse with heaven, let us, at least, consecrate each day by allotting some portions of it to God. Let us, by our fervor and recollection on this weekly festival, repair that dissipation of mind to which our commerce with the world exposes us. Let us, in fine, here upon earth, commence that sweet converse with God, which is to form our perpetual felicity in heaven.

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Patrick Henry