

LET US PRAY

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 13, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

It is part of God's plan that his children should meet together each Lord's Day for the purpose of worship and study. How wise this plan is. These periods of worship and study not only bring fresh information to the Christian, but also added encouragement and inspiration to do the things that the Lord wants done. The privilege of meeting together with a company of Christians to sing praises to God, to pray fervently together, to assemble around the Lord's table, to give of our means, and to study God's inspired word is one of the greatest blessings that we Christians have. Let us never neglect such services, but let us look forward to them.

If someone should ask you to suggest a passage in the Bible which teaches us most about prayer, what scripture would you suggest? Some of us would immediately think of the passage in the sermon on the mount in which Jesus said, "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen." (Matt. 6:9-13),

This is Christ's "model" prayer through which he taught his disciples to pray. It is a model in brevity, for it has only sixty-nine words and takes less than a minute. It is a model in scope, for it covers man's whole range of need, touching both the physical and the spiritual. It is a model in simplicity, since it can be easily understood even by a child. It is a model in directness, for it is specific rather than vague. The prayer is addressed to God. There then follow three petitions concerning heavenly things and finally four petitions concerning physical things. Truly, this is a wonderful passage of instruction concerning prayer--a model in every respect.

Christ's Intercessory Prayer

Others of us might think in terms of the prayer that Jesus prayed on the night in which he was betrayed. This prayer is found in the 17th chapter of John, where it comprises the entire chapter. Christ here prays for his disciples, and then extends the prayer to all of those who shall believe on him through their word. He includes this sentence in the prayer, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me." (John 17:20-21). Still others might think of the passage which Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Pray without ceasing ... Brethren, pray for us." (I Thess. 5:17, 25).

James' Instructions on Prayer

In addition to these passages there is a paragraph in the final chapter of the book of James that is very rich in its instructions concerning prayer. James writes, "Is any among you suffering? let him pray, Is any cheerful? let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, And the Lord shall raise him up; and if he hath committed sins, it shall be forgiven him. Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its workings. Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heavens gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit." (James 5:13-18).

In this passage there are seven important suggestions. In verse 13, we find the phrase, "Let him pray," which suggests individual prayer. In verse 14, we find, "Let them call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him," which suggests united prayer. In verse 15, we read, "The prayer of faith shall save him," which suggests believing prayer. "Pray one for another," in verse 16, suggests intercessory prayer. Also, in verse 16, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man," suggests fervent prayer. In verse 17, we have a reference that suggests specific prayer, in the words, "he prayed fervently that it might not rain." Finally, in verse 18 we read, "And he prayed again," which suggests repeated prayer.

"One For Another"

Now, let us follow the technique of the television cameraman. We have looked at the entire passage in James, now let us use the zoomar lens and come in for a close-up in verse 16. Its opening sentence reads, "Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." The attitude of willingness to confess sins is vitally important in prayer. Unless there is humility, such as in characterized in one's confession of sin, there can be no prayer. The proud, arrogant, man can never pray. Perhaps you remember the passage, Luke 18:10-14, in which Jesus tells the story of two men who went up into the temple to pray. The proud Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank thee that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I get." In contrast to this prideful prayer the publican would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote his breast, saying, "God, be thou merciful to me, a sinner." Christ made it very clear that it was the publican

who went down to his house justified rather than the other one. Confession of sin puts one in the right attitude of prayer, the attitude of humility.

Our sentence suggests that we are to confess our sins, “one to another.” The phrase “one to another” comes from the Greek word ALLEELOIS. It suggests equality. All are sinners and all need to confess their faults to others. The sentence also includes the phrase “Pray one for another.” The phrase “one for another” comes from the Greek word ALLEELOON, and again suggests the idea of equality. All men are in need of prayer. Even those who are highly exalted by education, economic position, or status among men are in need of the prayers of the lowliest Christians.

I read an interesting story recently about prayer. During the time when Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States he often greeted visitors who came to look at the White House. On one occasion as these visitors passed through the public rooms on the main floor of the White House, Mr. Lincoln was greeting each one and expressing his happiness that they had come to visit. In the long line he discovered Henry Ward Beecher, the noted preacher from Brooklyn. He asked him to step aside and wait for a few moments. When the others had gone, Lincoln took Beecher into a private room, closed the door turned the key, and asked that Beecher pray for him and for the nation. No man ever occupies so high a position or has such virtue and strength in himself that he does not need prayer.

Several weeks ago I visited one of the ladies of this congregation when she was in the hospital. We had a prayer for her recovery and then she said, “Brother Baxter, I pray for you and your family each day. Also, whenever I am present I pray for you as you go into the pulpit.” This has meant a great deal to me, for it is a great encouragement to know that a thoughtful, devout Christian prays for my family, for me, and especially for my work in preaching the gospel. I think it would be inspiring to know the prayers that are offered on behalf of “one another” in this congregation. I know that I pray for many of you, perhaps for all of you at one time or another. I also know that the elders pray for various families and various individuals in those families from time to time. I am sure also that we pray for the elders, for the teachers of the Bible classes, and for those several of us who preach.

Notice also in our sentence that the prayer was for a specific purpose, “that ye may be healed.” This was a definite concrete request and not some vague, general petition. Often our prayers are less effective than they ought to be because they are so general.

Energized Prayer

Our sixteenth verse also contains the sentence, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its working.” The word used here for prayer is the Greek word DE-EESIS, which means a prayer for a particular benefit. It is a supplication for an appeal. It comes from the verb, DEOMAI, which was used among the Greeks in petitions addressed to kings. It was not a claim of rights of justice, but rather an entreaty for favors and mercy.

The phrase translated in the King James version as “effective, fervent,” comes from the Greek word, ENERGI, from which we get our English word, energy. This sentence is teaching that our prayers get their energy from God, if they are according to his will. Man has no power by which to energize his prayers, so the power must come from the all-wise, all-powerful, eternal heavenly Father. In view of the rest of the sentence we are sure that it means that if we live according to God’s will and if we pray according to God’s will, that our prayers then become effective and fervent.

The words “righteous man” are a translation of the Greek word, DIKAIOS, and suggest that not everyone who prays is heard of God. In John 15:7, we find Christ saying, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” It is obvious that this is an if clause. Earlier Jesus had told the story of a young man who was healed of blindness. In the conversation that followed he said, “We know that God heareth not sinners; but, if any man be a worshipper of God, and do his will, him he heareth.” (John 9:31). This young Jewish man had been taught that only those who obey God can pray to him. This is the correct teaching of the Bible.

Augustine once wrote, “Oh Lord, grant that I may never seek to bend the straight to the crooked, that is, thy will to mine; but that I may ever bend the crooked to the straight, that is, my will to thine; that thy will may be done and thy kingdom come.”

For a moment can you imagine the cross? It consists of a strong central beam with a cross bar. Let the strong central beam represent God’s will and let the cross bar represent man’s will. Often, wherever there is sin, man’s will does cross the will of God. This is the problem of our world, and this is the reason for all of the sorrow, heartache and tragedy that man knows. When we make our will parallel to God’s will, there is no longer a cross and hence we leave behind much of the suffering, heartache and tragedy that sin has brought. However, we must hasten to say, that because sin is so widespread in our world there will never be a time when we can escape the tragic suffering which sin has brought, even though we bring our wills into complete subjection to God’s will. You will recall that Jesus once said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matt. 16:24). Because of the sins of the world we will always have to pay the penalty of the cross. But let us dedicate ourselves to removing the cross so far as we personally are concerned by bringing our wills into the same plane as that of the Lord’s will.

Our sentence closes by pointing out that the prayer of a righteous man avails much. When we call upon the infinite God in the right kind of way and out of the right kind of life, there will come infinite blessings. There is no limit to what prayer can accomplish, because it is not limited by man's reach, but by the limitless reach of God.

Conclusion

Prayer is taught on page after page of the scriptures. No man who believes in the religion of Christ can think lightly of prayer, Let us appropriate the blessings of prayer in our own lives.

If you are not yet a Christian, come to Christ, confess his name before men, repent of your past sins, and be buried with him in baptism, for only then do you become a member of God's family. It is only after you have obeyed the Lord's commands that he will add you to his family and that you will have the privilege of calling on God as a Heavenly Father. Come now, accept the Lord's wonderful invitation for the salvation of your soul.