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A Sermon on Closet Prayer.

BY REV. DR. A. L. WILKERSON OF MADISON, WISCONSIN.

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. —Matthew vi, 6.

The subject of prayer is very extensively treated in the Scriptures. Indeed, it is among the chief matters regarded by the word of God. And the text is one of the chief utterances upon the subject contained in the Bible. It occurs in the discourse of our Lord called the "Sermon on the Mount," the discourse that affords the fullest consecutive exposition of the principles of the kingdom of God anywhere given by Jesus Christ. It is the language of the sovereign to his subjects.

The text is, therefore, in the completest sense authoritative. It reveals to the subject, with certitude, what is the pleasure of the king; and it enjoins upon the subject the observance of that pleasure. It is at once luminously indicative, and peremptorily imperative. It says: "This is the thing to do. Do it." Manifestly there is no proper spirit in which a subject may meet such an utterance from the lips of his Lord, but the spirit of obedience. That which the Lord prescribes, the servant must obey to do. In this fit spirit of devout obedience let us attend to the instruction afforded by the text.

One Thing in View.

At the outset it should be noticed that the text has only one thing in view. It does not purport to contain all necessary instruction upon the subject of prayer. And in order to make sure of receiving a due impression of the insistence upon one thing it has in view, it will be our wisdom to mark several things that it says nothing about. These several things are, in themselves, very important; and they are suitably considered elsewhere in God's word. It is, therefore, no disparagement of their importance that the Saviour omits to speak of them here. But the importance of the thing insisted upon in the text is emphasized by the fact that so many other things of real concern, connected with the same general subject, are omitted from mention, while this is selected and given special prominence.

Observe then, first, that the text does not directly enforce the duty of prayer. It assumes the existence of a habit of prayer on the part of those who are addressed; and it implies approval of the practice of prayer. And that which is here unmistakably implied respecting the duty of prayer, is abundantly taught in direct terms elsewhere in the Scriptures; and the teaching is repeated in many forms. But just here the duty of prayer is not the thing insisted upon. That all men ought to pray, the Saviour taught; and that men ought always to pray, he also taught; but neither of these teachings is the point of the text.

Nor does the text specify what are the proper subjects of prayer. This is a matter of great interest and importance and we are not left without instruction in regard to it. But the text gives no information whatever upon this point. "The Lord's Prayer" follows within a very few verses and it is replete with instruction as to the proper subjects of prayer. But the text itself is silent upon this subject; it gives no hint. It is occupied altogether with another matter.

Then again, the text says nothing about the proper hour of prayer. Whether the morning should be selected or the evening as the more suitable season for the exercise, whether the midday or the midnight is preferable for the purposes of prayer is a question utterly unnoticed. This, too, is a question that the text does not undertake to decide.

No more does the text give any indication as to the proper length of time to be employed in prayer. The danger of so shortening the time devoted to this exercise as to make it even a mockery, and the danger of attaching a superstitious value to mere protraction of prayer,—both of these dangers are left with a guard, and even without a warning, so far as the text is concerned.

Nor is any hint here given as to the proper frequency to be observed in the practice of prayer. It is fairly implied, indeed, that it is an exercise to be renewed at intervals. But the length of the intervals between the seasons of prayer is not indicated. Ought the disciple to pray as often as he partakes of the Lord's Supper?

Should it be a monthly exercise? Would a weekly observance of the practice be sufficient? Or ought it to be a daily habit? We must look elsewhere than to the text for an answer to these questions. The text is absolutely silent upon a topic so vital as this.

The magnitude, in our view, of these and other similar omissions of the text ought to make impressive the magnitude, in our Lord's view, of that which it does not omit. Dealing with no other subject but the subject of prayer, it does not enforce the duty of prayer, it does not nominate the subjects of prayer, it does not appoint an hour for prayer, it does not indicate the proper length of time to be devoted to prayer, and it does not give any direction with regard to the frequency of prayer. All these things it omits. But it does not omit to require that the worshiper, when he prays, shall betake himself to a private place where he may be alone with God. "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

Reasons for Closet Prayer.

We shall not too carefully observe that the thing upon which our Saviour here insists is not that his disciples are to pray, but that they are to enter into their closets and pray. It is not prayer that he prescribes, but prayer under certain conditions. The command, therefore, is not obeyed so long as the expressed conditions are not observed. We are, however, to distinguish intelligently between things which radically differ. The Saviour does not prohibit public prayer, nor social prayer, nor even private prayer in public places; but he does prohibit any praying to be seen of men, and he does positively require that each disciple shall resort to a secret place for private prayer. You may lift up your heart to God in fervent, effectual prayer from the midst of a crowd, anywhere, on the street, in the store, or while engaged in your household duties, without violating either the letter or the spirit of your Lord's requirement in the text; but you cannot abandon your closet without violating both the letter and the spirit of that requirement. For with respect to this commandment it is true that the spirit of obedience will observe the letter of the prescription. The peculiar, distinguishing feature of this word of the Lord, is its demand for separation, seclusion, solitariness on the part of the worshiper. And obedience that does not render precisely this, which is the particular thing that the commandment requires, is not obedience.

If, therefore, the command were altogether arbitrary; if there were no discoverable reason for its utterance; if there were no appreciable advantage to be derived from its observance; this distinguishing demand for literal privacy would still characterize it, and the observance of this demand would be essential to any genuine obedience. But it is not an arbitrary enactment of authority, there are good reasons to be adduced for it, and there are mighty benefits to be derived from its observance. Indeed it is easy to believe that, if the truth could be known, it would plainly appear that the effective spiritual power of the church is always in proportion to the general fidelity of her members to the practice of closet prayer. The days when the utterances of the pulpit are most effective to awaken, convert, and persuade men with respect to the truths of the gospel; the days when public prayer gathers and guides and voices the genuine aspirations of the genuinely devout assembly; the days when social prayer is spontaneous, and strong, and gentle, and warm; the days when family prayer is a delight and a refreshing to the circle of kindred spirits;—are those not the days when the Father which seeth in secret bestows his children soul by soul separating themselves from each other and from all the world and seeking each a solitude in which he may unobscure himself to his God alone? And upon the other hand, the seasons in which the exercises of the pulpit are heavy and destitute of quickening power; when social and family worship are perfunctory, languid and distasteful; are those not seasons when the disciples neglect the place of secret prayer and absent themselves from the resting-place appointed by the lover of their souls?

But it is not only to the interests of the church at large and to the welfare of the disciples in their various fellowships that the habit of closet prayer is advantageous. Rather it is advantageous to these wider corporate interests because it is of advantage first to personal religion in the individual soul. For what is it in its spirit that the text calls for and that ought to be understood by secret prayer? It is a voluntary action; it is a premeditated action; it is an intelligent and deliberate action. It involves a pause and a rest. Wordly business crowds and clamors and insists on receiving attention. Household cares are thronging and multiplying to the bewilderment and distraction of the overworked housewife. Social obligations are urgent and the mind is oppressed with the burden of many and diverse responsibilities. There are only twenty-four hours in the day for all that is to be done. What, now, does the observance of closet religion mean in such a life? It means that worldly business, household cares, social conventions,—all things else, and everything,—must yield

to the claim that Christ makes for a personal interview with his disciples.

When we speak of our "callings" in life, we speak more justly often than we think. For if we are at all where we ought to be, it is because we are where God has called us to be. But among all the endlessly diversified stations in this life to which divine providence calls the children of God, there is not one in which the highest fidelity to its duties is in the least degree incompatible with the paramount obligation resting upon all those who are "called to be saints." Sincerity, sympathy, soundness of Christian character is conservative, not destructive, of integrity in the discharge of all of the duties incident to our earthly callings. Fathers, mothers, pastors, teachers, masters, servants,—delude not yourselves with the imagination that your responsibilities in these relations absolve you from any of your responsibilities as subjects in relation to him whom you call Lord, "whose" you confess yourselves to be, "whom" you profess to "serve," and who charges you to "keep yourselves in the love of God." You may safely depend upon it that no real interest—professional, financial, social, or domestic—providentially committed to your stewardship, will suffer by reason of your best fidelity to the injunction to "take heed to yourself." If Paul could protest to the Corinthians, "I seek not yours but you," much more may you believe, O child of God! that you yourself are the special object of the divine solicitude; "for this is the will of God, even your sanctification." This is first in the thought of God, for you: here you are called to serve your own generation by the will of God. But what you are will determine your conception of the duties of your earthly calling, and the manner in which you will discharge them. And what you are will be determined by the constancy and intimacy of your walk with God. Your life, therefore, is the matter of prime consequence, not only to yourself, but to the world, and to God.

My brethren in the ministry, it should be of deep significance to us to observe that it was a minister to whom the exhortation was originally addressed, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine." "Self" first—"and the doctrine." It is not our wisdom, it is our folly if we venture to transpose the order of this inspired word, and take heed unto the doctrine first, and then, secondarily, unto ourselves. The preacher may be unchallengeably orthodox in his preaching, the pastor irreproachable in his outward deportment and exemplary in diligent care for the flock; but the man that he is will inevitably, though inscrutably, qualify his work. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men."

No one fails to perceive that human holiness and prayerfulness are inseparably related to each other. To say of a man that he is a godly character is to say that he is a man of prayer. For what is prayer? The outgiving of the human heart to God, and the incoming of God to the human heart. Whether it be petition or thanksgiving, adoration or inquiry, agony of penitence or serene rapture of reconciliation,—prayer is a veritable communion of thought and reciprocity of good will between the earthly child and the Heavenly Father, in which and by which the worshiper grows in godliness; and without which a man remains carnal, and increases unto more ungodliness.

Its General Benefit.

The thoughtful soul, therefore, will discern that our Lord's directions concerning closet-prayer are admirably adapted to secure to his disciples, to the fullest degree, the benefits of prayer. And if his directions were advisory only, it would be unbecomingly in us to neglect them. But they are not advisory only; they are mandatory. The obedient subject of divine grace must recognize it as a duty to make distinct provision among his arrangements for a period of private communion with God. The king in Zion commands this. He does not specify where the closet shall be located, nor what its size or shape shall be. But he does specify a closet—with a door—and directs that the door shall be shut; that is, it is prescribed that there shall be a secret place selected, and precaution taken against any interruption of the interview. The office where you transact your business, the shop where you do your work, the family sitting room where all are free to come and go,—such places you cannot properly regard as sufficiently answering to the description of closet mentioned in the text, because in such places you cannot be reasonably secure from interruption. For a like reason, though you are alone at your work, an hour of your work cannot be a proper closet-hour, because the work itself will inevitably, to some degree, interrupt the flow of your communion. Solitude and freedom, both, are essential to the integrity of true closet worship. There may often be moments of prayer—genuine, fervent and refreshing prayer—redeemed from the midst of the most engrossing secular occupation; the mind may be for an instant closed to the world and opened toward God, without leaving the place of work, or laying down the tools of labor. But no candid person will for a moment contend that such fragmentary and occasional devotions fairly fulfill the requirement of Christ in the text, in its spirit any more than in the letter. Suspension of ordinary employment, withdrawal from human society and observation, and distinct care taken against interruption for the time being—all this at

least is included in the demand of the text. And can it be doubted that those who are most regular and principled in the practice thus prescribed are the ones whose thoughts most frequently escape from the midst of this world's care to find refreshing at the throne of grace? Would it be too venturesome to say confidently that those who have no familiarity with the closet have little familiarity with prayer at all? And that those who most frequently meet God in the closet are most familiar with the experience of prayerful hearts about their work?

It is true that closet prayer as described in the text calls for time, and is often expensive to worldly convenience. But this is one element of its value. It constitutes thus a very practical text. None but an obedient spirit will observe to do this thing. The inconvenience of the practice is sufficient effectually to deter from it all who do not sincerely acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. And the inconvenience of the practice is the only honest plea that any professed disciple can offer for its non-observance. Think of it, you who are strangers to God in the closet! Your Lord calls you to communion with himself by an express appointment. And you neglect the summons, because it is not altogether convenient for you to obey it. After all that can be said, this is the sum of every honest excuse for the abandonment of the closet. If Christ be your Lord, where is his honor from you?

I dare testify that when we pastors, with our people, shall be found obedient with general consent to this one command of Christ, then our Father which seeth in secret, beholding us all and severally entered into our closets, and praying with closed doors, himself will reward us openly with a revival of his grace and with the quickening of all our spiritual power. Amen.—Chicago Standard.

Envy Among Ministers.

If there is any class of people in all the world who should work in unison and harmony with each other, they are Christ's ministers of the gospel. It is their mission, if they are faithful servants of God, to reconcile the world to God. But such an attempt will be in vain unless they are reconciled to each other. Paul says, in writing to the Galatians, "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another." Envy is blinded by the light, and cometh not to the light, but seeks its prey under the cover of darkness. Its prey is the happiness and prosperity of other men. But, says one, who shall lay any such thing to the charge of God's elect, and especially to the charge of his ministers? Envy is detestable in the sight of God among any of his children, but how much more, if possible, among his ministers. It is, indeed, a grave charge, but we will appeal to the reader to testify to the fact that such a charge can justly be made against some.

We are not surprised to see this spirit of envy among the various classes of professional men, whose sole object is wealth or honor. But when such an evil enters the ministry, the very messengers of peace is it not time to call a halt, apply our chart and compass, and see whether we are drifting? The biggest sermon a man ever preaches is not from the pulpit, but it is his every day life, his walk and conversation. His whole life should be a living epistle known and read by all men, and one worthy of imitation. It will be imitated whether it be good or whether it be evil. The minister who cherishes a spirit of envy towards his brother minister cannot preach with any effect to his people. If he fails to exhort them to be reconciled one towards another, he fails to declare the whole law of God, and therefore fails to do his duty.

It would be alarming, no doubt, to know to what extent this spirit of envy is prevailing among the ministers of our State. It is sincerely hoped that this spirit is not so prevalent in all portions of this State, and in other States, as it is in those portions with which the writer is intimately acquainted. May the time soon come when no minister will use any unfair means to get a call to a church, and when one minister will not be afraid to invite another to preach at his church and thereby succeed him as pastor. Let it be the one great aim of every preacher to do nobly the work assigned to him, and not disturb, but seek to enhance the happiness of his brother ministers. There is room and work for all, and more than they can do. When they become so numerous as to cause competition at home, remember there is the Macedonian cry beyond the sea for help. But let none who possess such a spirit respond to the cry.

Much more might be said, but it is hoped that nothing more is necessary.

"HARMONY."

The promise to one's self that he will repent and turn to God some time in the future is a superlative nothing. A spider's web is a cable in strength compared to it. If it is important to seek salvation, wisdom would suggest that it should be done at once. To postpone the matter at one time makes it easier to do so at another. To repeat the rejection, is but to ice the soul into hardness and indifference. Let the unrepentant, therefore, heed the warning that "now is the accepted time."

The Prayers of God's Children Being Answered in Behalf of McAdenville, N. C.

A few weeks ago a few of God's people met at a neighbor's house and appointed a committee to carry on three prayer meetings in this town on Tuesday and Thursday nights of each week. This was done for two or three weeks, and then the prayer-meeting was moved to the church on account of the house not being large enough to seat the audience. By this time there was so much interest raised in the place that the people would go most any distance to a prayer-meeting. Some young men came through curiosity to hear and see the people shout. The leaders knew that these young men were the worst of sinners, and constantly held them up to God in prayer. Soon one of them knelt for prayer, and the next thing we saw of him, he was in the center of the largest crowd he could find shouting and singing.

Rev. Mr. Mullenax of Grover, N. C., got news of the good meeting, and came to help in the work. Young men who had always kept out of the way of preachers, rushed to this aged minister, and asked to be prayed for. He, with the help of the Christians who started the prayer meetings, called upon God to send down his converting power, and fifty-one, mostly young men, professed faith in Christ.

The meeting is still going on, and Christian friends everywhere are requested to pray for the new converts, and also that other unrepentant young men may be brought to Christ. John says, "I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong."

Rev. Mr. Bailey of Gastonia, N. C., preached an able sermon here last Saturday night, and will be with us again on Wednesday night next.

Rev. Mr. Mullenax will administer the ordinance of baptism to about sixteen young men and a few ladies in the South Fork on the second Sunday in December. We are looking forward to a good time then. HUMMER.

Kebukee Association, &c.

The interesting articles of J. C. B. have afforded me much pleasure. The last gives the year 1769 as the date of the organization of the Kebukee Association. This is probably a typographical error. Both Benedict and Barlett & Read give the year 1765 as the date of organization, it being the fourth Association in America, the Philadelphia having been organized in 1707, the Charleston in 1751, and the Sandy Creek in 1758.

Tolson church, in Edgecombe (now Wilson) county, one of the constituent members of the Kebukee Association, was in her early years a flourishing body. I presume she has either become extinct or gone off into the anti-mission heresy. This church was organized (according to Benedict) in the year 1756, united with the Charleston Association in 1760, with which she remained until the organization of the Kebukee in 1765 from which she withdrew in 1794 with twenty-two other churches, to form the Neuse Association.

This church was the home of three eminently useful ministers—John Thomas and his two sons, John and Jonathan. The last named was said to be "a man of talents, very affable in his address, and a great orator." He was ordained to the Baptist ministry December, 1758. His last sermon was preached at Sandy Run, Bertie county, from Luke 14: 23, "Compel them to come in, that my house may be filled." The Holy Spirit helped him, and the results were wonderful. The greater part of the vast congregation wept aloud. This was December, 1774. A month or two afterwards, God called him home.

We are expecting to see Dr. Huffman resume his work on the Early Baptists of North Carolina. Why the long delay? JNO. T. ALBRITTON.

Mt. Olive, N. C.

Revival at Cypress Creek.

As it does God's children good to hear of the prosperity of Zion, allow me to say that we met at Cypress Creek church on the first Sabbath in November, for the purpose of holding a few days' meeting. The presence of the good Spirit was felt from the first, and the power increased from day to day for ten days to the joy of all present. Such a meeting was never seen at this place. The church was greatly revived and sinners saved. There were eight accessions to the church—seven baptized and one restored. Others, we trust, will follow soon. The number claiming to have found peace in believing were about twenty, and many anxious persons left inquiring "What must we do to be saved?"

Our motto always was, "None fit for the church but regenerate sinners." We had no excitement different from a sinner feeling that he was lost. Trusting to the work of the Spirit, we urged none to come forward for membership till they had obtained a well-grounded hope.

To the Lord be all the glory.
Yours in Christ, L. BRYAN.

He who does not find genuine enjoyment in doing good will find it no other way. To get happiness, we must first give it; to gather, we must first scatter; to reap, we must first sow. "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."—Methodist Protestant.