

## THE MEANING OF PRAYER

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Text: Luke 11:1. And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray . . .

We are always hearing exhortations to seek God and follow his will from our churches and from our own sense of inward need. We feel a need for God and want to seek him, at least in our better moments when we stop to think about the deeper meanings in life, but many of us are sincerely puzzled and baffled as to how we should seek him, how we can find that power which others feel and use in their lives. We see the strength and the serenity of those people with a simple but firm faith in God and wish we could find that same power, and wonder how it can be acquired. So often when we seek help from a church we do not find it; we are told that we should seek God but we are not told how. There is little point in feeding a man vitamins when he has a sore toe; some specific medication is required. That is why it seems good to think together today how we can find God, how we can feel his presence in our lives through prayer. We all know that we should pray. (and there is no need to talk about that part of it) Let us think together what prayer is and how to pray. Let us join in the heartfelt desire of the disciples, as they turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, teach us to pray".

We cannot learn how to pray until we have a clear idea of what prayer is, and understand why we should pray. First of all we must recognize that prayer is instinctive, a common feeling in all men, whether they are conscious of it or not. Carlyle once said, "Prayer is and remains the native and deepest impulse of the soul of man". We may ignore this impulse when things are going smoothly but whenever in life a time of great stress comes, men, no matter how skeptical they think they are, feel the common impulse to pray. A soldier, serving with the army in the Pacific was asked by the chaplain if he ever prayed. "Sometimes", he answered; "I prayed last Friday when the enemy made that counterattack, but I guess everybody prayed then." Consider how inevitably the impulse to pray asserts itself whenever critical danger comes suddenly into any life. Prayer is always underground in the consciousness of man waiting to assert itself, even in the most skeptical.

But as we recognize this fact, we must realize that this is not the real use of prayer. [not the prayer life of Jesus] Prayer must not be merely a tendency, spasmodic and untrained; we must not pray only occasionally when we are in pain or when we need something; we should not pray after the manner of little boys on Halloween who ring doorbells and then run away. We do not hold a high opinion of the kind of son who looks to his father only as a last resort in time of need, who turns to his father only when he needs money or gets into trouble. A true son will constantly seek his father's advice, and make of him his confidant. So we in our relations to God, our Father, should not turn to him only when we are in difficulties, but constantly seek his advice and guidance. Prayer, then, is a deep, impulse lying in the hearts of all of us; but if we recognize this impulse only occasionally it becomes only a selfish sporadic cry of need. Prayer is more than a cry to God when we are distressed. It is a steady feeling of relationship to God felt at all times. [Confucius - my life has been a prayer]

Prayer is not an occasional begging for a favor like ringing for a spiritual bellboy. It is a spirit of communion with God, the loftiest experience within the reach of the soul. Through prayer we speak with God and find his presence in our lives. It is only as we seek him out in prayer that we find him real and vivid in our lives. Some say that they do not pray because God is not real to them, but it would be truer to say that God is not real because they do not pray. If we have the belief that God is, then the practice of prayer will turn this idea into the experience of a real presence in our lives. Praying to God should mean in a very real sense coming into communion with the power of God's spirit. By it we can focus our attention and our energies toward what we feel is right to do, and thus charge the batteries within us which are too weak to start us off of their own power, by aligning ourselves with the spirit of God.

Prayer as communion with God involves the vivid consciousness that God is ever present, that we can enter into fellowship with him as we do with a friend, and think out our problems to find the right solution. But even when we recognize that true prayer is of this sort, we must recognize that there are often real difficulties which prevent us from practicing it. For example, a man may believe firmly that God exists, and may desire very sincerely to speak with him, and yet fail to feel the presence of God. The practice of communion with God is sometimes not so simple as we are led to believe, because so often people have the feeling when they pray that they are talking to empty space. Although we realize that people have been praying to God since the time when man first began to think, and recognize that it is inconceivable that man has been praying for so long to someone who isn't there, sometimes when we try to put prayer into practice we find it hard to feel the presence of God.

There are several reasons for this. Perhaps the greatest of these is the fact that in our everyday lives we are so concerned with the earthly and mundane that we go along for days without ever considering the evidences of God in our lives. Thus when we stop and try to pray we find it hard to find God because we are unused to thinking about him. It requires practice and training and a sensitivity to God's presence at all times to make our prayers real. We cannot ignore the presence of God until we feel we need him and then expect to find him. We must become aware of his presence in the beauty and order of the world he has created and in the stirring of our inner conscience which speaks to us the word of God. There are those of us who seem blind to beauty in the world in any form; their minds are so geared that beauty is a foreign element. Show them a beautiful sunset and they see only colors, meaningless. They climb a mountain and look over the glorious panorama and wonder where the wonderful view is everyone raves about. I know a man who finds music so meaningless that the only way he can tell that the National Anthem is being played is by the fact that people stand up. A man once said to Mr. Turner, the great artist: I never see sunsets like those you paint. And the artist answered grimly: Don't you wish you could? And so many of us say to ourselves: I never see the real presence of God as others seem to, but we wish we could. And we can if we but make ourselves sensitive to the evidences of God in the world about us. Remember, God is seeking us as we seek him. Just as beauty is everywhere present ready to move into our consciousness if we but open our eyes to it, so God is ever at hand to move into our lives if we but open them to him. [Jesus and Nature]

Another way in which God gives us evidence of his presence is in the inner promptings of what we call conscience. There is a core of the eternal within each man through which God speaks if

we but hearken to his voice. This center is seen by the inner feelings and convictions that tell us what is right and wrong. As we recognize this fact, we see another cause which sometimes makes our communion with God difficult. We can not expect to meet God if we are unprepared to receive him in our hearts, if they are not fit for his presence. Jesus tells us that the pure in heart see God, not these who harden their hearts by impurity or harsh and unkind thoughts. We cannot be right with God if we have the wrong attitudes toward our fellow men. If we cherish feelings of hate toward someone in our hearts, we cannot expect to find God there.

This fact points to another important consideration. Because we feel the presence of God in our inner feelings, it is a mistake to look for him outside somewhere. If we think of God as some power enthroned on high, it is hard to feel a sense of communion with him. But if we recognize that he speaks in our hearts, that we need not seek him outside, we can find him much more readily. The kingdom of God is within you, Jesus tells us. The presence of God can be experienced only within our own hearts. All the best in us, the noblest thoughts, the loftiest ideals, the most generous and loving attitudes, is the voice of God in us. If we think of the voice of God in this sense, we have no way to distinguish between what our beat conscience tells us, and what God is speaking through us. But it seems to me that the two are not to be distinguished; our own best ideals and conscience is the voice of God mediated through our finest endowments. This does not humanize the wisdom of God; it does not reduce it to mere human thought. Rather it recognizes that we hear God according to our capacities to understand and appreciate him, and that as we improve our understanding we learn more and more about him. That is why it is so necessary to improve ourselves, to make our consciences more sensitive, to live according to the best we know instead of the second best or the worst, for only as we sharpen our spiritual vision can we gain a better understanding of God's presence and enter into closer communion with him. Our hearts are like windows through which God flows as the rays of the sun. If our windows are dirty we see less light, and it is possible to let them get so dirty that no light can possibly shine through. But as we clean them more and more of the light shines through; and the light comes not from the windows but through them from God. No one, then, should make the mistake of groping outside himself to feel the presence of God. He should rather seek the God who is speaking to him in his best self. This is what Jesus tells us, I think, when he says "The living water which I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up into eternal life"

When we recognize that God speaks in us through our best selves we can understand why it is that sometimes we fail to feel the presence of God when we pray, why we fail to hear his voice in our hearts. The reason is that many of the speeches we address to God are not really prayers at all because they do not spring from the best that is within us, with the force of a dominant desire. James Montgomery in his poem "What is Prayer?" tells us: "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire., uttered or unexpressed, The motion of a hidden fire that trembles in the breast". Prayer to be effective must above all be sincere.. We must really desire what we are praying for. So often we are like the Pharisee at prayer. We pray that God may help us lead better lives, when we are really quite content to remain as we are. Any lazy student can pray to be learned; any loafer can pray to be rich; any irresolute and weak person can pray for a strong character, but unless this is really what he desires in his innermost self, his prayer is of no avail. Jesus always emphasized the need for sincerity in prayer. His criticism of the prayers of the Pharisees was not because they prayed for unworthy things, but because their prayers did not represent what these men really

wanted. Their habitual ambitions did not tally with what their spoken petitions asked. When Jesus tells us to pray to the father who seeth in secret and to use no futile and repetitious formula he is making a plea for sincerity. When we pray to God to make us good, we must mean it if our prayer is to have any force, if we are to feel God answering our prayer.

As we turn to the life of Jesus and seek from him the answer to our petition, Teach us to pray, the answer seems fairly clear. Prayer springs from the heart, from a deep desire that reaches out toward the highest which we know. It is not merely asking God for favors, but a sincere wish to come into communion with God, to develop our abilities toward that which we know is right. It not only gathers our energies toward a worthy object in life, but it provides the means whereby we can tap the inner resources of the power of God in our hearts when we seek his will and work and live accordance with it. In the words of Fosdick: "It is no affair of hasty words at the fag-end of a day, no form observed in deference to custom, no sop to conscience to ease us from the sense of religious obligation unfulfilled. Prayer is the central and determining force of man's life."

Prayer thus understood and practiced is a dominating force in life, It strengthens us when the path is rough and fills us with the courage that if we are on God's side we cannot be overwhelmed. It teaches us also to understand what we call unanswered prayer. I have a feeling that the hymn which says "Teach me the nature of unanswered prayer" does not put the situation quite correctly. I don't believe there is any such thing as unanswered prayer. What we call unanswered prayer happens when God answers by saying no. It seems hard for some of us to realize that God can say no to our requests; we feel that when we sincerely pray God must do as we say. But this is the primitive idea of a man with a wooden idol who feels he can control his god because he can control the idol. When we stop to think about it, we must agree that it is a good thing God does not grant everything we ask for, because so often we pray for things we should not have. And if God granted everything we prayed for there would be no occasion to labor or develop our intellectual powers to use in improving ourselves. And quite often we pray for things we are not ready to receive, things which we must labor ourselves to possess. For centuries we have prayed in the Lord's prayer "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" and the kingdom hasn't come. And yet as the years go by more and a more we see our duty in laboring to build this kingdom through our own efforts instead of asking God to do it alone. More and more we see the need of developing brotherhood and mutual understanding and equality.

True prayer constant and practiced is always answered, and the more we pray the more we become aware of the power and goodness of God as he enters more and more into our hearts. Of such prayer it is true that: More things are wrought by prayer than this world