

FAMILY PRAYER

by John Angell James

I address myself to the heads of families, on a subject of great importance, and deep interest. I mean, their duty to gather together their children at stated seasons, for the purpose of worshiping God, in their domestic capacity as a *household*. This service should comprise the reading of the Scriptures, solemn prayer, and, where it is convenient, the singing of a hymn.

The obligations to the duty of family prayer rest more on general principles than express command. There are some duties of religion resulting so plainly from the relations we bear to each other and to God, that they scarcely need to be made the matter of positive precept, and are, therefore, left to the deductions of intelligence, and the dictates of conscience. Of this nature is the one before us; we find our warrant for it, not so much in explicit injunction, as in its obvious connection with God's glory, and our own welfare; in the rich promises of Divine mercy to those by whom it is observed; in the fearful denunciations of Divine wrath against those who neglect it; and in Scripture examples, recorded with the testimony of Jehovah's approbation and praise. Such is an epitome of the argument in favor of this duty. Is it not the only way by which a family, as such, can glorify God and praise his holy name? Is not that in appearance an *atheistic* household where there is no altar, no sacrifice, no priest for *him*? A house silent as regards his praise, looks rather like a sepulcher of dead souls, than a habitation of living ones; while all the wealth, and elegance, and luxury that may be found there, are but as the garniture of the tomb, where the dead praise not the Lord. Even the heathen condemn such godless, Christless, prayerless households, for *they* have their own family deities, as well as their temple gods; and which they never forget to propitiate and consult on every occasion of importance.

Are not your own welfare and comfort, dear friends, deeply involved in this exercise? How conducive is this ever-

recurring service to keep alive in your own heart a deep sense of the importance of personal godliness. It is a means of grace for the parent as well as for the children, and has a tendency to fan the flame of devotion in his soul. He hears his own voice express the desires of his heart, which, by a natural influence, reflect back upon his spirit, and increase the very source of devotional feeling from which they spring. Besides, is it not a fresh bond upon his Christian consistency, to consider that he thus places himself so conspicuously and so constantly in the view of his family as a godly man?

And as regards his *family*, how soothing is it to a godly parent, amid all the solicitude he feels for his children, to recollect, that he has referred them to Jehovah as a God of providence and grace, both in his closet and at the domestic altar. Whether at home or abroad, this is his consolation, that he has committed them to the Lord, and made *them* the witnesses of the act of surrender. And provided he sustains this service by a 'consistent example', how much does it tend to exalt him in the estimation of his household; what an air of sanctity does it throw over his character! How prepared are they to submit to his authority as the king of his household, by the reverence they have acquired for him as their priest! His prayers are felt to be motives for submission to his commands, and procure for him the obedience of love.

Moreover, how can he expect family blessings without family prayer, or look for a continuance of family mercies without family praise? Can he have God's smile if he does not ask for it? Adversity comes with double gloom and terror into a prayerless house; while prosperity enters only as a golden curse into such a prayerless scene.

Dwell upon the effects of family prayer to the HOUSEHOLD. It is a standing remembrance to them of God—it is a means of grace of daily recurrence, tending constantly to enforce upon them the claims of true religion. It keeps them under the sound of instruction, and detains them constantly within sight of the cross of Christ, the throne of God, the solemnities of judgment, and the awful realities of eternity. It expresses a solicitude for their souls, and says to them

with a clear and impressive voice, "How will *you* escape, if you neglect so great salvation?" It has been eminently blessed in the conversion both of children and of servants, and has thus rendered innumerable families seminaries for the church, which have supplied not only members—but ministers and missionaries.

It has an obvious tendency to promote domestic peace and union. "Even when wisdom and regularity have done their utmost, there are often little and irritable events between parents and children, that may mar the happiness of all, if they are not wisely controlled by a spirit of mutual good-will and forbearance. And by no other means can this spirit of union and kindness be so effectually secured as by due attendance at the domestic altar. Under the influence of the holy flame which burns upon it, the heart has often been softened into a forgetfulness of those little irritations that if allowed to remain, would lead to an explosion, so far as not only to separate brother from brother, but perhaps parent from child."

It may be followed with a blessed effect upon the strangers who at any time may be within our homes. "A few years ago, an English gentleman visited America, and spent some days with a godly friend. He was a man of talent and accomplishments—but an infidel. Four years afterwards, he returned to the same house, a Christian. They wondered at the change—but little suspected when and where it had originated. He told them, that when he was present at their family worship, on the first evening of his former visit, and when, after the chapter was read, they all knelt down to pray, the recollection of such scenes in his father's house long years ago, rushed in on his memory, so that he did not hear a single word. But the occurrence made him *think*, and his thoughtfulness ended in his leaving 'the howling wilderness of infidelity', and finding a quiet rest in the salvation wrought out by Jesus Christ."

In his '*Fireside*,' Mr. Abbott tells us of a mirthful young lady who paid a visit of a week in the family of a minister, an eminently holy man. His fervent intercession for his children, went to her thoughtless heart; they were the Spirit's arrow, and upon that family altar his visitor was enabled to present

herself a living sacrifice to God. It is with the 'church in the house' as with the 'church in the village'. The wayfarer may get a word in passing which he never can forget. The stranger that turns aside to tarry for a night may hear at your family worship, the message which will save his soul.

Some years ago, an Irish wanderer, his wife, and his sister, asked a night's shelter in the cabin of a godly schoolmaster. With the characteristic hospitality of his nation, the schoolmaster made them welcome. It was his hour for evening worship, and when the strangers were seated, he began by reading slowly and solemnly, the second chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The young man sat astonished. The expressions, 'Dead in trespasses and sins,' 'Children of wrath,' 'Walking after the course of this world,' were new to him. He sought an explanation. He was told that this is God's account of the state of men by nature. He felt that it was exactly his own state. 'In this way, I have walked from my childhood. In the service of the god of this world we have come to your house.' He was on the way to a fair, where he intended to pass a quantity of counterfeit money. But God's word had found him out. He produced his store of counterfeit coin, and begged host to cast it into the fire; and asked anxiously, if he could not obtain the word of God for himself. His request was complied with, and next morning, with their new treasure, the party who had now no errand to the fair, returned to their own home. Perhaps, by this time the godly schoolmaster has met his guest within the gates of the celestial city, outside of which are thieves and whatever makes a lie."

Are *examples* needed to urge the performance of this duty? Behold the father of the faithful and the friend of God, whose name, amid the many honors which attend it on the page of Scripture, bears the following commendation from God himself, "I know Abraham, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord," Gen. 18: 19. Hear the godly resolution of Joshua, a warrior and the leader of the armies of the Lord, "As for me and my house, serve the Lord." If we leave the Scripture record, and come to the general history of the church, we shall find that there is scarcely any point of Christian duty in reference to which there have been more

consentaneous opinions, than on this. All godly men, of every age, and country, and denomination, have agreed about the obligations of family prayer; so much so, that there is scarcely a section of the Christian church, in which that man would not be thought grossly deficient in the essentials of the truly godly character, who lived in the neglect of this duty.

Then again, how fearful is the language of denunciation against those who restrain this act of homage to God! "Pour out your fury," says the inspired prophet, "upon the families which do not call upon your name." What a mark for the arrows of the Almighty is a prayerless family! What a receptacle for the contents of his cup of fiery indignation!

It may be proper to mention now, *some things connected the due performance of family worship.*

It should be observed *with great seriousness, solemnity, and fervor*—and not in a perfunctory, hasty, and careless manner. If it becomes a mere form, it is an insult to God, and an injury to the family. It is to be feared that the manner in which it is attended to in some families, is calculated rather to inspire disgust, than to excite reverence.

It should be *regularly kept up*, where it can be done, *both morning and evening*. That irregularity which leads the children to ask frequently and in doubt, "Are we to have prayer tonight?" is a most dishonorable inconsistency on the part of a professor of religion. In order to the regular performance of this solemn duty, it is necessary that heads of families should not visit late in the evening.

Punctuality as to time should be observed. There ought to be a fixed hour, and as far as possible the hour should be kept. No company that may happen to be in the house should be allowed to form an excuse for putting aside or postponing the morning or evening sacrifice.

It is of great consequence that the hour for evening worship be not driven off so late that the family, tired with the business of the day, are more fit for sleep than for prayer.

To keep up the interest of the children, *special notice of them should be frequently and affectionately taken in the devotions*—but they should be prayed at, or have their faults exposed in the form of supplication; this is perverting the worship, and is the way to produce unconquerable aversion to it in their minds.

A due medium should be observed, between wearisome length and careless haste. The tediousness of some people is, in the last extreme, injudicious and injurious. A prayer of ten minutes length, composed of petitions judiciously selected and uttered with fervor, is quite long enough for almost any family devotions on ordinary occasions. On the other hand, great care must be taken that it does not degenerate into a mere hasty form. **The great thing to be kept in mind is *seriousness, fervor, and variety.***

It is my firm conviction, dear friends, that family prayer is not only too much neglected in the case of some professors—but far too lightly attended to by others. It is not that serious, and solemn, yet delightful service which it should be. Even where it is maintained with the regularity of a fixed habit, it is often lacking in the fervor of a devotional service. It is the performance of a cold or lukewarm formalist, keeping up a decent custom, which he could not altogether omit without seeming to violate his consistency; but not the act of an importunate godly man, breathing out his soul to God for his family, in such strains of devotion, as seem to bless them at the time, and to be the pledges of other blessings to come.

Permit me to mention here two things of great importance connected with family prayer. The *first* is, that the mere act of family *prayer*, with whatever regularity, punctuality, and even seriousness it may be performed, is not to be regarded *as the whole of family religion*; nor is it to be performed as a *substitute* for the other parts. The children are to be trained up in the way they should go. They are to be educated in the fear of the Lord. *Instruction* is a momentous part of the duty of every godly parent. He is not only to be the priest—but also the prophet of his family.

The *second* thing which I would suggest to those who habitually maintain family prayer, is the vast importance, too great, indeed, for me to describe—of their maintaining *general consistency of conduct, and also a kind and conciliatory deportment towards the household*. People who regularly observe this godly custom, place themselves twice every day before their children in the character of professors of religion. They are heard reading the Bible and solemnly addressing God, and declare by such acts that they wish to be considered as partakers of genuine piety. What then if the very chapters they read, and the prayers they present, should actually condemn a large part of their conduct, so far as that conduct has been observed by their family! Will not such worship be offensive to them, and produce a prejudice against religion altogether? We should never forget that those whom we shall call to prayer in the evening, have been watching us all the day long—and with what sentiments will they come to the family altar, that he who is to act the priest, and to offer the sacrifice, has that day been guilty of gross inconsistency?

With what feelings must some apprentices and shopmen, who have been witnesses of their master's bad principles in the shop, listen to his prayers in the family? Or with what emotions must they hear him pray for *them*, after he has just ceased from threatening, scolding, or oppressing them?

The children can be expected to hear with little reverence the prayers of a father, who is severe, tyrannical, and unkind to them; or obviously lacking in general consistency as a Christian professor. But with what solemn effect, and holy awe, and deep impression are those prayers heard, which flow from the lips of consistent holiness. It may seem severe, and almost impious to offer the advice—but there are some people whom I would decidedly recommend to leave off family prayer—if they are determined not to leave off their inconsistent conduct. It would be far better that family prayer should be omitted altogether, than be employed merely as a substitute for religion, and a cover for hypocrisy.

It is painful to me to express a fear that this solemn and incumbent duty is not only neglected in some families—but

that the neglect itself, if not justified, is excused, and that on various grounds. *Some plead their inability to conduct the devotions of the household in a suitable manner.* Have you ever tried? You know not what you can do, until you have actually made the experiment. It is one of those cases of duty in which assistance may be expected from on high. But even admitting that you *have* made the trial, and that after repeated efforts you cannot sufficiently compose your minds, and command language for extemporaneous prayer—a very possible and indeed not uncommon case—you could still avail yourself of those admirable helps, which have been furnished by wise and godly men, in the printed collections of family devotions. It is *sincerity* that constitutes the salt of all our sacrifices, which may be sprinkled over the pre-composed form, as well as over the genuine prayers. Great care should be taken that the prayer should be read reverently, emphatically, and with great solemnity. And where this is done with slowness and expression, it is not only far better than nothing—but is to be preferred, as I think, to many of those short, incoherent, and, perhaps, almost unvarying supplications, which are presented by some who are ready to despise a form.

By others, *a lack of time* is urged as an excuse for the neglect. Is not this a most awful admission for a Christian parent? No time to bring down the blessing of God upon his household!

A question will probably be put *concerning the duty of females.* Where the husband is dead, the obligation for conducting family devotions of course devolves upon the widow with its full weight. Should the husband, however, be still living, and indisposed to the duty, the wife, by his permission, may lead the devotions of the household in his presence; or in the case of his refusal, she should, if she can gain opportunity, collect her children, and make supplication for and with them to God. It is greatly to be apprehended, that in many families where the duty is regularly maintained when the husband is at home, it is always neglected when he is away, even in those cases where the wife is a professor of religion.

Permit me, dear friends, now to ask you with faithful love

the solemn question, Is family devotion kept up by you, or are yours the atheistic households, which being without prayer, are without God? You are perhaps kind to your children, hospitable to your friends, attached to your ministers, loyal to your king, patriotic to your country—but are you not forgetful of your God? Alas, that HE should be selected to be the only object of neglect, who deserves and demands to be the first whose interests should be consulted, and whose favors should be sought!

It will require some exertion of moral resolution and decision to begin the neglected practice. If, however, you feel it to be an insurmountable difficulty to commence the service *yourself*, your minister and pastor will gladly preside at the performance of the first act, and address your household on the subject.

And as to you who do not wholly neglect this duty, bear with me if I ask you whether the service is performed with that regularity, fervor, and attractiveness, which its solemnity and importance demand? Are you indeed the pastors of your households, watching for their souls, as those that must give account, that you may do it with joy, and not with grief? Are your children growing up, in the element of piety, and breathing in your house the atmosphere of devotion? Do they *see* religion in your character, *hear* it in your prayers, *feel* it in your conduct to them, and begin to *love* it for *your* sakes, even before they are attached to it on its *own account*? How do you spend your sabbaths, or at least that portion of them which is spent in your own houses? You attend, perhaps—but twice at the sanctuary; how is the other portion of the day employed? Are you found, as your godly forefathers were, in the midst of the little circle, with the Bible and the catechism, training up your children in the fear, and nurture, and admonition of the Lord? Rendering religion plain to their understandings by the familiarity of your explanations; attractive to their hearts by the sweet and gentle tone of your address; and so captivating to their imagination by the union of Christian sanctity and parental love, that the recollections of these seasons in after life shall check them in their wanderings, and even recall them to the path of virtue?

Oh, where are these lovely scenes of domestic piety fled, scenes that wherever they exist melt even the frozen heart of infidelity to transient sympathy, and extort from the charmed lips of poetry an echo of the admiration that once ravished the soul of the wicked prophet, "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob; how lovely are your homes, O Israel! They spread before me like groves of palms, like fruitful gardens by the riverside. They are like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters." Numbers 24:5-6.

Mothers, I would affectionately admonish *you*. The godly character of your children depends, perhaps, under God, more upon *you*, than upon your husbands, for these obvious reasons; as a general principle it is true, that children are more tenderly attached to the mother than to the father, and there is a plastic power in your love to soften their heart and mold their character. And besides this, your children are a great deal more with you at that period of life, when the character is first and most permanently formed, than they are with the father. Millions have blessed God on earth, and will prolong the praise in heaven and through eternity, for a godly mother. **Mothers, next to ministers, have been the chief instruments of God, in building up the church!**

Think of the present privileges and future happiness of a godly household. Their dwelling has in it the ark of the covenant—*And the Lord will bless it, and all that pertain to it, because of the ark of the Lord*. Such a house stands near to heaven—on its lintel, and the posts of its doors, is the sprinkled blood of the slain Lamb; and when the destroying angels are abroad in the land, they see the life-insuring signal, and pass on. Angels of light, who minister to the heirs of salvation, encamp around the dwelling; and he who is the angels' Lord, the watchful Shepherd who never slumbers or sleeps, is there.

But follow that family to its last, its heavenly, its eternal home—in the mansions of glory—the "Father's house" above. Affliction had, sometimes, united it in a fellowship of tears upon earth, and death sent its members one after another to the silent abode of the grave; until, perhaps, one solitary mourner alone survived to tell the story of his

family, and to read in the memorials of the dead, the prophetic characters of his own approaching end. But even he, as he stood in solitude by the tomb of his kindred, uttered the triumph of faith, "*not lost—but gone before.*" And soon were his anticipations realized—he too died—and there they are, met on that happy shore which death never invades. Oh, thrice happy family! You have ascended from the domestic altar to the heavenly temple, and from the throne of **grace**—to the throne of **glory!** The cherubim and seraphim are around you—the spirits of just men made perfect are with you, and God overshadows you and fills you with all his fullness. For this you prayed and sought, and longed and waited. You have met in heaven—eternity is before you—you will never part—you will not go out forever!

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