

PRAYER AND PRACTICE

by John Angell James

I need not prove to you that **prayer**, as a *duty*, is essential to Christian conduct; and, as a *privilege*, is equally indispensable to Christian enjoyment. All consistent professors of religion give themselves to this devout exercise. They pray in the closet, at the family altar, and in the house of God. Their petitions are copious, comprehensive, and seemingly earnest. What solemn professions they make to God! What ardent desires they express! What numerous blessings they seek! What strong resolutions they form! Judging of ourselves by the prayers we pour forth in secret, or of each other by the utterances we hear when we meet with one accord to make our common supplication known, we may very properly say, "What manner of people ought we to be?" If we so pray—how ought we to live? What kind of people must we be—to be up to the standard of our prayers? And ought we not, in some measure at least, to reach this standard? Should there not be a harmony, a consistency, a proportion—between our **practice** and our **prayers**?

There are many rules and standards of our conduct, or rather the one rule and standard is presented in various aspects in the Scriptures. The moral law, demanding perfect love to God and man; the moral character of God as revealed in his word; the example of our Lord Jesus Christ; the principles drawn from the Bible, and implied in our profession of religion, are all so many declarations of what we ought to be, and to do. Looking at these, how we are struck with our shortcomings, and with what deep humiliation ought we to confess and mourn them! But I now direct you to another rule and standard, and that is—your *own prayers*. Do you indeed ACT as you pray? Do you understand the import, and feel the obligation of your own petitions? Do you rise from your knees where you have asked and knocked, to *seek*? Do you really want, wish for, and endeavor to obtain an answer to your prayers? Does God see, and do men see, that you are really intent upon doing, and being—what you ask for in prayer?

I need scarcely inform you, that the designs and uses of prayer are many, besides being a means of obtaining necessary blessings. It is intended to do homage to God as the Fountain of being and bliss; to express our dependence upon him; to be a solace to our own minds, and also to be a *means of personal improvement*. Our prayers are to act upon ourselves; they have, or ought to have, great power in the formation of character and the regulation of conduct. This is too much forgotten. The moral influence and pious obligation of prayer are too much left out of sight. **It is plain, therefore, that much of prayer is mere words**—we either do not **understand**, or do not **consider**, or do not **mean**, what we say. This is a solemn consideration; for if it is true, we play the hypocrite before God, and insult him by the offerings of feigned lips. Can we endure the thought? It is time to consider such a subject—I mean *the moral obligation of our own prayers*—and to institute a comparison between them and our practice.

Let us review our prayers under two heads—

I. Prayers which relate to OURSELVES. I can only make a selection of subjects, but a few will be sufficient. How fervently we sometimes pray for the salvation of our souls, as our one great business in life, adding also an entreaty that we may ever consider it as such. Well, do we make it so? Do we go from praying to acting—and to live for salvation, for heaven, for eternity? How common is it for professors to pray for victory over the world by faith; to be delivered from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; to be enabled to set their affections on things above, and not on things of the earth; and to be dead to seen and temporal things, through the life that is hid with Christ in God—and yet all the while they are as obviously eager to amass wealth, to multiply the attractions of earth, and to enjoy as much luxurious gratifications as possible.

Nothing is more frequent than petitions to **grow in grace**—but where is the diligent use of the means of growth; where the habit of constant and lengthened retirement for prayer, meditation, self-examination, and reading the Scriptures? Is it not as though they expected the

good seed of the kingdom to grow and thrive amidst thorns?

They pray for the **mortification of their corruptions**, and for their crucifixion with Christ; then of course they *ought* to have their eye fixed upon their heart, to watch against the least rising of sin; to repress the first movement, and crush a thought or feeling of iniquity. They *ought* to labor as they would do, to eradicate a vigorous and rapidly spreading weed in their garden; or to resist and heal a growing disease in their body. But do they? Is there all that effort after mortification—that weeping, wrestling, and ceaseless labor after the destruction of sin—which their prayers would lead us to expect?

They very frequently put up a prayer for **consistency in their profession**. This is a petition that is urged with all the appearance of sincerity and fervor, as if he who uttered it, and all who joined in it, were most anxious never to do the least thing, nor even to say a word, that would cause the enemies of religion to taunt professors with their inconsistency. And yet, perhaps, the very individual who had expressed, or the hearer who had joined in his earnest breathings after grace to be consistent, will, the next morning, by some dishonorable transaction in business, and, may be, in their dealings with some who were present the previous evening, do that which would disgrace a man of the world.

Spirituality of mind is the subject of innumerable prayers from some who never take a step to promote it—but, on the contrary, who are doing all they can to make them selves carnally minded! How many repeat that petition, "Lead us not into temptation," who, instead of most carefully keeping at the utmost possible distance from all inducements to sin, place themselves in the very way of it!

How often do they repeat that other petition in our Lord's prayer, "**Forgive** us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;" and yet how little do many feel disposed to pardon those who injure them, and how rarely do they from the heart forgive the trespasses of their neighbors! We should recollect that a person of a resentful and unforgiving temper shuts, by the use of such a prayer,

the ear of God against his cry for mercy, and moves the arm of Omnipotence for his destruction! For if he ask to be forgiven, only 'as he himself forgives', and he, at the same time, revenges, instead of pardoning the offence—what is this but petitioning for vengeance, instead of clemency?

Professors ask to have **the mind of Christ**, and to imitate the example of their Lord. But where is the assiduous endeavor, the laboring effort, to copy this high model, in its self-denying condescension, its profound humility, its beautiful meekness, its indifference to worldly comforts, its forgiving mercy, its devotedness to God?

How often do we pray to be delivered from **evil tempers** and irascible feelings; and yet we indulge them on every slight provocation, and take no pains to subdue them! But it is unnecessary to multiply the illustrations of the inconsistency between our prayers and our practice, in reference to our own individual concerns as Christians. Alas! alas! who must not blush and be ashamed for his hypocrisy before God? Who must not smite upon his bosom, for this his iniquity, and say in deep humiliation and contrition, "God be merciful to me a sinner?"

II. Prayers which relate to OTHERS. We pray for the conversion of our children. What fervent petitions are breathed out for them! Well, and how are these prayers followed up? By the serious, regular, and devout maintenance of family prayer? By clear instruction, affectionate counsels, faithful warning, and above all, a consistent exhibition of the beauties of holiness in ourselves? Do our children see in us, and hear from us, all that can recommend true religion, and that is calculated to win them to piety? Or, on the contrary, do they not place our conduct and our prayers in contrast, and think, if they do not say, that it is a pity their father does not act more as he prays?

All consistent members of a Christian church of any denomination, pray for its prosperity—but is it enough to say, "Peace be within your walls, and prosperity within your palaces. For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within you?" This should be followed up with a

peaceful, judicious, and unwearied effort to promote the good of the church. But is it?

The minister is the constant theme of supplication; his health, comfort, and usefulness, are the topics of seemingly beseeching entreaty. It would appear as if everyone were his helper, comforter, and fellow-laborer. A stranger would imagine that he had none around him, but such as were laying themselves out to promote his happiness; and his usefulness. What conduct it should be to comport with such prayers! What active men these praying men should be! How concerned might it be expected, they would be—never to grieve his heart by unkindness, never to hinder his usefulness by neglecting, much less refusing, anything by which it could be promoted! And yet is it not too true to be denied, that these prayers have, in some instances, been the cover of the greatest indifference, and even of the most active unkindness?

Professors pray for the aboundings of brotherly love, and the undisturbed peace of the church. How fervent are their expressed longings after the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace; and their entreaties that no root of bitterness may spring up to trouble the brethren, and thereby many be defiled! Now such prayers bind them, of course, to follow after the things that make for peace; to abstain from every action, every expression, and every look that would prevent or disturb it; and so to behave themselves as to unite the hearts of the brethren more closely together. To pray for love, and to nourish enmity; to pray for peace, and to promote faction; to pray for union, and to encourage division—is gross hypocrisy. Everyone who prays for charity should exemplify it; and he who invokes the spirit of concord upon a community, should be the first to open his heart for its reception. It is most affecting to observe how little some professors seem to be bound by their own prayers in this particular. It would appear, as if they thought that their petitions for love and peace were designed for others, but not for themselves; as if while they prayed that others might be the friends and promoters of charity, they had a license to indulge in wrath, malice, and uncharitableness. It is quite time that the different sections of the universal church began to think of their prayers, as well as of their

arguments; and to remember how much they *pray*, and how little they *do*, for peace; how much they invoke the descent of the celestial, dove-like Spirit, and how much they do to grieve, and drive him away, by their uncharitable conduct.

But I come now to another instance of disagreement between prayer and practice; and that is seen in the petitions presented for the revival of religion. Who does not often ask for this; for a spirit of more fervent, glowing, self-denying, and consistent piety, to spread over the church of God, and for more numerous conversions of impenitent sinners? We continually hear this petition ascend from the lips of our brethren, "Lord, revive your work in the midst of us;" and it might be looked for that it would be attended with corresponding efforts to obtain the blessing that we thus seek. Yet many pray for revivals of piety, who take no steps to promote them. Do they begin with themselves, and endeavor that *their own* religion may be revived? Do they remember that the quickening of the whole consists of the quickening of the parts of which it is composed, and that it is obligatory upon them to seek that it should begin with *themselves*? And to gain the answer of such prayers, they ought also to bestir themselves for the conversion of others. A revival can be expected only in the way of *general* activity—it must not be left wholly to ministers—there is something for everybody to do; and if in this way, and in this case, doing be not added to praying, the latter savors much of hypocrisy, or of unmeaning words. To pray for the conversion of souls, and do nothing by direct efforts to achieve it, is shocking inconsistency.

Then think, my dear friends, what frequent and abundant prayer there is for the outpouring of the Spirit upon all flesh, and the conversion of the world to Christ. I do not mean to say that we yet pray enough, but I *do* mean to say, that we pray more than we act. Our prayers, I know, are far behind our obligations, but I equally know that our exertions are far behind our petitions. It is recorded somewhere, that a minister who was collecting money for a public religious object in some town in America, upon asking an individual for an introduction to some of his neighbors, received from him the name of one, with this remark—"If you were to hear that man pray for the conversion of the world, you would

imagine, from his fervor and copiousness, that he was ready to give all his fortune for accomplishing the object of his desire; and yet when called upon for his benefaction, he doles out but the merest pittance of property." The minister called on this inconsistent professor, laid his case before him, and after much entreaty, received a dollar or two for its support, a sum very far below the importance of the cause, or his means and obligations to support it. Upon this the applicant told him what he had heard about the fervor of his prayers, and, after contrasting them with the scantiness of his beneficence, expostulated faithfully with him on the gross inconstancy of his conduct. He saw, at once, the impropriety of his behavior, confessed that it had never occurred to him before, and immediately and considerably enlarged his liberality. Is not this a common case, except in its results?

Is there not often the same contrast still to be seen, of men generous and abundant in prayer, and at the same time niggardly and grudging in their contributions? They *pray* as if they really wished and wanted the world to be converted, but they *give* as if they would rather it remained as it is. But who can wonder that this is the case among laymen, if the example is set them by the preachers of the word, and by those who lead the devotions of the assembly? The minister prays, every sabbath, for the conversion of the world; what then, if he is a rich man, or approaching to it, ought to be his liberality? *His* prayers are very abundant; so ought to be his liberality. If covetousness is exhibited in the pulpit, who can wonder that it should find its way into the pew? But whether we are ministers or laymen, we are placed under solemn obligations, that is, if we would be consistent, to an abounding beneficence by our very intercessions—for to plead with God for the salvation of the heathen abroad, or for the conversion of souls at home, as if it were the object which lies closest to our heart, and for which we are ready to give up all we are, and all we have; and then to calculate, and scheme, how little we can give; then to avail ourselves of every sordid plea, and every plausible excuse, to keep our money in our pockets, is an odious exhibition of disgusting insincerity. It may be that this matter has not hitherto occurred to some who shall read this tract; but it can now no longer escape their observation, and they will see the

necessity, from henceforth, of curtailing their prayers, or enlarging their contributions—it remains for them to say which side of the alternative they will take.

Thus, my dear brethren, you perceive that the sincerity of a professor of religion is tested by his prayers; and it must be so, and ought to be so, if those prayers are to be considered anything more than mere unmeaning forms, or the offerings of feigned lips—for God answers our supplications not by miracle, or by interpositions of his providence, which leave us nothing to do but to stand still and see the salvation of God, but by engaging and blessing our own instrumentality. Prayer is not a substitute for human action, but the connecting link between our doings, and God's blessing. If we pray for temporal success, comfort, or health, we must, and we do use the means; if for pardon, we must repent and believe; if for sanctification, we must watch and resist temptation; and if for the conversion of others, we must use the appropriate means, that *is*, we must make direct effort and give our property. We are commanded to *seek*, as well as to *ask*, and in all those cases where anything can be done, and ought to be done, by us, to neglect to do it, and to content ourselves with petitioning God, however numerous or fervent our requests may be, will receive from him no other answer than that which he gave to Joshua, when he said, "Get up! Why do you lie on your face this way?"

Praying is a very solemn engagement, and should not be so trifled with; but it is awfully trifled with, when it is treated as if it imposed no obligation upon us in reference to the objects for which it is presented. God has said he will be sanctified in all those who draw near to him; but is *this* to sanctify him, to offer prayers which we do not wish or mean should be answered? Is this to serve him with reverence and godly fear, and remembering that he is a consuming fire—to importune him for an object, and from that moment *care* nothing about it, and *do* nothing to obtain it? How indignantly did he reproach the Jews for their feigned devotions, where he said, "This people draws near unto me with their mouth, and honors me with their lips; but their heart is far from me!" "So My people come to you in crowds, sit in front of you, and hear your words, but they don't obey

them. Although they express love with their mouths, their hearts pursue unjust gain. Yes, to them you are like a singer of love songs who has a beautiful voice and plays skillfully on an instrument. They hear your words, but they don't obey them." (Ezekiel 33:31-32)

Bear, then, in constant and practical recollection, that prayer is a solemn and a holy thing, the effect of true piety, and intended and designed, when properly performed, to increase its own cause. We should be the better, not only *through* our prayers, as a means of obtaining blessings from God, but *by* them, on account of their own influence upon ourselves. Even in this view there is no ground for the question and cavil of wicked men, "What *profit* would we have if we pray to him?" It is profitable, when sincere, not only by the external advantages which it brings, but by the internal power which it exerts. Every part of prayer has a salutary tendency. Prayer improves the character, as well as comforts the heart. Prayer exerts a counteracting influence on whatever tends to injure the soul, and a beneficial effect on all that is calculated to do it good.

Prayer is **adoration**; and what is so adapted to produce profound and habitual veneration for God, as the contemplation and praise of his infinitely glorious perfections? Prayer is **confession** of sin; and when is sin more apt to melt the heart into the soft relentings of godly contrition, than when carefully recounted to Him against whom it has been all committed, with a spirit awed into reverence and submission by the pure majesty of the Divine presence? Prayer is **supplication** for blessings needed; and what a sense of dependence, what a feeling of want, what a confidence in God for supplies, is this exercise likely to produce? Prayer is **intercession** for others; and how does it nourish all the feelings of kindness, pity, benevolence, and universal charity! Prayer is usually attended with **thanksgiving** for mercies received, and its breath fans the spark of gratitude, until it is kindled into a flame of pure and ardent love. Prayer resists the influence of the **world**, raises the soul out of the region of temporal things, and places it within sight and attraction of unseen and eternal things. Prayer gives efficiency to all the other means of grace; and thus is continually, by its own tendency and power,

producing a favorable influence upon our character and conduct. Let us, then, beware of insincerity in our prayers and in all other matters; for it is very obvious that there is among professors of religion, who are not really hypocrites in gross, too much of petty hypocrisy in the details of their profession.

This is a serious charge, and ought not to be hastily, much less falsely, made; but is it not too true to be denied, and too obvious to be concealed? We are none of us, perhaps, sufficiently impressed with the solemn obligation to be careful in the use of our tongues, to weigh our words before we utter them, so as to speak nothing which we do not mean in the very import that will be conveyed by them to the hearer—and to remember them, after they have gone from our lips, so as to feel the bond they impose upon our conduct and our conscience. Speech, next to reason, is man's highest glory and distinction, and even reason, without speech, could be of little service—how tremblingly anxious, then, shall we be, never to make our talking powers the vehicle of deceit, the veil of hypocrisy, or the medium of unmeaning compliment. To be insincere in our talk with our fellow-creatures; to ask for favors we do not care to obtain; to solicit an interchange of offices we do not covet; to utter compliments we do not mean; to acknowledge obligations we do not feel; to lavish praises which we know are ill-deserved; to appear anxious for friendship which we do not want—is a lamentable and criminal inconsistency, which is but too common among professors.

But how much more guilty is all this unmeaning prattle when addressed to the holy and heart-searching God! Hence the admonition of the apostle, "Let every man be slow to speak," and the still more impressive exhortation of the wisest of men, "Guard your step when you go to the house of God. Better to draw near in obedience than to offer the sacrifice as fools do, for they are ignorant and do wrong. Do not be hasty to speak, and do not be impulsive to make a speech before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. For dreams result from much work and a fool's voice from many words. When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because He does not delight

in fools. Fulfill what you vow. Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth bring guilt on you, and do not say in the presence of the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry with your words and destroy the work of your hands? For many dreams bring futility, also many words. So, fear God." (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

Among the many confessions of our sins, and supplications for pardoning mercy, which we are, or ought to be, continually laying before the footstool of God's throne of grace, the following should have a place—"Lord, forgive our misuse of the faculty of speech; pardon our unmeaning, insincere, and deceptive language towards our fellow-creatures, even where it is not our actual intention to lie; and especially *forgive our unmeaning prayers*, and our insincere devotions; which though they be not the offspring of designing hypocrisy, are the effusions of ignorance, carelessness, and formalism."

Therefore, dear brethren, not only give yourselves to prayer, but yield yourselves up to the power, direction, and control of your own devotions. Do not, from anything I have said, be induced to pray less, but to *do* more. Do not lower the standard of your prayers—but elevate the standard of your practice. What you have to do is to be men and women of prayer, and then to let your character be cast in the mold of your prayers. We all see things most clearly, and feel them most impressively, when we are prostrate before the throne of God, and in his presence let us realize his presence everywhere, and at all times; then shall we be likely to be the same people in action, as we are in devotion, and glorify our Father in heaven, not only by what we say to him—but by what we do for him.

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