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The Place of Prayer in the Sanctification of Christian Life

By JAMES G. MANZ

PRAYER, in and by itself, makes no one holy. It is only the person who is already holy in Christ who truly prays. One's whole conception of Christianity can be perverted if one begins to speak about prayer without first relating it to the Word of the Gospel. A word of warning from Luther is in place as we begin to consider the subject of this paper:

But I would counsel you, if you wish to pray, fast, or establish some foundation in the Church, take heed not to do it in order to obtain some benefit, whether temporal or eternal. For you would do injury to your faith, which alone offers you all things. Your care should be that faith may increase, whether it be trained by works or by suffering.¹

In this brief study on prayer the author limited himself to a discussion of the place of prayer in the Christian's sanctification, more specifically his ethical development.

I

WHAT WE MEAN BY PRAYER

It is universally admitted among Christians that prayer is one of the works of a believer which is of fundamental importance to growth in holiness. The correct way to formulate a theologically adequate definition of the nature of prayer is to consider it, first of all, as a work of God in His redeemed child. In understanding the essence of Christian prayer the story of the conversion of St. Paul is most helpful. The accounts of Paul's conversion show that when Christ spoke to Paul we have a man fundamentally different from the pious Jew who was "zealous toward God." First the risen Christ spoke to Paul at his conversion, and then we see, for the first time, one who actually speaks to God in prayer, Acts 9:11. "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying: Abba, Father," Gal. 4:6.

Prayer is not a blind groping for God in which man "speaks" to Him. Nor is it the bold, imposing prayer of the mystic, who presumes to come directly into the presence of His Creator with no pleading of the merits of Christ. Prayer must be viewed as the believer's response to the Gospel of Christ, the message of the love of the Triune God. Prayer is a great power in Christian life merely by virtue of the great truth that the One to whom our prayers are offered is the One who evoked our prayer, in the first place, when He called us by the Gospel.

The best approach to the Christian consideration of prayer is to begin with Him who alone makes true invocation possible.

We are reminded of the words of St. Paul: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words," Rom. 8:26 (R. S. V.). Paul expresses a similar thought later in the same chapter when he says: "It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us," Rom. 8:34 (R. S. V.). Likewise the intercession of Christ is taught clearly in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where we are told that He "is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them," Heb. 7:25 (R. V. S.).

When we thus consider the nature of Christian prayer, and speak of the intercession of the Holy Spirit and Christ, we are face to face with a mystery and are standing on holy ground. It is not within the province of any human being to say just exactly how God works in His children when they pray. It should be evident that when a Christian prays there is a directness of contact with God, whose sanctifying powers are beyond our powers of explaining or grasping.

It was undoubtedly this high concept of prayer as God's work that moved Aulen to number prayer with the Word and Sacrament as a "means of grace."² Prayer, however, is not a means of grace, even when we recognize that true prayer is the Lord's own work. It is the Word alone which awakens and nourishes prayer. God's Word to us comes before our word to Him. Prayer, on its highest level, indeed is the "groaning of the Spirit" within us, Rom. 8:26,

but it is the Word that *first* brings the divine Spirit to a man. Thus, Koeberle rightly insists that Bible reading should precede and accompany prayer, since it is the Word alone that justifies prayer and gives life and clarity.³

We are in God's presence in a very special sense when we pray. Frequent contact with the Lord in true prayer has ever resulted in the sanctification of life among God's children. Additional proof of the fact that one who truly prays stands in the presence of God is given by the many Bible verses which make it clear that no one can live a life of sin and engage in real prayer at the same time.⁴

The words of Nygren regarding Luther's ethics apply to what we have to say of prayer as a primary factor in the ethical development of the Christian man:

The starting point for his ethics, we remember, is not what man is able to offer God, but what God does for man.⁵

II

HOW PRAYER HELPS TO CLARIFY ETHICAL ISSUES

Koeberle states:

Every ethics is confronted by a double problem: the question of the content and that of the energy of moral action. There is the material problem: What shall we do? And there is the formal problem: How are the obligations that we recognize to be realized? ⁶

This statement of the ethical task seems to be especially helpful in considering the specific place of prayer as a factor in man's sanctification. Prayer as a major factor in Christian sanctification helps the believer to solve both of these problems: it clarifies his ethical questions, and it strengthens him for his tasks.

The first ethical question facing any man is that concerning his own nature and position in the universe. A Christian knows that the only right answers to these questions are given in the Bible.

The answers to the problems of life are not always given, however, when one has correctly quoted the Bible or the Catechism. Indeed, if the question has been rightly grasped and the appropriate answer given, the intellectual solution has been found. But our lives are lived in settings far removed from the church, the con-

firmation classroom, and our own prayer chambers. We are sometimes hurried and rushed, and the best-informed Christian can easily lose his balance.

Every Christian thus has the problem of clearly seeing himself in relationship to God and His will. Prayer is of great importance in helping a Christian to see his true position and to keep his balance. Einar Billing speaks beautifully concerning prayer as such a factor in life when he deals with the Lord's Prayer in his little book *Our Calling*. Anyone who truly prays for daily bread is given divine help in seeing his real place in life:

Day by day we have to discover the daily task, out of the faith in forgiveness of sins. To find our work one day at a time is in accord with the Savior's own directions. He taught us to pray for daily bread — daily — and for the forgiveness of sins. Even more pointed, He said, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. 6:34). I am convinced that we do well to take these words literally.⁷

Thus, the Lord's Prayer "is the finest document we possess on the teaching of the call."⁸ The Christian who in all humility and faith truly prays it knows his duty much more clearly than would be possible if he did not pray the Our Father.

If prayer is of basic importance in helping the Christian see his relationship to God and his place in the universe, it is just as helpful in enabling him to understand himself. One who truly prays knows himself as he could not possibly know himself if he did not pray. Above all, the true Christian through his practice of prayer gains a deeper knowledge of himself as a sinner.

Prayer is directly related to the conscience of the Christian. When we thus speak of the relationship of prayer to moral insight, we see that the conscience is not a dead, static, lifeless, purely intellectual factor present in the mind and heart. The conscience as a living voice is capable of change, growth, and refinement as Christian life progresses, just as it may gradually wither, weaken, and become almost insensible to all of its God-given possibilities if one lives a faithless, prayerless life.

Prayer arouses the conscience, refines its perceptions, guides and illuminates the understanding and strengthens the will in its con-

flict with sin. By nature man is a chaos of wild desires and opposing wishes unless they are united, as though bound together by a ring, purified and ordered through prayer.⁹

A psychological study of Christian prayer would doubtless be able to make much of the fact that true Biblical prayer is largely petitionary. Heiler goes to great lengths to show that prophetic and Biblical prayer is petitionary, in contrast to the prayer of absorption of the mystic.¹⁰ The Lord's Prayer is composed of petitions. The relationship of this interesting fact to the sanctifying aspect of Christian prayer is not nearly as remote as it may seem to be. When one constantly asks favors of God, the implication, not only of dependence and weakness, but of the necessity of obedience, is present, consciously or unconsciously. One who prays frequently, then, is constantly reminded of the fact that it is his duty to obey the One to whom he prays.

The most common and "unspiritual" requests of the believer, therefore, can be a powerful factor in his growth in grace. It would be hard to find an instance which shows more clearly the close relation between the "physical" and the "spiritual," and the fact that the needs of our body are most closely related to the needs of our soul. "For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer," 1 Tim. 4:4-5.

Prayer which is offered by one who truly repents and believes can be a major factor in promoting clarity of understanding and rightness of judgment in all moral matters. But when prayer is offered by one who does not come to God through Christ, then this corrective and balancing function of prayer is completely lost. Indeed, false ideas of prayer promote an understanding of God and of life that is wrong in the fullest sense. When prayer, apart from faith, is considered a good work in itself, then the one who so understands prayer is given a completely false view of God, the world, and his own place in it. It is the work-righteous and ego-centric concept of prayer that elevates the praying man or woman in monastery or convent above the father in the field or factory, or the mother in the home. When we consider how firmly fixed such ideas are in large areas of Christendom, we see that prayer, in and

by itself, will not give one a true perspective according to the Biblical point of view.

Just as Bible reading apart from prayer and meditation becomes a merely intellectual exercise, so also prayer and meditation become sentimental or fanatical unless they are closely connected with the Bible. Indeed, all religious exercises may easily become perverted, in the sense that the exercise itself may come to be regarded as a good work.¹¹

The prayer that springs from faith created by the Word fosters the development of moral insight. He who truly prays learns to know himself and his relation to the universe and his fellow man.

III

PRAYER AND THE ENERGY FOR MORAL ACTION

Prayer does more than help a Christian see and accept his position given by God. It does more than help one to see duty in any given case that he is facing. Prayer strengthens the believer, inasmuch as through its practice he develops special graces and abilities that he needs in order to face situations as a Christian and overcome his own special temptations. Our task is now to examine just how God so uses prayer in the lives of His people.

God is truly working in the life of His child who prays. Prayer as an act of Christian sanctification, in this respect, is much different from those other forms of sanctification which consist simply in fleeing, avoiding, and denying. Most of the Ten Commandments are stated in the form of negatives — "Thou shalt not." One who simply, for the love of Christ, flees the world and its temptations will surely develop strength and grow in grace. There are certain temptations that can be faced in a God-pleasing way only when the believer avoids them. Yet while there are some things a Christian dare not do, there are others that he *must* do. Obedience in either area results in growth in grace. One who avoids excessive use of liquor and occasions for sin against the Sixth Commandment, and one who simply prays, is each acting as a Christian. Indeed, a true believer practices both forms of good conduct and obeys both the command "Thou shalt not" and the command "Thou shalt." The strength developed by one who prays is, however, supplementary and essential to the type of strength developed

through flight from temptation and is in some respects easier and more attractive to the Christian.

Prayer is an existing, positive, living activity and force in the life of a believer. One who prays is strengthening his ties of fellowship with Christ in a most personal and vital manner, for he is not only preserving union with Him by avoiding sin, nor is he only looking forward to the final Consummation — he is doing something which is most natural for the Christian right now! The youngest or weakest Christian can engage in the practice of prayer as well as the most mature saint. For either type it is a phase of the Christian life that is essential for healthy living.

Prayer from this point of view, as a good deed with moral significance, is a beautiful example of the practice of Christian ethics. If Christian ethics in the highest sense be "reconciliation" ethics — that is, if the believer does good because he is in union with Christ, and not in order to obey the Law — then spontaneous, joyful prayer is a good example of a truly Christian deed.

The Christian's action is action in the spirit and the fact of the *agape*-relation. He who lives in this relation is in the kingdom of God, and he who is in the kingdom of God does live in this relation. The quality of the action is regulated, not by law or rule, but by the fact that the regenerated person has become a participant in a new relationship. "That mind which was also in Christ Jesus" is the spirit of the fellowship, and Christ is, in the most literal and present sense, the central person in that *koinonia*. All who are within it are of one mind, and that not because it is required of them, but because the fellowship and that mind are one indivisible fact.¹²

God Himself is the final Judge as to the relative value and meaning of the good qualities which develop in His children. Moral improvement which takes place because of the practice of Christian prayer is surely of primary importance and significance, however, inasmuch as it is brought about by the Gospel, and is only in a secondary and inferior sense dependent upon the Law.

There is, therefore, a transforming power which God develops in one who prays which is an essential part of Christian sanctification. We find in St. Paul both the negative aspect of sanctification and the positive aspect as manifested in prayer, of which we speak.

To Timothy he says: "Flee also youthful lusts," 2 Tim. 2:22. And to the Thessalonian Christians he writes: "Pray without ceasing," 1 Thess. 5:17. Failures in Christian growth are doubtless due in some cases to neglect of the warnings and in others to neglect simply to pray! It is significant that Paul's warning admonition to young Timothy is followed by the positive injunction: "But follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart," 2 Tim. 2:22. Those who do so call on the Lord will know things about Christian living and will possess secrets of Christian strength that the slothful in prayer will never know.

In the life of the most joyful, prayerful Christian, however, the problem of his will in opposition to the will of God is bound to arise. Here we have the real crux of the problem of energy for moral action. What does the Christian do when he is faced with the urgings of his will which are contrary to the known and accepted will of God? He surely thinks of his Lord, who in Gethsemane prayed: "O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt," Matt. 26:39. Here is the answer, for the will of the Lord must prevail. Yet Christ, as the Divine Son, has resources of divine power which are not available to those who are God's children only by virtue of faith. Where does a human find the strength to accept the verdict? Here is the real problem. The full solution is beyond the scope and ability of the writer of this paper, but even a brief examination of the matter should help to explain some things about the nature of moral strength that is developed in prayer.

The real issue and situation should be clear if we consider just what we mean when we speak of the will of God. We must know what God's will really is. The question of God's will and the possibility of its change in prayer should be clear when we consider His will in a triple aspect:

1. His will in its essence. Obviously, this cannot be changed. "Who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counselor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto Him again?" Rom. 11:34-35. The Apostle also tells us that God "only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see,"

1 Tim. 6:16. God is in heaven, and man on earth cannot change Him. This is His "hidden will."

2. His will as we know it from the Holy Scriptures. This is His "revealed will." In the Gospel we learn that God loves us and all men, that He sent Christ to die for the sins of the world, and that He wills the salvation of all. "Who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth," 1 Tim. 2:4.

3. His "will" as it manifests itself from time to time in our personal life or as it seems to be evident to us. The problem of the "will" of the Lord in all matters of Christian living is not an easy one. We know the will of the Lord in the matter of salvation, but we do not know His "will" in the other, "earthly" matters of our life.

The important thing for us, however, is not any metaphysical discussion of what happens to the will of God in prayer. We must consider what happens to the human will when one truly prays.

Scripture and Christian history give many instances in which the will of human beings has been changed after God had revealed His will in answer to prayer. St. Paul's instance of his acceptance of physical affliction is probably the classical example: "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me: My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me," 2 Cor. 12:8-9. A change in viewpoint from anxious concern for the removal of the "thorn in the flesh" to a willingness to "glory in my infirmities" surely involved a change in the will far greater than most humans are able to make!

The difference between Paul's experience and ours is that he really knew God's will in this matter. God Himself, in some supernatural way, brought him the message. Paul could resign himself to the Lord's will because he was sure of it. There are instances in which Christians may be in doubt. It is then that the will, even of a true believer, may really be in conflict with the will of God. The knowledge of the Lord's will in any given instance involving temporal welfare, and the acceptance of His will, is something that often has to be worked out over the course of many prayerful years.

But a faithful believer will find, after years of prayer, that he is willing to accept God's verdict when it finally becomes known.

There comes the time when "Thy will be done" involves acceptance of some trouble, limitation, or evil in the life situation of the believer. When this finally becomes manifest, as in the case of incurable illness or the death of a loved one, the believer accepts God's will as he now knows it to be for his earthly life, and looks forward to the complete triumph of His will of love in eternity. Prayer is essential for anyone who so accepts His will in such an instance.

"Thy will be done," correctly understood, can also incite weak and imperfect Christians to overcome limitations in their persons and lives that have been imposed because of selfishness, laziness, or any other human weakness. Surely no pastor of limited Christian insight will want to go through his life with a restricted point of view and justify lack of growth on the score that he has limitations imposed by God. "Thy will be done" surely does not mean that each of us should remain as he is. In the very act of praying for vision, light, and grace the Christian will grow in strength and ability.

The purpose of prayer is not to effect a change in the divine will, but that the will of God *shall be done*. . . . Since God is love, all prayer must be characterized by the desire to realize in unabridged measure this loving will.¹³

The simple fact is that those men in the history of the Church who have been fervent in the practice of prayer have been those who have been strongest in the doing of the Lord's work. Luther's beautiful words near the conclusion of his introduction to the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism,¹⁴ where he speaks of the essential office of prayer in the success of the Reformation, and the lifework of a man like George Mueller of Bristol, England,¹⁵ who ascribed so much of the success of his work to the power of prayer, are only two instances in which outstanding Christians pay tribute to the power of prayer. Christian experience proves that through prayer supernatural power is generated in the lives of believers, great and simple alike. Those who have done great things for God have been men of prayer. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," James 5:16.

IV

THE ANSWER OF PRAYER

This brief study can best be summarized and concluded with a consideration of the question: "Does God Answer Prayer?"

A Christian would not think of doubting or denying the truth that God answers prayer. Christian thinking on the subject, however, both on the theological level and in the simple, everyday lives of believers, varies greatly and does not seem to always give similar answers to questions that can be raised.

There are those who confine the effects and answer to prayer solely to the change that it works in the one who prays. Dionysius the Areopagite, who did so much to promote mystical, Neo-Platonic thinking in the Church, gives a classical statement of this limited view of answer to prayer:

Let us then press on in prayer, looking upwards to the Divine benignant Rays, even as if a resplendent cord were hanging from the height of heaven unto this world below, and we, by seizing it with alternate hands in one advance, appeared to pull it down; but in very truth instead of drawing down the rope (the same being already nigh us above and below), we were ourselves being drawn upwards to the higher Refulgence of the resplendent Rays. Or even as, having embarked on a ship and clinging to the cables, the which being stretched out from some rock unto us, presented themselves (as it were) for us to lay hold upon them, we should not be drawing the rock towards ourselves, but should, in very truth, be drawing ourselves and the vessel towards the rock; and also, conversely, if any one standing upon the vessel pushes away the rock that is on the shore, he will not affect the rock (which stands immovable), but will separate himself therefrom, and the more he pushes it so much the more will he be staving himself away. Hence, before every endeavor, more especially if the subject be Divinity, must we begin with prayer, not as though we would pull down to ourselves that Power which is nigh both everywhere and nowhere, but that, by these remembrances and invocations of God we may commend and unite ourselves Thereunto.¹⁶

This naturalistic view of the effect of prayer would probably be accepted by any theist, Christian or non-Christian. No one will

deny the fact that it contains an element of truth and that auto-suggestion during prayer, and change wrought on himself by the one who prays, are an important aspect of the "answer." If one speaks of non-Christian prayer, one must admit that any "sanctification," so wrought, is the work of a human being. However, the matter becomes quite a different thing when one speaks of "self-improvement" wrought in the believer who prays. Any change wrought in the Christian who prays is a work of God and an answer to prayer, inasmuch as God Himself evoked the prayer through the Word of the Gospel. God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, enables the believer to persist in prayer, since he is "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time," 1 Peter 1:5. It is also most important to remember that the faith of a Christian is, after all, not in the act of prayer itself, but faith in our crucified Lord, who died for us and taught us to pray to the Father in His name.

The Christian is never satisfied, therefore, with any theological explanation that limits the answer to prayer merely to effects wrought in the life of one who prays. The answer to prayer is something that, finally, rests in the hands of God, with whom all things are possible.

Something else must be said before we conclude our consideration of God's answer to prayer, as this is seen in the prayer for sanctification. God has given special promises to answer the prayers of His children for holiness and the Holy Spirit. We have His promise to give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him, Luke 11:13; the assurance that "unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ," Eph. 4:7. Paul assures us that "this is the will of God, even your sanctification," 1 Thess. 4:3. The problem of the will of God, as opposed to the will of man, does not arise when we consider the necessity and desirability of the factor of holiness in human life. We know that this is the will of the Lord for us.

We, therefore, end this paper at the point where we started: we who pray stand in the presence of God, to whom we have been brought by the Gospel. We speak to Him at His gracious invitation. We have His Word and promise that He grants the Holy

Spirit and the needed grace in the life of His children. "Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer," 1 Tim. 4:4-5.

Chicago, Ill.

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty* (Philadelphia, A. J. Holman Co., Vol. II, 1915), p. 342.
2. Gustaf Aulen, *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia, 1948), page 401.
3. Adolf Koeberle, *The Quest for Holiness* (New York, 1936), pp. 176—177.
4. Cf. Is. 1:15; Micah 3:4; Ps. 66:18; Matt. 6:5-15; Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer.
5. Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 439.
6. Koeberle, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
7. Einar Billing, *Our Calling* (Rock Island, 1947), p. 27.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
9. Koeberle, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
10. Cf. Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer* (London, 1932), p. 242.
11. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (New York, 1942), p. 314.
12. C. C. Rasmussen, in his article "The Lutheran View of Christian Ethics" in *What Lutherans are Thinking* (Columbus, 1947), p. 446.
13. Aulen, *op. cit.*, p. 403.
14. *Concordia Triglotta*, 707.
15. See Chapter V, p. 70, in *The Fundamentals*, Testimony Publishing Co. (Chicago).
16. Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, Translated by C. E. Rolt in "Translations of Christian Literature, Series I," Greek Texts, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (London, 1920), pp. 81—83.