

Charles G. Finney:

"Ask, and it shall be given you." Matt. 7:7, 8.

"Ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, to consume it upon your lusts." James 4:3.

I will commence the present discourse by briefly recapitulating the prefatory remarks which I made in my first sermon on this subject. I then observed,

1. That all real prayer is heard and answered.
2. Prayer is not always answered according to the letter of it, but often only according to its spirit. As an instance of this, I spoke of the striking case recorded respecting Paul's thorn in the flesh.
3. None can be saved who are not in a state of mind to prevail in prayer.
4. Many things are really answers to prayer which are not recognized by the suppliant as such nor by those who witness the prayer, the blessing bestowed, or the thing done in connection with it.
5. Much that is called prayer is not really prayer at all.
6. Many neither care nor expect to be heard, and therefore do not watch to see whether their prayers are answered. They pray merely as a duty; their heart being set on doing the duty and appeasing their consciences, and not on obtaining the blessing nominally asked for.
7. Nor do such persons feel disappointed if they fail of obtaining what they profess to ask for in prayer.
8. They do not trouble themselves to enquire why they are not answered. If they can only discharge their duty and appease their consciences, they have their desire.
9. Failure to obtain the blessing sought is always because the revealed conditions are not fulfilled.
10. Nothing is more important for us than to attend to, and understand the revealed conditions of prevailing prayer.
11. God may answer the mere cry of distress when benevolence does not forbid it. He often does hear the sailor in the storm--the young ravens in their hunger; but this is a very different thing from that prayer which God has pledged himself by promise to hear and answer on the fulfilment of certain conditions.

This brings us to a consideration of the conditions of prevailing prayer.

1. The first condition is, a state of mind in which you would offer the Lord's prayer sincerely and acceptably.

Christ at their request taught his disciples how to pray. In doing so, He gave them an epitome of the appropriate subjects of prayer, and also threw a most important light upon the spirit with which all prayer should be offered. This form is exceedingly comprehensive. Every word is full of meaning. It would seem very obvious however that our Lord did not intend here to specify all the particular things we may pray for, but only to group together some of the great heads of subjects which are appropriate to be sought of God in prayer, and also to show us with what temper and spirit we should come before the Lord.

This is evidently not designed as a mere form, to be used always and without variation. It cannot be that Christ intended we should evermore use these words in prayer and no other words; for he never again used these precise words himself--so far as we know from the sacred record--but did often use other and very different words, as the scriptures abundantly testify.

But this form answers a most admirable purpose if we understand it to be given us to teach us these two most important things, namely, what sort of blessings we may pray for, and in what spirit we should pray for them.

Most surely, then, we cannot hope to pray acceptably unless we can offer this prayer in its real spirit--our own

hearts deeply sympathizing with the spirit of this prayer. If we cannot pray the Lord's prayer sincerely, we cannot offer any acceptable prayer at all.

Hence it becomes us to examine carefully the words of this recorded form of prayer. Yet, be it remembered, it is not these words, as mere words, that God regards, or that we should value. Words themselves, apart from their meaning, and from their meaning as used by us, would neither please nor displease God.--He looks on the heart.

Let us now refer to the Lord's prayer, and to the connection in which it stands.

"When ye pray," says our Lord, "use not vain repetitions as the heathen do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

Hence there is no need that you continue to clamor unceasingly, "O Baal, hear us; O Baal, hear us." Those were indeed vain repetitions--just such as the heathen use. It is a most singular fact that the Roman Catholic church has fallen into the practice here condemned. Like the priests of Baal, in Elijah's time, they demand and practise everlasting repetitions of the same words, numbering their repetitions of Pater Nosters and Ave Marias by their beads, and estimating the merit of praying by the quantity and not the quality of their prayers. The more repetitions, the greater the value. This principle, and the practice founded upon it, our Saviour most pointedly condemns.

So, many persons, not Roman Catholics or heathen, seem to lay much more stress upon the amount of prayer than upon its character and quality. They think if there can only be prayer enough, that is, repetitions enough of the same or similar words, the prayer will be certainly effective, and prevalent with God.--No mistake can be greater. The entire word of God rebukes this view of the subject in the most pointed manner.

Yet be it well considered, the precept, "Use not vain repetitions," should by no means be construed to discourage the utmost perseverance and fervency of spirit in prayer. The passage does not forbid our renewing our requests from great earnestness of spirit. Our Lord himself did this in the garden, repeating his supplication "in the same words." Vain repetitions are what is forbidden;--not repetitions which gush from a burdened spirit.

This form of prayer invites us, first of all to address the great God as "Our Father who art in heaven." This authorizes us to come as children and address the Most High, feeling that He is a Father to us.

The first petition follows--"Hallowed be thy name." What is the exact idea of this language? To hallow is to sanctify; to deem and render sacred.

There is a passage in Peter's Epistle which may throw light on this.

He says, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." The meaning seems plainly to be this;--Set apart the Lord God in your hearts as the only true object of supreme, eternal adoration, worship, and praise. Place Him alone on the throne of your hearts. Let Him be the only hallowed object there.

So here in the first petition of the Lord's Prayer, we pray that both ourselves and all intelligent beings may in this sense hallow the name of the Lord God and sanctify Him in their hearts. Our prayer is--Let all adore Thee--the infinite Father--as the only object of universal adoration, praise, worship, and love.

This prayer hence implies:

(1.) A desire that this hallowing of Jehovah's name should be universal.

(2.) A willingness to concur heartily ourselves in this sentiment. Our own hearts are in deep sympathy with it. Our inmost souls cry out--Let God be honoured, adored, loved, worshipped and revered by all on earth and all in heaven. Of course, praying in this spirit, we shall have the highest reverence for God.--Beginning our prayer thus, it will so far be acceptable to God. Without such reverence for Jehovah's name, no prayer can possibly be acceptable. All irreverent praying is mockery, most abhorrent to the pure and exalted Jehovah.

"Thy kingdom come." What does this language imply?

(1.) A desire that God's kingdom should be set up in the world and all men become holy. The will is set upon this as the highest and most to be desired of all objects whatever. It becomes the supreme desire of the soul,

and all other things sink into comparative insignificance before it. The mind and the judgment approve and delight in the kingdom of God as in itself infinitely excellent, and then the will harmonizes most perfectly with this decision of intelligence.

Let it be well observed here that our Lord in giving this form of prayer, assumes throughout that we shall use all this language with most profound sincerity. If any man were to use these words and reject their spirit from his heart, his prayer would be an utter abomination before God. Whoever would pray at all, should consider that God looks on the heart, and is a holy God.

(2.) It is implied in this petition that the suppliant does what he can to establish this kingdom. He is actually doing all he can to promote this great end for which he prays. Else he fails entirely of evincing his sincerity. For nothing can be more sure than that every man who prays sincerely for the coming of Jehovah's kingdom, truly desires and wills that it may come; and if so, he will neglect no means in his power to promote and hasten its coming. Hence every man who sincerely offers this petition will lay himself out to promote the object. He will seek by every means to make the truth of God universally prevalent and triumphant.

(3.) I might also say that the sincere offering of this petition implies a resistance of every thing inconsistent with the coming of this kingdom. This you cannot fail to understand.

We now pass to the next petition;--"Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven."

This petition implies that we desire to have God's will done, and that this desire is supreme.

It implies also a delight in having the will of God done by all his creatures, and a corresponding sorrow whenever it fails of being done by any intelligent being.

There is also implied a state of the will in harmony with this desire. A man whose will is averse to having his own desires granted is insincere even although his desires are real. Such a man is not honest and consistent with himself.

In general I remark respecting this petition that if it be offered sincerely, the following things must be true:

(1.) The suppliant is willing that God should require all He does, and as He does. His heart will acquiesce both in the things required and in the manner in which God requires them. It would indeed be strange that a man should pray sincerely that God's will might be done, and yet not be willing himself that God should give law, or carry his will into effect. Such inconsistencies never can happen where the heart is truly sincere and honest before God. No, never. The honest hearted suppliant is as willing that God's will should be done as the saints in heaven are. He delights in having it done, more than in all riches--more than in his highest earthly joy.

(2.) When a man offers this petition sincerely, it is implied that he is really doing, himself, all the known will of God. For if he is acting contrary to his actual knowledge of God's will, it is most certain that he is not sincere in praying that God's will may be done. If he sincerely desires and is willing that God's will should be done, why does he not do it himself?

(3.) It implies a willingness that God should use his own discretion in the affairs of the universe, and just as really and fully in this world as in heaven itself. You all admit that in heaven God exercises a holy sovereignty. I do not mean by this, an arbitrary unreasonable sovereignty, but I mean a control of all things according to his own infinite wisdom and love--exercising evermore his own discretion, and depending on the counsel of none but himself. Thus God reigns in heaven.

You also see that in heaven, all created beings exercise the most perfect submission, and confidence in God. They all allow him to carry out his own plans framed in wisdom and love, and they even rejoice with exceeding joy that He does. It is their highest blessedness.

Such is the state of feeling towards God universally in heaven.

And such it should be on earth. The man who offers this petition sincerely must approximate very closely to the state of mind which obtains in heaven.--

He will rejoice that God appoints all things as He pleases, and that all beings should be, and do, and suffer as God ordains. If man has not such confidence in God as to be willing that he should control all events respecting

his own family, his friends, all his interests, in short, for time and eternity, then certainly his heart is not submissive to God, and it is hypocrisy for him to pray that God's will may be done on earth as in heaven. It must be hypocrisy in him because his own heart rebels against the sentiment of his own words.

This petition, offered honestly implies nothing less than universal, unqualified submission to God. The heart really submits, and delights in its submission.

No thought is so truly pleasing as that of having God's will done evermore. A sincere offering of this prayer or indeed of any prayer whatever involves the fullest possible submission of all events for time and for eternity to the hands of God. All real prayer puts God on the throne of the universe, and the suppliant low before Him at his footstool.

(4.) The offering of this petition sincerely, implies conformity of life to this state of the will. You will readily see that this must be the case, because the will governs the outward life by a law of necessity. The action of this law must be universal so long as man remains a voluntary moral agent. So long therefore the ultimate purpose of the will must control the outward life.

Hence the man who offers this prayer acceptably must live as he prays; must live according to his own prayers. It would be a strange and most unaccountable thing indeed if the heart should be in a state to offer this prayer sincerely and yet should act itself out in the life directly contrary to its own expressed and supreme preference and purpose.

Such a case is impossible. The very supposition involves the absurdity of assuming that a man's supreme preference shall not control his outward life.

In saying this, however, I do not deny that a man's state of mind may change, so as to differ the next hour from what it is this. He may be in a state one hour to offer this prayer acceptably, and the next hour may act in a manner right over against his prayer.

But if in this latter hour you could know the state of his will, you would find that it is not such that he can pray acceptably--"Thy will be done." No, his will is so changed as to conform to what you see in his outward life.

Hence a man's state of heart may be to some extent known from his external actions. You may at least know that his heart does not sincerely offer this prayer if his life does not conform to the known will of God.

We pass to the next petition;--"Give us this day our daily bread."

It is plain that this implies dependence on God for all the favors and mercies we either possess or need.

The petition is remarkably comprehensive. It names only bread, and only the bread for "this day;" yet none can doubt that it was designed to include also our water and our needful clothing--whatever we really need for our highest health, and usefulness, and enjoyment on earth. For all these we look to God.

Our Saviour doubtless meant to give us in general the subjects of prayer, showing us for what things it is proper for us to pray; and also the spirit with which we should pray. These are plainly the two great points which he aimed chiefly to illustrate in this remarkable form of prayer.

Whoever offers this petition sincerely is in a state of mind to recognize and gratefully acknowledge the providence of God. He sees the hand of God in all the circumstances that affect his earthly state. The rain and the sunshine--the winds and the frosts, he sees coming, all of them from the hand of his own Father. Hence he looks up in the spirit of a child--saying, "Give me this day my daily bread."

But there are those who philosophize and speculate themselves entirely out of this filial dependence on God. They arrive at such ideas of the magnitude of the universe that it becomes in their view too great for God to govern by a minute attention to particular events. Hence they see no God, other than an unknowing Nature in the ordinary processes of vegetation, or in the laws that control animal life. A certain indefinable but unintelligent power which they call Nature, does it all. Hence they do not expect God to hear their prayers, or notice their wants. Nature will move on in its own determined channel whether they pray or restrain prayer.

Now men who hold such opinions cannot pray the Lord's prayer without the most glaring hypocrisy.--How can they offer this prayer and mean anything by it, if they truly believe that everything is nailed down to a fixed

chain of events in which no regard is had or can be had to the prayers or wants of man?

Surely, nothing is more plain than that this prayer recognizes most fully the universal providence of that same infinite Father who gives us the promises and who invites us to plead them for obtaining all the blessings we can ever need.

It practically recognizes God as Ruler over all.

What if a man should offer this prayer, but should add to it an appendix of this sort--"Lord, although we ask of thee our daily bread, yet Thou knowest we do not believe Thou hast any thing at all to do with giving us each day our daily bread; for we believe Thou art too high and Thy universe too large to admit of our supposing that Thou canst attend to so small a matter as supplying our daily food. We believe that Thou art so unchangeable, and the laws of nature are so fixed that no regard can possibly be had to our prayers or our wants.["]

Now would this style of prayer correspond with the petitions given us by Christ, or with their obvious spirit?

Plainly this prayer dictated by our Lord for us, implies a state of heart that leans upon God for every thing--for even the most minute things that can possibly affect our happiness or be to us objects of desire. The mind looks up to the great God, expecting from Him, and from Him alone, every good and perfect gift. For every thing we need, our eye turns naturally and spontaneously towards our great Father.

And this is a daily dependence. The state of mind which it implies is habitual.

We must pass now to the next petition, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

In this immediate connection, the Saviour says, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." The word trespasses, therefore doubtless explains what is meant by debts in the Lord's prayer. Luke, in reciting this Lord's prayer, has it--"Forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us." These various forms of expression serve to make the meaning quite plain. It may often happen that in such a world as this, some of my fellow men may wrong or at least offend me--in some such way as I wrong and displease God. In such cases this petition of the Lord's prayer implies that I forgive those who injure me, even as I pray to be forgiven myself.

The phraseology in Matthew makes the fact that we forgive others either the measure, or the condition of our being forgiven; while as given by Luke, it seems to be at least a condition if not a ground or reason of the request for personal forgiveness. The former reads--"Forgive us as we forgive," &c. and the latter;-- "Forgive us, for we also forgive every one indebted to us."

Now on this petition I remark,

(1.) It cannot possibly imply that God will forgive us our sins while we are still committing them. Suppose one should use this form of petition;--"Lord, forgive me for having injured Thee as Thou knowest that I do most freely forgive all men who injure me;" while yet it is perfectly apparent to the man himself and to every body else that he is still injuring and abusing God as much as ever. Would not such a course be equivalent to saying, "Lord, I am very careful, Thou seest, not to injure my fellow men, and I freely forgive their wrongs against me; but I care not how much I abuse and wrong Thee!" This would be horrible! Yet this horrible prayer is virtually invoked whenever men ask of God forgiveness with the spirit of sin and rebellion in their hearts.

(2.) This petition never reads thus; "Forgive us our sins and enable us to forgive others also." This would be a most abominable prayer to offer to God; certainly if it be understood to imply that we cannot forgive others unless we are specially enabled to do so by power given us in answer to prayer; and worse still, if this inability to forgive is imputed to God as its Author.

However the phraseology be explained, and whatever it be understood to imply, it is common enough in the mouths of men; but no where found in the book of God.

(3.) Christ, on the other hand, says;--Forgive us as we forgive others. We have often injured, abused, and wronged Thee. Our fellow men have also often injured us, but Thou knowest we have freely forgiven them. Now, therefore, forgive us as Thou seest we have forgiven others. If Thou seest that we do forgive others, then do Thou indeed forgive us and not otherwise. We cannot ask to be ourselves forgiven on any other condition.

(4.) Many seem to consider themselves quite pious if they can put up with it when they are injured or slighted; if they can possibly control themselves so as not to break out into a passion. If, however, they are really wronged, they imagine they do well to be angry. O, to be sure! somebody has really wronged them, and shall they not resent it and study how to get revenge, or at least, redress? But mark; the Apostle Peter says, "If when ye do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God." "For even hereunto were ye called," as if all Christians had received a special call to this holy example. O how would such an example rebuke the spirit of the world!

(5.) It is one remarkable condition of being answered in prayer that we suffer ourselves to harbour no ill will to any human being. We must forgive all that wrong us, and forgive them too from the heart. God as really requires us to love our enemies as to love our friends,--as really requires us to forgive others as to ask forgiveness for ourselves. Do we always bear this in mind? Are you, beloved, always careful to see to it that your state of mind towards all who may possibly have wronged you is one of real forgiveness, and do you never think of coming to God in prayer until you are sure you have a forgiving spirit yourself?

Plainly, this is one of the ways in which we may test our fitness of heart to prevail with God in prayer. "When thou standest, praying, forgive, if thou hast ought against any." Think not to gain audience before God unless thou dost most fully and heartily forgive all who may be thought to have wronged thee.

Sometimes persons of a peculiar temperament lay up grudges against others. They have enemies against whom they not only speak evil, but know not how to speak well. Now such persons who harbor such grudges in their hearts, can no more prevail with God in prayer than the devil can. God would as soon hear the devil pray and answer his prayers as hear and answer them. They need not think to be heard;--not they!

How many times have I had occasion to rebuke this unforgiving spirit! Often while in a place laboring to promote a revival, I have seen the workings of this jealous, unforgiving spirit, and I have felt like saying, Take these things hence! Why do you get up a prayer-meeting and think to pray to God when you know that you hate your brother; and know moreover that I know you do? Away with it! Let such professed Christians repent, break down, get into the dust at the feet of God and men too, before they think to pray acceptably! Until they do thus repent all their prayers are only a "smoke in the nose" before God.

Our next petition is, "Lead us not into temptation"

And what is implied in this?

A fear and dread of sin;--a watchfulness against temptation; an anxious solicitude lest by any means we should be overcome and fall into sin. On this point Christ often warned his disciples, and not them only, but what He said unto them, He said unto all,--"Watch."

A man not afraid of sin and temptation cannot present this petition in a manner acceptable to God.

You will observe, moreover, that this petition does not by any means imply that God leads men into temptation in order to make them sin so that we must needs implore of Him not to lead us thus, lest He should do it. No, that is not implied at all; but the spirit of the petition is this;--O Lord, Thou knowest how weak I am, and how prone to sin; therefore let thy providence guard and keep me that I may not indulge in any thing whatever that may prove to me a temptation to sin.--Deliver us from all iniquity--from all the stratagems of the devil. Throw around us all Thy precious guardianship, that we may be kept from sinning against Thee.

How needful this protection, and how fit that we should pray for it without ceasing!

This form of prayer concludes:--"For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever, amen."

Here is an acknowledgment of the universal government of God. The suppliant recognizes his supremacy and rejoices in it.

Thus it is when the mind is in the attitude of prevailing prayer. It is most perfectly natural then for us to regard the character, attributes, and kingdom of God as infinitely sacred and glorious.

How perfectly spontaneous is this feeling in the heart of all who really pray, "I ask all this because Thou art a powerful, universal, and holy Sovereign.--Thou art the infinite Source of all blessings. Unto Thee, therefore, do I

look for all needed good either for myself or my fellow beings!"

How deeply does the praying heart realize and rejoice in the universal supremacy of the great Jehovah! All power, and glory, and dominion are thine and thine only, forever and ever, amen and amen. Let my whole soul re-echo, amen. Let the power and the glory be the Lord's alone for evermore. Let my soul for ever feel and utter this sentiment with its deepest and most fervent emphasis. Let God reign supreme and adored through all earth and all heaven, henceforth and forever.

REMARKS.

1. The state of mind involved in this prayer must be connected with a holy life. Most manifestly it can never co-exist with a sinning life. If you allow yourself in sin, you certainly cannot have access to God in prayer. You cannot enter into the spirit of the Lord's prayer and appropriately utter its petitions.

2. The appropriate offering of this prayer involves a corresponding sensibility--a state of feeling in harmony with it. The mind of the suppliant must sympathize with the spirit of this form of prayer. Otherwise he does, by no means, make this prayer his own.

3. It is nothing better than mockery to use the Lord's prayer as a mere form. So multitudes do use it, especially when public worship is conducted by the use of forms of prayer. Often you may hear this form of prayer repeated over and over in such a way as seems to testify that the mind takes no cognizance of the sentiments which the words should express. The chattering of a parrot could scarcely be more senseless and void of impression on the speaker's mind. How shocking to hear the Lord's prayer chattered over thus! Instead of spreading out before God what they really need, they run over the words of this form, and perhaps of some other set forms, as if the utterance of the right words served to constitute acceptable prayer!

If they had gone into the streets and cursed and swore by the hour, every man of them would be horribly shocked, and would feel that now assuredly the curse of Jehovah would fall upon them. But in their senseless chattering of this form of prayer by the hour together, they as truly blaspheme God as if they had taken his name in vain in any other way.

Men may mock God in pretending to pray, as truly as in cursing and swearing. God looks on the heart and He estimates nothing as real prayer into which the heart does not enter. And for many reasons it must be peculiarly provoking to God to have the forms of prayer gone through with and no heart of prayer attend them.

Prayer is a privilege too sacred to be trifled with.--The pernicious effects of trifling with prayer are certainly not less than the evils of any other form of profanity. Hence God must abhor all public desecration of this solemn exercise.

Now, brethren, in closing my remarks on this one great condition of prevailing prayer, let me beseech you never to suppose that you pray acceptably unless your heart sympathizes deeply with the sentiments expressed in the Lord's prayer. Your state of mind must be such that these words will most aptly express it. Your heart must run into the very words, and into all the sentiments of this form of prayer. Our Saviour meant here to teach us how to pray; and here you may come and learn how. Here you may see a map of the things to pray for, and a picture of the spirit in which acceptable prayer is offered.