

## LECTURE XXIV.

### *PUBLIC PRAYER.*

YOU are aware, young gentlemen, that, during the "Dark Ages," the disgraceful incompetency of the clergy resulted, first, in the introduction of forms of prayer, and, second, in the customary disuse of the divinely-appointed ordinance of preaching. The Reformation reversed all this. It has become the characteristic of the Popish religion that it makes the liturgical service nearly the whole of public worship, and of the Reformed that it makes the sermon the prominent part. This difference is imprinted upon the very speech of the people. The Papist says: "I go to mass;" the Protestant, "I go to preaching." Many ignorant Protestants depreciate the devotional acts of the sanctuary too much. I would protest against this unseemly and mischievous extreme. It is for this reason, in part, that I would give great emphasis to the minister's duty of preparing himself thoroughly for public prayer, and performing his part in it with propriety. I trust you will not graduate the relative importance which I attach to the sermon and the prayers, according to the relative space here bestowed on the two subjects; for the principles which regulate pulpit eloquence apply also to the devotional parts of it. I beg you to consider me, once for all, as applying them all to this important branch of your duty.

I deem that the minister is as much bound to prepare himself for praying in public as for preaching. The negligence with which many preachers leave their prayers to accident, while they lay out all their strength on their sermons, is most painfully suggestive of unbelief toward God and indifference to the edification of their brethren. When the sermon is appropriate, nervous, finished, but the prayers of the same minister are rambling, aimless and nerveless, how distressing is the impression upon every pious heart! This lamentable indifference in the spiritual guides accounts sufficiently for the feeling which the worldly part of our congregations so plainly betray, that in their eyes the sermon is the only part of the proceeding which can possibly interest them, while the devotional acts are only the wearisome "grace before meat," the irksome form which detains them from their indulgence, to be evaded in any way not positively indecent.

Some affect to think that the spiritual nature of the exercise ought to preclude preparation; that because it is the Holy Ghost which teaches us to pray, we should not attempt to teach ourselves. This argument is a remnant of fanatical enthusiasm. Should we not also preach with the Spirit? Why, then, do we not extend the same sophisms to inhibit preparation of the sermon? The answer is, that the aid of the Holy Spirit does not suspend the exercise of our own faculties. He works through them as his instruments, and in strict conformity to their rational nature. He assists and elevates them. He helps us also in prompting us to help ourselves.

Bethink yourselves, my young brethren, that it is no

slight undertaking to guide a whole congregation to the throne of the heavenly grace, and to be their spokesman to God. To speak for God to men is a sacred and responsible task. To speak for men to God is not less responsible, and is more solemn. The public prayers of the pastor are apt to be the models of the devotions of his people; when he leads them in prayer he is really teaching them to pray. Prayer is the Christian's vital breath. Prayer is the appointed channel of his whole redemption. How mischievous is that man who by his coldness, inappropriateness, irreverence, vagueness, unbelief, chills the aspirations and obstructs the access of a whole multitude which he should have led up to the mercy-seat!

The many blemishes which we hear in public prayers are to be traced to two sources: first, deficient piety, and, second, deficient preparation. It is this delinquency to duty which gives the advocates of an enforced liturgy all their plausible objections against *extempore* prayer in public worship. We, who claim liberty from such restrictions, and who assert the superiority of the free method of the scriptural saints, are bound to commend our opinion by our practice. I shall recite some of the blemishes by which the Christian ear and heart are most often offended, in order to guard you against them.

It is a grave fault to repeat frequently and mechanically any *formula* of words; as interjections, the names and titles of God, or favourite phrases. Inordinate repetition grates on every ear. These "words, of course," betray either odious mannerisms, or a vacuity of heart in the sacred service which is utterly profane. We sometimes hear the name of the majestic Being to whom

prayer is addressed repeated so heedlessly, that it is a literal "taking of it in vain." In a word, the mere commonplaces of devotional language are not the dress in which that soul clothes its desires, which has a true errand at the throne of grace. Such a heart will be very far from going to seek after the novelties and pedantries of language, but the sincerity of its emotions will give a certain freshness to its language of request. This mechanical phrase is obnoxious to every charge of formalism, monotony and lack of appropriate variety, which we lodge against an unchangeable liturgy, while it has none of its literary merit and dignified and tender associations.

He who speaks to God for others is bound to eschew all provincialisms, solecisms, vulgarisms and grammatical errors in his language. He should never be guilty of thrusting into the mouths of worshippers such locutions as the request that God would "solemnize their souls," or that he would "grant to bestow" his grace. You will have need here for great jealousy of the imitation of the current phrases; because usage has blinded even many educated men to odious blemishes, and given these faults a species of pious license. But why should the devotions of those who have some feeling for their mother-tongue be disturbed by violations of her integrity? Does God take pleasure in bad grammar? He has spoken to us in good Greek, thereby showing us that he expects us to address him in good English.

We observe that desire is always definite when it is earnest; our petitions, therefore, should be definite also. But this does not excuse an indelicate or trivial minute-

ness of detail. The pastor may feel that, in asking temporal blessings, after the example of the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," he may appropriately ask for "rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness;" but good taste should prevent his descending to such particulars as that the bloom of the peach might escape the spring frosts. To pray nominally to God, but really at a fellow-creature, to flatter or revile in prayer, to insinuate a witticism or sarcasm, to arouse by allusions to party strifes, political prejudices and asperities,—all these are nauseous to a true taste and a genuine piety as well. The man who is really inspired with the spirit of prayer will be incapable of such crimes against propriety. What must be the unbelief and irreverence of that man who can make a pretext of approach to a God so pure, majestic and good, for displaying his smartness or his malice, or for loading the ear of the eternal Judge with flatteries of a fellow-culprit?

Half-educated or spiritually proud men frequently indulge in an indecent familiarity with the Most High, under the pretence of filial nearness and importunity. It is the amazing privilege of justified believers to call this exalted Being their "Father which is in heaven," and, through their divine Advocate, to approach him with filial trust; but this joyful affection should always be tempered with adoring reverence and tender contrition. The proper language for the accepted sinner before the mercy-seat is, therefore, that of profound veneration. Especially are all fondling and amatory expressions, addressed to either person of the Trinity,

abhorrent to the truly pious heart. Our affection for the Author of our redemption should be too unique, and elevated by its sanctity too far above all carnal emotions, to borrow their language. The prophets and apostles surely apprehended God, and knew how to praise him better than we; but they are never found addressing Jesus Christ or the Father or Spirit in any of these fulsome terms: they speak only the language of holy adoration.

Vague and aimless language indicates very clearly a vacant mind devoid of true spiritual affections. Too often the prayers offered before sermon are such as to suggest no other real purpose, than to comply with an expected form and fill decently the allotted time. So, the prayer which closes the sermon is often so pointless, that it amounts to nothing more than a mechanical mark for the ending of the ceremonial. Sometimes there is an absence of any intelligible order in the prayers; and we hear petitions for a mixed medley of objects, interspersed with thanks, confessions and praises.

Now, in opposition to all these faults, I would point out to you the proper mode of performing this duty, by referring you to the instruction of our Directory for Public Worship.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I. It seems very proper to begin the public worship of the sanctuary by a short prayer; humbly adoring the infinite majesty of the living God; expressing a sense of our distance from him as creatures, and unworthiness as sinners, and humbly imploring his gracious presence, the assistance of his Holy Spirit in the duties of his worship, and his acceptance of us through the merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

II. Then, after singing a psalm, or hymn, it is proper that, before sermon, there should be a full and comprehensive prayer: *First.*

1. Our Standards here discriminate between the grace or spirit, and the gift of prayer. The former is a devout, believing, thankful frame of heart, which “hungers and

---

Adoring the glory and perfections of God as they are made known to us in the works of creation, in the conduct of providence, and in the clear and full revelation he hath made of himself in his written Word. *Second.* Giving thanks to him for all his mercies of every kind, general and particular, spiritual and temporal, common and special; above all, for Christ Jesus, his unspeakable gift, and the hope of eternal life through him. *Third.* Making humble confession of sin, both original and actual; acknowledging and endeavouring to impress the mind of every worshipper with a deep sense of the evil of all sin, as such; as being a departure from the living God; and also taking a particular and affecting view of the various fruits which proceed from this root of bitterness—as sins against God, our neighbour and ourselves; sins in thought, in word, and in deed; sins secret and presumptuous; sins accidental and habitual. Also, the aggravations of sin, arising from knowledge, or the means of it; from distinguishing mercies; from valuable privileges; from breach of vows, etc. *Fourth.* Making earnest supplication for the pardon of sin, and peace with God, through the blood of the atonement, with all its important and happy fruits; for the Spirit of sanctification, and abundant supplies of the grace that is necessary to the discharge of our duty; for support and comfort, under all the trials to which we are liable, as we are sinful and mortal; and for all temporal mercies that may be necessary, in our passage through this valley of tears—always remembering to view them as flowing in the channel of covenant love, and intended to be subservient to the preservation and progress of the spiritual life. *Fifth.* Pleading from every principle warranted in Scripture; from our own necessity; the all-sufficiency of God; the merit and intercession of our Saviour; and the glory of God in the comfort and happiness of his people. *Sixth.* Intercession for others, including the whole world of mankind; the kingdom of Christ, or his Church universal; the church or churches with which we are more particularly connected; the interest of human society in general, and in that community to which we immediately belong; all that are invested with civil authority; the ministers of the everlasting gospel; and the rising generation: with whatever else, more particular,

thirsts after righteousness," superinduced by divine grace. The latter is the ability to express this frame appropriately in words. The former only is necessary for the right performance of the duty of secret prayer; both are necessary for him who would lead the devotions of others. Now, the grace of prayer is to be secured only by a life of personal and private devotion. He who carries a cold heart into the pulpit betrays it not only to God, whose detection of it is inevitable, but almost surely to the hearers also. The pretended gift without the grace is a body without spirit. The dis-

---

may seem necessary, or suitable, to the interest of that congregation where divine worship is celebrated.

III. Prayer after sermon ought generally to have a relation to the subject that has been treated of in the discourse, and all other public prayers, to the circumstances that gave occasion for them.

IV. It is easy to perceive that in all the preceding directions there is a very great compass and variety, and it is committed to the judgment and fidelity of the officiating pastor to insist chiefly on such parts, or to take in more or less of the several parts, as he shall be led to by the aspect of Providence; the particular state of the congregation in which he officiates, or the disposition and exercise of his own heart at the time. But we think it necessary to observe, that although we do not approve, as is well known, of confining ministers to set or fixed forms of prayer for public worship, yet it is the indispensable duty of every minister, previously to his entering on his office, to prepare and qualify himself for this part of his duty, as well as for preaching. He ought, by a thorough acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures, by reading the best writers on the subject, by meditation, and by a life of communion with God in secret, to endeavour to acquire both the spirit and the gift of prayer. Not only so, but when he is to enter on particular acts of worship, he should endeavour to compose his spirit, and to digest his thoughts for prayer, that it may be performed with dignity and propriety, as well as to the profit of those who join in it; and that he may not disgrace that important service by mean, irregular, or extravagant effusions.

play of it only serves to distress and chill the truly devout, to confirm the slumbers of drowsy Christians, to encourage the prayerless tendencies of the ungodly, to place the minds of all out of harmony with the divine truths which are about to be discussed in the sermon. Above all, the help of the Holy Ghost and the inestimable advantage of Christian intercession are forfeited. Thus the purposes of God in ordaining public prayer are disappointed, and this means of edification is turned into a deadening form. How great is the guilt of him who, appointed to be an ensample to the flock, obstructs their access to the throne of grace! The pastor is under sacred obligations, then, to cultivate upon his knees the spirit of prayer. This possessed, the gift of prayer will be taught him by the same principles of taste and propriety which direct his preaching.

2. But, second, the pastor must look to the position in which he stands, as the leader of public prayer, to determine the manner of its performance. He is the organ of the people; not of himself, save as he is one among them. He speaks the mind of the aggregate church in that place. He is to pray in behalf of the church, then, as the church should pray for itself. If a Christian could be found who was the fair type of what his brethren in that place should be, the pastor should speak just as that representative man would, only changing individual expressions into public and common, and the singular member into the plural. How, then, does a soul properly speak for itself to its God? Does it dream of fine language? Does it think of artificial terms of expression? Does it deem that ornaments of style have any place? You well

know that if you overheard that man in his secret prayer, and found him employing such ambitious verbiage, you would conclude at once that he was insincere. So, just as soon as the minister introduces any rhetorical artifice, he betrays the fact that he is speaking to creatures and not to God. He has forgotten what he professes to be about, and is mocking the Searcher of hearts!<sup>1</sup> The first requirement, then, is that the language of prayer must be wholly unambitious, unaffected and simple. It must be, not such as is proper from a teacher speaking to his congregation, but just such as is appropriate for an accepted sinner speaking to his God.

From the same position I deduce the rule that the preacher, in intercessions which he represents the people as offering for himself, should indulge in no affected excesses of humility. This would be in reality to have the people tell God in their pastor's presence, how great a sinner they thought he was! The pastor may presume that his people respond to the apostolic request: "Brethren, pray for us," but in giving voice to their prayer for himself, he should put into their mouths no other language than they would use, if interceding for him in his presence. Even in doing this he should avoid the appearance of egotism.

From the same point of view I infer that the pastor should be chary of introducing personal details into his

---

<sup>1</sup> It is said that a newspaper, with laudatory intention, remarked of the prayer of an ambitious young Socinian: "The prayer of the reverend gentleman was admitted to have been the most eloquent ever addressed to a Boston audience." The silly editor uttered a truer sarcasm than he knew; your "eloquent" prayers are always addressed to the audience, not to God.

public devotions. He represents his church as a whole : neither he nor his family, nor any other individual or family, should monopolize that access to the throne of grace which is common to all. Even when a single person is under such peculiar trials as to entitle him to the special prayers of the church, the pastor should not dwell too long upon his particular condition.

Once more, true prayer is the language of faith. None really pray except those who have begun to feel the quickening grace of God ; hence it is unnatural that any one should pray habitually and still remain an entire stranger to the filial affections and hopes of the Christian. Prayer, then, is usually the language of God's children, not of his enemies. The pastor is the organ of the body of penitent believers, not of the impenitent. He should use language suitable to a sinner turning from his ways ; for this is always appropriate, not only to the awakened sinner, but to the imperfect and penitent child who is continually renewing his "first works." But his strain should be prevalently filial, believing and hopeful, as becomes God's reconciled children.

Since it is God to whom you speak, and not man, your prayers should not be didactic. Doctrinal truths and the facts of redemption are, indeed, the grounds, arguments and guides of our petitions. This will justify such allusion to them, especially in our pleadings, as founds our requests on their proper reasons ; but our reference must be subordinate and brief, lest we should seem to preach to God instead of praying to him. There is a painful absurdity in our going about formally to instruct God of his doctrinal truths : it is his part to

inform us of these ; it is our wants and praises which he invites us to tell him.

3. It is of radical importance that the leader of the church's prayers shall present distinct and definite petitions, and these not numerous at one time. One of the constant sins of our prayers is that we are vague, and therefore feeble, in our desires. We scarcely remember precisely what we asked of God ; we do not watch and work for the answer. The pastor should conscientiously avoid fostering this wretched vice of the people's devotions : he should put into their mouths always distinct objects of desire. Prayer is the professed language of want ; but want is always definite : he who wants, wants some thing—a distinct thing. The leader of prayer should therefore speak as one who has an errand at the throne, a point to press with God. He should eschew loose generalities of petition, and all that stream of indefinite, goodish talk with which so many prayers are filled, which really expresses nothing save a slumbering faith and a heart void of desire. Nor should the emotions and memories of the people be burdened with many points in the same prayer. Sincere devotion is the most arduous exercise of the soul : it should therefore not be too much taxed at the same time. Ardent desire is, moreover, expulsive in its nature : it claims, for the once, the whole heart for its object. No man is strongly exercised concerning many diverse and remote objects at once ; hence a few appropriate topics of petition, handled in an orderly manner and enlarged with judicious amplification, until the mind is fixed and the heart engaged by them, constitute the most edifying prayers.

4. He who leads the devotions of others must study appropriateness of matter. He should ask himself what would be uppermost in the hearts of Christians at that time, if they were supposed to be in a suitable temper. Let that be his topic. It is due from the judgment of charity that he shall credit God's children with that right temper; and he should desire, at any rate, to foster it in them, by leading them to the expression of those desires which it should prompt. He must remember that he is the mouthpiece of the church. What right, then, has he to put into her mouth words which she is not rightfully inclined to utter? If the children of God have one thing upon their hearts, and you force a different one into their petitions, you do them a grievous wrong. Assume, then, that the things which ought to be especially appropriate to the time and circumstances are the things which the Holy Spirit has put into the desires of the people, and give tongue to these. Every prayer should be studied with reference to the present wants of the church: this will also secure variety in your public devotions. When the soul of the people is pressed with particular wants, do not consume their time with the usual routine of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, to the exclusion of their chief errand at the throne of grace, but either abbreviate those parts, or borrow their thoughts from the same pressing objects.

5. "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few."<sup>1</sup> The language of prayer should be

---

<sup>1</sup> Eccles. v. 2.

well-ordered and considerate. He who speaks to the Searcher of hearts should beware how he indulges any exaggeration of words, lest his tongue should be found to have outrun his mind, and to have "offered the sacrifice of fools." Both the words and the utterance should express profound but affectionate reverence. The enunciation of prayer should be softer, more level, less marked by *ictus*, less vehement, more subdued. Every tone should breathe tenderness and supplication. There are ministers whose inflections, modulated upon the pensive, minor key, are the native voice of contrite desire. Study to make these tones your own. It is difficult to say which is most unsuitable to this sacred exercise—a hurried, perfunctory utterance, as of one who reads some tiresome or trivial matter, a violent and declamatory manner, as though one had ventured upon oburgation of his Maker, or a headlong and confused enunciation.

6. Above all should the minister enrich his prayers with the language of Scripture. Not everything in the Scripture is appropriate to express devotion, as some pedantic minds seem to imagine, but the language of its spiritual and devotional parts. Besides its inimitable beauty and simplicity, it is hallowed and sweet to every pious heart by a thousand associations. It satisfies the taste of all; its use effectually protects us against improprieties; it was doubtless given by the Holy Spirit to be a model for our devotions. Let it then abound in our prayers. The young minister should store his memory richly with these noble strains, fixing in his mind the very words of the English version. He should memorize perfectly the finest passages from the

Psalms, the Prophets, the Evangelists and the Apostles, and study to make them the apt vehicles of his worship. But let him shun those fantastic and perverse applications of the language of the Bible in which certain classes of preachers so much delight, which wrest figurative or tropical expressions to some quaint sense they were not intended to bear. This has grown, in some, to an odious pedantry: the more strange and far-fetched their applications, the better they are pleased. Such a mannerism can only mystify or else amuse the hearer, and it is therefore glaringly out of place in prayer.

Great beauty, variety and solemnity are gained by employing the numerous descriptive and attributive phrases which are found in the Scriptures for addressing the persons of the Trinity. These forms of speech should be selected with reference to the particular topic of thanksgiving, confession or petition which was to be introduced; for example, either a request or a thanksgiving for temporal good may be begun: Thou, Father, "which openest thy hand, and satisfieth the desires of every living thing."<sup>1</sup> A prayer for aid in self-examination may appropriately begin: "Thou who searchest the hearts, and triest the reins" of the children of men.<sup>2</sup> A prayer for rulers, or against powerful assailants, may address God as "Judge of all the earth,"<sup>3</sup> or as "King of kings and Lord of lords."<sup>4</sup> Prayer for deliverance from war and confusion naturally appeals to the "Prince of peace."<sup>5</sup> Those passages in our prayers which ex-

<sup>1</sup> Psalm cxlv. 16.<sup>2</sup> Jer. xvii. 10.<sup>3</sup> Gen. xviii. 25.<sup>4</sup> Rev. xvii. 14.<sup>5</sup> Isa. ix. 6.

press adoration, or exalted, spiritual emotion, may be best composed of the varied and inimitable forms of doxology contained in the Scriptures. What formula of human invention can ever equal this?—"Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory, for ever and ever, amen!" Or this: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing."<sup>1</sup> So, the formulary known as the Lord's Prayer should not only be a guide to the matter of our prayers, but it should, on suitable occasions, be recited in the words of the Gospels. And it is especially adapted to form the close of a prayer of human composition.

In fine, public prayer must never be prolix or tedious. The soul cannot long sustain properly so elevated an exercise. After weariness supervenes, all that remains is a ministration of formalism.

From all this, young gentlemen, you will readily comprehend that this duty will require of you careful and special preparation. The young minister should no more venture into the pulpit with an *impromptu* prayer, than with an *impromptu* sermon. And the prayer after sermou, although usually short, should no more be left to the chance suggestions of a moment of exhaustion, than the longer. Every pastor should practise frequently the art of devotional composition. He will do this, not so much to recite these written prayers in the pulpit, as to train his own taste, and to gather a store

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. i. 17; Rev. v. 12. And the following: Rom. xi. 33-36; xvi. 27; Jude xxv.; Rev. iv. 8, 11; Rev. vii. 12; Isa. vi. 3; Dan. ix. 4; Ps. viii. 1; c. 5; lxxii. 18 to end.

of devotional language. He should also prepare himself regularly for his duty by noting suitable subjects of prayer and praise with careful deliberation and by preparing acceptable words. And, above all, he should seek to have his own soul in a right frame by fervent, secret prayer.

Let me, in conclusion, recommend to you the little work of Dr. Samuel Miller on Public Prayer. You will find that most of the advices I have given you are borrowed from it. It is a manual of the highest merit for its piety and excellent taste.

THE END.