

The Gain of Prayer

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"Pray without ceasing."—I Thessalonians 5:17.

In the text Paul makes the suggestion that through prayer we gain **sensitivity to others**. Mark the setting in which we come upon our text. In it we have such commands and appeals as these:

"Edify one another" (v. II).

"Be at peace among yourselves" (v. 13).

"Comfort the feeble-minded," or, as Weymouth has it, more accurately, "Encourage the faint-hearted" (v. 14).

"Be patient toward all men" (v. 14).

Isn't it clear that the net effect of such Christian social teachings is to say: Don't live an ingrown, self-occupied life; live with an awareness of others. Try to see things from their point of view, as well as your own. Think of them as persons you can serve, not as persons you can use.

And if you ask, "How," one way is through prayer. Dr. Frank Laubach in his writings has told the world of the great transfiguration that swept his life when, as a rather futile, frustrated missionary in the Philippine Islands nearly two decades ago, he made a mighty surrender of himself to the living Spirit of God and began really to live in the presence of God. Prayer came to life in his experience. It became what one of our splendid hymns calls it: "the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air!"

In this connection Dr. Laubach goes on to say, most significantly, "And I added another resolve—to be as wide open towards people and their need as I am towards God. Windows open outward as well as upward! Windows especially open downward where people need most." Through a new awareness of God in prayer he came to a new sensitiveness to people and their manifold needs.

I challenge you to make an experiment—some of you at least, who may not have gone far in the school of prayer. It is this: Get quiet before God. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind the name of some person who, either to your knowledge or, beyond that, to God's knowledge, needs help. Maybe there will come to you the name of a neighbor who is having domestic trouble. Maybe it will be a young man battling with some temptation or even yielding to it. Maybe it will be a school teacher having more than her share of problems at the moment. Maybe it will be a person who has turned sour on life in general. Hold that person in your praying mind for a few moments. Think of yourself as an invisible conduit through which God's power, love, and truth are flowing to and around that person.

Now, one thing that will almost surely happen is that by a law of association you will begin to think of others who are in similar need: others with family tensions and threats, others with fierce temptations to fight or staggering loads to carry. Thus your sympathies will be both deepened and widened. Thus, too, if you are wise, you will ask God what steps He will have you take to help Him answer the very prayers you have just offered.

II

Another gain that comes to us through prayer is **immunity to bitterness**. "See that

none render evil for evil unto any man," says the apostle in verse 15, and then, as though to give us the secret of such victory, the text: "Pray without ceasing."

Some people live on a strictly tit for tat basis. If they are hated, they hate. If they are injured, they retaliate. If they are cursed, they curse. If they are treated coldly, they freeze up in response.

Whatever else that sort of living may be, it isn't Christian. The Christian moves on a higher level. If he is to maintain this level of unhating unretaliating conduct, he knows that he must keep his inner attitudes and his controlling emotions free from the bacteria of bitterness. He knows further—or at least he should know—that he must take hold of every suggestion and temptation to resentment and bring it, through prayer, into the sterilizing light of the Cross of Christ.

One lady who had learned this secret said that every time she thought of the person who had done her an injury she then and there said: "I bless you—in His name!" She was thinking, of course, of our Saviour's words: "Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

It isn't that prayer makes us love the evil person and his ways. Rather, it enables us to see him as the person God intends him to be and, for Christ's sake, to love him. That's clear gain—both for ourselves and for him.

III

Again, it is through prayer that we gain **constancy of joy**. "Rejoice evermore" is the pithy, sunshiny counsel of verse 16. And again the apostle seems to say, If you wonder how you can do it, "Pray without ceasing."

There are two sources from which our joys may come. They may come from the outer circumstances of our lives which are pleasant and gratifying, or they may come from our inner fellowship with God. We live only a little while in this world before we discover that if we are depending on outer circumstances to keep us happy, we are headed for a lot of disillusionment and wretchedness.

The Christian answer to the rise and fall of circumstances is prayer. By means of prayer we become circumstance-proof. When our circumstances turn black, our communion with God sustains us and its deeper joy rises within us like a tide.

There is a gladness at the heart of prayer, a gladness that says: I have the answer to anything that may come to me. My answer is God. I know that in His presence (right here in this world) there is "fulness of joy" and at His right hand there are "pleasures for evermore."

Someone asked a glowingly happy modern saint, whose whole life is spent prayerfully in useful service, if he thought Jesus ever laughed. His reply was: "I don't know, but I know that He has fixed me up so that I can laugh." He has proved, just as you and I may prove, that prayer produces the singing heart.

IV

Or again, it is through prayer that we gain the **humility of gratitude**. "In everything give thanks," we read in verse 18. "Always be thankful" is the Weymouth translation.

Prayer, in whatever measure it is sincere, is the humbling of our little, dependent selves before the great creative Self of the universe—God. In that mood of humility, it is surprising how many things we can think of that call for thanksgiving.

Neglectful of prayer, we are like the discontented little girl who was reminded of the numerous things in her possession that she should appreciate. To which she sobbed back: "It isn't what I've got, but what I haven't got that I am crying for." In a small child we can call it peevish immaturity; in complaining, ungrateful adults we might as well call it, honestly, a form of pride and greed.

The cure? Get on your knees, my brother, my sister! Get on your knees! The quicker the better! Start with your Bible, with a passage, say, like Psalm 103:2, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."

Then get out your pencil and a piece of note paper. Set down the "benefits" that are yours. You have lost some money: be thankful you haven't lost your integrity. You have lost your hearing: be thankful you haven't lost your reason. You have lost your husband: be thankful you didn't lose him by desertion or unfaithfulness. Your child is in a hospital: be thankful he isn't in a prison or a reformatory.

Never mind if, to start with, you don't feel the gushing of gratitude. George S. Stewart is right when he says: "There is frequent need to remind ourselves that gratitude is something deeper than the emotion of gratitude, and is a principle of the Christian life." It is this discipline of gratefulness that grows strong through prayer. Be faithful to the discipline, and the delight of gratitude will follow.

V

It is through prayer, moreover, that we gain **susceptibility to spiritual revelations**. This is suggested by the apostle's two negatives in verses 19 and 20.

"Quench not the Spirit.

"Despise not prophesyings."

The latter is translated by Weymouth: "Do not depreciate prophetic revelations." Where Christians recognize the ministry, guidance, and leadership of the Holy Spirit fresh messages and directions from God may be expected. These never take the place of the Bible. They never run contrary to the Bible. Rather do they throw fresh light upon the Bible. They take the form of insights—flashes of understanding, imperatives for service—that come to us directly from the living Spirit of God.

A minister many years my senior once told me that an illiterate and thoroughly eccentric Christian man once came up to him on the ferry crossing San Francisco Bay, and said to him: "My brother, I have been attending your meeting. You have been a blessing to me. In prayer for you the Holy Spirit has shown me that you are suffering from an ailment in your body. He wants me to give you this little recipe and to tell you that if you will follow it, you will be healed."

My friend said that the queer brother had correctly named a malady which had bothered him for years. He further said that after praying about it he was led to use the formula that had been given to him, and that the prophesied cure came to pass—permanently.

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