

CHAPTER XVII

THE HIGHEST FORM OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE

THE highest form of Christian service is intercessory prayer. I state this without fear of contradiction. And what I am going to say now is applicable to every Christian in the world, for all may have a part. You may not be able to preach, but you can pray. It is your privilege to become an intercessor if you choose to, and thus accomplish the greatest work that God has committed to man.

Turn with me if you will to Exodus 32: 31, 32, and notice here the almost unparalleled prayer of Moses as he intercedes on behalf of his people, "And Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin——" And here occurs a pause indicated by a dash after the word "sin" as if Moses waited to hear God's answer before saying more, "And if Thou wilt forgive their sin," he prays. And in the pause that follows, his heart overwhelmed with grief, he listens for God's reply; but in vain he waits for an answer; there is no response. Then, with a burden that crushes him almost to death and a love that struggles up in his heart on behalf of his people, he continues his intercession: "And if not," he prays, "blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written."

Oh, what a prayer! How marvellously this servant of God interceded for his people! What a burden rested heavy upon his heart! It is almost impossible for us to comprehend the bitter anguish of his soul as he pleaded. How deep was his love!

Did ever man pass through such an experience? And how feeble are our petitions in comparison with this great inter-

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cessor's! Moses was willing to be forever separated from God, to have his name blotted out of the Book of Life and be eternally lost, if only his people might be saved.

But Moses does not stand alone. There is one other who passed through the same experience, felt the same burden, endured the same agony and made the same offer. That one was Paul, the mighty apostle to the Gentiles. "I say the truth in Christ," he exclaims, "I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9: 1-3).

What a picture of the heart of Paul! We think of him as a man filled with joy, not only rejoicing himself, but bidding others to do the same. Yet here he declares that he has great heaviness and continual heart sorrow, that he is under tremendous pressure, that he carries a burden every moment of the day and night. And oh, what a burden! How it crushes him! So great is it that he declares himself willing to be accursed, eternally separated from Christ, for the sake of his kinsmen according to the flesh. In other words, Paul feels exactly the same as Moses felt. So wonderful is his love for his own people Israel, that, after counting the cost, he is willing to lose all in order that they might gain all. And the only relief he can find is in prayer, mighty, unceasing intercession for his brethren the Jews.

And now with such examples of intercession born out of a broken, burdened heart, how lamentably weak and unreal are our prayers! Would to God we too might be thus burdened for others, that we might have power with God in the ministry of intercession.

Now I want to mention some things which it is necessary to remember if we are to engage in this, the highest form of Christian service.

STANDING ON PRAYING GROUND

First of all, it means that we must be standing on praying ground. That is to say, we must be certain that everything is right between us and God. Unless this is the case it is useless to even attempt to pray. "If I regard iniquity in my heart," declares the inspired Word, "the Lord will not hear me." That means that God will not even listen to my prayer, let alone answer it. To be standing on praying ground is to have put away every sin, to turn from anything that grieves the Holy Spirit, and to separate myself from all that is displeasing to God. And so as we think of this, the highest form of Christian service, and resolve to become intercessors, let us make sure first of all that we are standing on praying ground and that there is nothing between us and God.

THE BURDEN FOR OTHERS

In the second place, intercessory prayer means that we have prayed beyond ourselves, our needs and problems, and that we are in a place and position spiritually to enter into this blessed ministry with Jesus Christ, taking upon us the burden for others in a real soul-travail, and allowing the Holy Spirit to pray through us in the will of God.

Most of the prayers recorded in the Bible are for others. Moses and Paul, as we have already seen, thought only of Israel. Our Lord Himself seldom prayed for His own needs. His burden was always for the multitudes that thronged Him on every side. Intercessory prayer is prayer for others.

That means that we put ourselves alongside of the Lord Jesus Christ, seek to know the burden of His heart, find out the plan, the programme that He wants carried out, and then pray with that in mind. So often we do not think of this. The whole burden of our prayer is centred upon ourselves. It is our needs, our desires, that are uppermost in our prayers. We must get past this. We must pray until we have dealt with everything that concerns ourselves and then launch out in

intercession on behalf of others. What does God want done? What is His plan for this work or that? How best can we serve the interests of the Lord Jesus Christ and glorify Him? These are the questions that must be asked. Let us therefore wait before Him until He reveals the burden of His heart, and then, putting ourselves alongside Jesus Christ, let us intercede and bring His programme to pass.

That means that we must take into account the enablement of the Holy Spirit, for He alone knows the mind of God. The life yielded to Him will be directed, guided and illuminated, so that the petitions offered will not miss the mark. He will lead us to pray along the line of God's plan and God's purpose if we will but trust Him and place ourselves entirely at His disposal. Oh, the joy of praying with Jesus Christ! That is a different thing from praying for ourselves.

THE HARDEST KIND OF WORK

Now I want to go on and say that intercessory prayer is without doubt not only the highest form of Christian service, but also the hardest kind of work. To the person who is not an intercessor such a statement seems absurd. Prayer to most people is looked upon as an easy occupation. Difficulties are unknown. But that is because they know nothing at all of the ministry of intercession. Their prayers, for the most part, are centred upon themselves, their loved ones and their own personal interests, with an occasional petition for the perishing heathen. They spend, perchance, five to fifteen minutes in the morning and the same again at night. To set aside a special hour during the day, or to wait before God for half a night never enters their mind. Their prayer life is spasmodic. It is considered a side issue and is readily neglected if other things demand attention. Such a person is in no way affecting the kingdom of Satan. Hence prayer, so-called, is easy.

But the Christian who enters upon the ministry of intercession will pass through a very different experience. Satan will do everything in his power to hinder and obstruct.

There will be a conscious realization of his presence and opposition.

Then, too, discouragement will cross our pathway. Again and again we will feel like giving up. No wonder the Lord gave the parable of the friend at midnight. Importunity is one of the greatest requisites. We pray on for a certain time and then because the answer does not come we grow discouraged and give up. Thus Satan uses his most successful weapon against us and breaks down our determination to become intercessors.

Then, when all else has failed, he will burden us with work. Satan would rather have us work than pray any time. Full well he knows that prayerless work will be powerless and fruitless. Hence if he can only keep us busy so that we do not have time to pray he will have accomplished his purpose.

*"Away with work that hinders prayer,
'Twere best to lay it down;
For prayerless work, however good,
Will fail to win the crown."*

Oh, my brother, let me beg of you to take stock of your life and to make a thorough investigation and see if everything you are doing is really essential. Perhaps you are crowding out prayer by allowing Christian activities to take its place. I plead with you, before it is for ever too late, to adjust your ministry, leave out the non-essentials, and do not allow yourself to become overloaded, but see to it that you have time to get alone with God, and you will accomplish more in one month than you otherwise could in a year.

"Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers" (Col. 4: 12). Why such fervency? Why so much labour? Most of us would simply make our request before God, believe that He had answered, and think no more about it. But not so with Epaphras. To him it was hard work. He was a real intercessor. And so Paul describes his prayer life on behalf of others not only as "labour" but "fervent labour", or, as

it is in the margin, "striving". Do we know anything about that kind of ministry?

"And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly: and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22: 44). Thus prayed the Son of God. Even to Him prayer was the most difficult work that He had to do. Oh yes, it was a joy, for communion with God always brings joy and blessing; but then there is the enemy to meet when prayer becomes a battle. I wonder how much we know about this kind of prayer?

The inspired Word says that He was in agony, that after He had prayed for a time He began to pray "more earnestly", and that the work was so hard, the agony so great, the burden so heavy, the pressure so terrible, that the very sweat became blood as it oozed out through the pores of His skin. What intensity! How terrific the struggle! And how far we fall short in our intercessory prayer life! How little we know of the burden that rested on the Son of God.

"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8: 26). Here we have a picture of the prayer-life of the Holy Spirit. Even He prays as Jesus prayed. Note the language used in regard to His intercession. It was with "groanings". And in order to give some idea of the intensity and suffering it is said that the groans of the Spirit are inexpressible. No language is capable of conveying an adequate conception of the fervency of the Spirit's intercessions. They are with groanings which cannot be uttered.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE WEAPON

Intercessory prayer is the Christian's most effective weapon. Nothing can withstand its power. It will do things when all else has failed. And the marvel is that we turn to other agencies in order to accomplish what only prayer can bring to pass. God has placed this mighty weapon in our hands and He expects us to use it. How disappointed He must be

when we lay it aside and substitute natural means for supernatural work.

When D. L. Moody first visited Edinburgh, Scotland, it was literally true that within a few days the entire city was stirred to its depths. Not only so, but the whole of Scotland was more or less aroused. It was not long until the trains were bringing people into the city to attend the meetings from every part of the country, so tremendous was the interest.

What had happened? Why, God in answer to volumes of intercessory prayer that for months past had been ascending daily, had suddenly put a great concern upon the people. Thousands became anxious about their spiritual condition, and multitudes were swept into the Kingdom. It was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, outpourings of the Spirit that Scotland has ever seen or known. And now what is the result? Was it a true outcome?

I was over in the Old Country a few months ago, and this is what I discovered. The great outstanding leaders in evangelical and evangelistic work all over the British Isles, the men and women who have accomplished the biggest things for God's Kingdom, in the large majority of cases, were converted under the ministry of D. L. Moody. Scotland has never forgotten that remarkable visitation. (The secret, as everyone will admit, was first and foremost, intercessory prayer.)

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5: 16). Such is God's estimate of intercessory prayer. The illustration that follows is taken from the ministry of Elijah. How marvellously he made use of the God-appointed method! I think of Elijah as walking around with the key of heaven in his pocket. Taking it out, he places it in the lock of the clouds, turns it, and lo, the heavens are shut and closed, so that no rain can possibly fall. Three and a half years later he takes the key again from his pocket, puts it in the same lock, turns it, and lo, the rain falls in torrents. Thus he wielded the mighty weapon of intercession and brought things to pass.

"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12: 5). Yes, Peter was kept in prison, that was man's power. Then follow two words that bring us immediately into a higher realm where mightier forces are at work—"But prayer." Thank God, the Early Church knew the power of intercessory prayer. Peter was released. God had sent His angel in answer to the cry of the Church.

Why have we turned away from it? How is it that the Church of today has such little confidence in the efficacy of intercession? What a loss is ours! Oh, that God might talk loudly to us and call us back to the days of the Early Church, until once again we are brought to realize the effectiveness of this mighty weapon, so that we, too, may bring things to pass and do a supernatural work through intercessory prayer.

THE HIGH-WATER MARK

Intercessory prayer is the high-water mark of spiritual experience. There are many who boast of wonderful supernatural manifestations who are not intercessors. (It is possible to have some of the gifts of the Spirit, and yet not to be an intercessor.) To fail here is to fail everywhere, but to thus enter into fellowship with Christ is the greatest of all blessings.

You can never get higher than the throne-life. When Jesus Christ returned to the right hand of His Father it was to engage in the great ministry of intercession on behalf of His Church. For nineteen hundred years now He has been occupied in this way. In His estimation at least it is the most important work that He has to do. The throne-life is the high-water mark. To engage in this same ministry is to do down here what Christ is doing up there. The Bible says, "He ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7: 25).

My friend, you may be seeking some special gift. You may be looking for some unusual manifestation. It may be that some great emotional experience is your delight, and possibly you look down upon others who have not as yet received what you have received and consider that you are far above

them in Christian experience. Let me assure you that such is not the case. The highest form of Christian service is intercessory prayer. The high-water mark of spiritual experience is an intercessory life. Unless you have attained to this you fall far short. I care not how emphatically you may boast of your spiritual experiences and of the special gifts that you have received, your ministry is void of power, your gifts valueless, if you know not how to intercede on behalf of others. The throne-life is what really counts with God.

Forgive me if I seem to speak strongly on this point. But we are living in a day when Satan has substituted everything else in the world for spirituality in the place of intercessory prayer. We need to be warned and placed on our guard lest we be deceived by his devices and miss after all the high-water mark of spiritual experience.

GOD'S MIGHTY INSTRUMENT

(Intercessory prayer is God's mighty instrument for the salvation of souls.) I give here as an example the remarkable conversion of J. Hudson Taylor as related in his own words. It shows how his mother's prayers prevailed on his behalf. With gifts and talents she was not especially endowed, but she knew God, and she knew the ministry that is carried on behind the closed door. The incident reads as follows:

"Little did I know at the time what was going on in the heart of my dear mother, seventy or eighty miles away. She rose from the dinner table that afternoon with an intense yearning for the conversion of her boy, and feeling that—absent from home, and having more leisure than she could otherwise secure—a special opportunity was afforded her of pleading with God on my behalf, she went to her room and turned the key in the door, resolved not to leave that spot until her prayers were answered. Hour after hour that dear mother pled for me, until at length she could pray no longer, but was constrained to praise God for that which His Spirit taught her had already been accomplished—the conversion of her only son.

"When our dear mother came home a fortnight later, I was the first to meet her at the door, and to tell her I had such glad news to give. I can almost feel that dear mother's arms around my neck, as she pressed me to her bosom, and said, 'I know, my boy; I have been rejoicing for a fortnight in the glad tidings you have to tell me.'"

Oh, my friends, may God stir our hearts! How great is our responsibility! How wonderful are our resources! Souls are perishing on every side. Many of our relatives and loved ones are still outside the fold. We have talked to them and urged them to accept Christ, but all in vain. Year after year has gone by and they are not yet saved. Oh, that we might take upon us the burden of their souls and give God no rest until He answers and they are converted. If we truly realize the mighty instrument that God has placed in our hands we will surely wield it until results are obtained. All else may fail, but intercessory prayer is bound to avail. God cannot deny Himself.

GOD'S ALL POWERFUL AGENCY

(Intercessory prayer is God's all powerful agency for the outpouring of the Spirit.) (No revival has ever yet been given apart from this ministry.) Someone has prayed. Go, if you will, to the records of the great awakenings for years past and you will find that the secret, the source, has been prayer. God has burdened a little group here and there, sometimes only two or three in number, but these have so given themselves to intercessory prayer that the result has been a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The mystery of the great awakening under D. L. Moody in the church where he preached one Sunday night in England, when hundreds were swept into the Kingdom, for some time remained unsolved, but at last the secret came to light.

Two sisters, we were told, lived together. One was an invalid. Some years before she had picked up a newspaper and read an account of the work of the great American evangelist, D. L. Moody. A burden settled down upon her. From that day she began to pray that God would send Moody to

England and that he might preach in her church. At last after praying daily her request was granted. Her sister came home one morning and told her that a man by the name of Moody had preached.

Under a great burden the invalid shut herself in and refused to be seen. All that afternoon she pled with God, with the result that showers of blessing fell upon the congregation and hundreds were saved at the close of the evening service. That was the beginning of Moody's great work in the British Isles. God had signally set to His seal and it all came about as the result of an invalid's intercession.

When I was holding a city-wide campaign in Ballymena, where I faced the largest crowds that had ever gathered, I went to the little old school house where the four young men had wrestled with God in prayer, prayer that resulted in the great Irish Revival of 1859 -travailing, prevailing prayer.

Let me quote from the lectures of Charles G. Finney, the man who prayed down revivals. This incident proves again that God's all powerful agency in true revival work is intercessory prayer. It reads as follows:

"A pious man in the western part of this state was suffering from consumption. He was a poor man, and was ill for years. An unconverted merchant in the place, who had a kind heart, used to send him now and then some things for his comfort, or for his family. He felt grateful for the kindness, but could make no return, as he wanted to do. At length he determined that the best return he could make would be to pray for the man's salvation. So he began to pray, and his soul kindled, and he got hold of God. No revival was taking place there, but, by and by, to the astonishment of everybody, this merchant came right out on the Lord's side. The fire kindled all over the place, a powerful revival followed, and multitudes were converted.

"This poor man lingered, in this condition of weakness, for several years. After his death, I visited the place, and his widow put into my hands his diary. Among other entries was this: 'I am acquainted with about thirty ministers and churches.' He then went on to set apart certain hours in the

day and week to pray for each of these ministers and churches, and also certain seasons for praying for different missionary stations. Then followed, under different dates, such facts as these: 'Today I have been enabled to offer what I call the prayer of faith for the outpouring of the Spirit on — Church, and I trust in God there will soon be a revival there.' Under another date he had written: 'I have today been able to offer what I call the prayer of faith for — Church and trust there will soon be a revival there.' Thus he had gone over a great number of churches, recording the fact that he had prayed for them in faith that a revival might soon prevail among them, and it did.

"She told me that he was so exercised in prayer during his sickness, that she often feared he would 'pray himself to death'. The revival was exceedingly great and powerful in all the region, and the fact that it was about to prevail had not been hidden from this servant of the Lord. According to His Word, 'the secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him' (Ps. 25: 14). Thus this man, too feeble in body to go out of his house, was yet more useful to the world and the Church of God than all the heartless professors in the country. Standing between God and the desolations of Zion, and pouring out his heart in believing prayer, 'as a prince he had power with God and with men, and prevailed' (Gen. 32: 28).

"(There are two kinds of means requisite to promote a revival) the one to influence men, the other to influence God. Prayer is an essential link in the chain of causes that lead to a revival, as much so as truth is. Some have zealously used truth to convert men, and laid very little stress on prayer. They have preached, and talked, and distributed tracts with great zeal, and then wondered that they had so little success. And the reason was that they forgot to use the other branch of the means, effectual prayer. They overlooked the fact that truth, by itself, will never produce the effect, without the Spirit of God, and that the Spirit is given in answer to prayer."

PRAYER AND THE WORD

There is one passage in the Bible that has been more or less of a motto to me for years past. It is the statement found in Acts 6: 4, and reads as follows: [We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word."] What an ideal vocation! Everything else was considered secondary. The greatest thing that the apostles could possibly do for the Kingdom of God was to give themselves first to prayer, then to the ministry of the Word. And you will notice that prayer precedes preaching.

Oh, my brethren, let me entreat you to lay greater emphasis on this part of your work. To minister the Word apart from prayer is impossible. The two are inseparably connected. He who would preach powerfully must pray effectively. To prevail with God is to prevail with man. Therefore let us give ourselves as never before in these closing days of the Age to intercessory prayer, the highest form of Christian service.

