

The GOSPEL TRUTH

The Oberlin Evangelist

On Persevering Prayer For Others

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"And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves:

"For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?"

"And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.

"I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity, he will rise and give him as many as he needeth." --Luke 11:5-8

I propose, in speaking from this passage, to treat of prayer offered for others, and the encouragement we have for such prayer. This passage seems to have been designed to encourage us to pray for our friends and for others in general. The same is true of the Lord's prayer, since many of its petitions obviously contemplate blessings upon others not less than upon ourselves. Indeed, the whole Bible is replete with instances and examples of prevailing prayer for others. I might begin with the case of Abraham interceding, now for Ishmael, anon for Abimelech, and yet again for Sodom; and then I might pass on to speak of Moses and of Samuel; of Jeremiah also, and of other prophets; of the Apostles moreover, who are continually in prayer for the churches. The Bible is full of this, and must make the impression on every attentive reader, that intercession for others is a natural development of the Christian spirit.

It is equally a dictate of nature to pray for others as to pray for one's self. Who does not sometimes experience the spontaneous and irresistible impulse to cry out to God for others? It is utterly impossible for a parent to see a child in a house on fire, or sinking in deep waters, or in any great peril without crying to God for help. You who read the Bible must notice how God's people are continually in prayer for his church and his cause on earth. You see there how parents pray for their children, how one prays for another under any

circumstances of want. This lies out on the face of the whole Bible. None can fail to notice it who read their Bibles with any attention.

From the mere light of nature we expect God to hear our prayer for others. Consider this point and you will see it to be so. Even the wickedest of men and of women pray for their children in distress, and indeed for others besides theirs. They have an innate conviction that God should be sought in prayer, and that he will hear and help. Sometimes the impulse to pray for others is irresistible and insuppressible. You cry out spontaneously--May God have mercy on their souls! I doubt whether there is a man in our nation, however wicked, who could have stood by and have seen the cars at Norwalk plunge off into the river, without crying out, May God save their souls! This is quite as natural as to pray for ourselves, and shows fully the instinct of our minds. You may say what you please about there being no virtue in prayer, and you may try to believe what you will; yet none the less this sort of prayer will come with the occasion that calls for it. The fact remains the same, despite of all that men may strive to do by false philosophy to excuse themselves for praying so little. I am aware that some men object, saying it is of no use to pray for others; but this objection is utterly shallow and groundless. It assumes that prayer never influences God, but ourselves only. They say the influence of prayer is wholly subjective--i.e., on the person who prays; never objective--i.e., upon God. Strange that men should ever adopt a notion so absurd. This subjective influence never could be gained if men did not believe in the objective influence. How much good would it do your own heart to pray if it were the fact and you absolutely knew it to be, that God never hears and answers prayer! Think how ridiculous for a man to go before God and say to him--"Lord, I don't expect my prayer to influence thee in the least, for I know that thou canst not hear prayer at all; but I want to get a certain subjective effect on myself by this prayer, and therefore I obtrude myself before thy throne." How strange! Any man would be shocked at his own folly and absurdity.

But some of you perhaps did not fully understand me when I said in my last sermon that prayer did not change God's nature and purposes. Some men say--"Prayer must change God's plans if he answers it." No, never. It has always been God's plan to hear and answer prayer. This has always entered into his purposes.

Again, God's immutability implies that he will answer prayer. It would be strange indeed if God should not change his course in answer to prayer, if he be indeed immutable. If he were not to change for right prayer, it would prove him to be not good--it would imply that he had ceased to be benevolent; indeed, it would undeify him at once. When you come to resolve this idea into its elements, you will see that it subverts the whole idea of God and of his attributes. It must imply that God's creatures might come into any position before him, and he can never answer their prayers.

But many say--I can see how prayer may benefit myself, but cannot see how it can benefit others. I reply, the latter can easily be seen. No man can read the Bible without seeing that this is the fact--prayer does benefit others. No man can study his own convictions without seeing evidence of it. If prayer never could benefit others, the fact would belie all our innate convictions.

I have said that to pray for others is a spontaneity of our nature. Even when our enemies are in sudden danger and trouble, we lift up our cry for them spontaneously. I doubt whether even an infidel could see a child struggling in pain and peril, without crying out--May God help! Sometimes men in their sins have fallen into fearful circumstances, and have cried mightily to God, and God has interposed so signally as to astonish them. I have heard of

many cases of this sort. I recollect one, of a wicked man, on the point of drowning, who cried to God for help. It was remarkable that all his sins seemed to be concentrated into one present mass. He saw them--saw himself that great sinner who had sinned so grievously; saw that he must turn from all his sins to God, as he would ever hope for mercy;--did turn to God, saying, I yield, and I will be thine forever. At once after this, he rose to the surface, and floated ashore.

I have heard of another case, of a man in his sins, praying for a sick child. God heard, and wonderful to say, God answered, and the case made an impression on his mind which terminated in his speedy conversion.

So God hears the young ravens when they cry. So he heard those heathen sailors who were in the ship with Jonah. So he often hears sailors in distress as his word most impressively declares. "God commandeth and raiseth the strong wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven; they go down again to the depths; their soul is melted because of trouble. Then they cry unto the Lord, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then they are glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven." Ps. 107:25-30. Many a sailor knows that God has heard him in his cry of distress. Some of them can gratefully testify--God heard my cry and spared my life; now, therefore, I will serve him as long as I live. How often does God hear such prayer so manifestly as to leave no doubt, and no possibility of reasonable doubting!

Let us now ask--Why should we pray for others? Why has God so constituted us that we feel that we may and must pray for others? I answer,

1. They need our prayer. They may be mentally incapable of prayer; or their prayers for themselves may be utterly unavailing. Hence, they need the aid of some one who has power with God to pray for them. I can well remember that, in my own case, full one year before I was married, I had an irresistible conviction on my mind that I should lose my soul if I were to marry any other than a pious wife. I knew I could not pray for myself. An ungodly wife would not pray for me, but would only strengthen me in my sins. I therefore came fully to the conclusion that I should never marry any other than a pious woman. I had never heard my father or my mother pray, and had no reason to suppose they ever prayed for me. Hence, perhaps I felt the more need of a praying wife. But I have often heard other men say the same in regard to marrying pious wives. This may doubtless be abused; persons may depend too much on others' prayers; children often do, upon the prayers of their parents.

2. We need the exercise of praying for others. It will do us as well as them great good. This we may readily learn from our own experience.

3. Viewing God in his governmental relations and capacities, he needs this intercessory prayer for its influence on his creatures. He wants to interest his people in each other, and to cement their many hearts, as it were, into one. It is his great desire to bring all his people to care for each other and to love each other. Place before your mind the case of a great family. Suppose the father should not encourage his children to ask favors for each other. You say at once this would be very bad. Certainly a wise father would encourage that for the sake of strengthening the bands of mutual sympathy in his household. Some of the best families I ever knew have been remarkable for this. Each of the children were in the habit of asking favors not for himself, but for his brothers or sisters. You can easily see the value of this in a family. Surely its value cannot be less in Gods' great family. It cannot be strange,

therefore, that God should encourage his children to expect to be heard when they pray for their brethren and sisters. You can see how important it is that a father should encourage in his children the benevolent spirit of asking favors for each other, and should induce them to do so for the very purpose of cultivating benevolence in their hearts. It certainly is a most salutary arrangement in any family, or indeed in any government. Any good ruler loves to see his people interested in each other. What do you think of that family, ten in number, with which I was acquainted, who were accustomed, when they met each evening around the family altar, to detail briefly the state of their minds to each other, and if anyone was in darkness or in sin, all would unite to pray for that one, or even, if the case seemed to call for it, would set apart an entire day for fasting and prayer in his behalf. Was not that a most admirable practice? Or what would you say of that church which should in this way pray for each other, and help those especially who were in any affliction? And will not God encourage this spirit among his people? Most assuredly you know it must be so.

Again, prayer for each other draws us into a deeper consideration of each other's wants. When you begin to pray for another, you are compelled to study his character, his temptations, his wants. This opens the way for a richer heart-union.

Again, prayer for others draws us into sympathy with God's love, and with his feelings towards his people. We may blame them more, or may pity them more; or it may be that we shall simply love them more;--but, however this may be, we shall be more likely to have the same mind towards them that God has.

Again, it is intrinsically fit and proper that God should manifest his pleasure in every case of disinterested importunity for the souls of others. The case may be that of a stranger to you, yet your heart becomes deeply engaged and your very soul takes hold of the case; God sees it with delight. What do you want, my child, says he. I want this soul should be converted, you reply. Is there not some propriety in God's being pleased with this prayer? God looks on this suppliant, saying--"You come not to plead for yourself, not for life, not for any temporal good; but for your enemy. You come to pray for your enemy and you want I should convert his soul. I will do it." Indeed, I suppose that, other things being equal, a sincere prayer offered for any enemy is more sure to be granted than any other prayer. But whether offered for an enemy, or for a friend, it is impossible that God should not be greatly influenced by self-sacrificing, really benevolent prayer. He must be if he loves real benevolence, and seeks to promote it among his creatures.

Again, prayer for others needs this encouragement. If we were to pray earnestly for others and God did not regard it, we should lose confidence in prayer, not to say also in God himself.

This condescension on his part, is of the utmost importance to the whole universe. They need to know that they can influence the Infinite Mind by prayer for fellow creatures, for this will encourage them to try to help each other by prayer, and will serve to knit the bonds of mutual affection and interest.

It is striking to notice how our dependent relations upon each other and upon God multiply the occasions of prayer for each other. It would seem that God loves to create these occasions and to multiply them continually. So he shuts us up by his providence, straitens us all round about, and thus compels us to feel the necessity of prayer. O how he loves to multiply these occasions, and bring up one subject of prayer after another, keeping our hearts ever warm with benevolent interest in our fellow-beings, and drawing us also

exceedingly near to himself. All this time he is never weary of giving us audience, and of inviting us into the secret chamber of his love.

Prayer for others supplies one important condition in the government of God upon which he can show mercy without detriment to any governmental interests. Every one can readily see that a king might grant a favor to an offender for the sake of a mutual friend, which he could not grant for the offender's sake alone. Suppose a man here in Oberlin has committed a great crime; the Government cannot pardon him on the strength of his own prayer only; but if all Oberlin were to unite their petitions, he might, perhaps, for their sakes, grant the pardon. This principle has a wide and well-known application. Thus a parent might get a blessing for his child. The child may be guilty of high treason, but his father may have rendered so great services to the government, that for the sake of these, and in answer to his prayers, the Governor may honorably and safely pardon him. The Governor would reply to the guilty son--I cannot pardon you for your own sake, but for your father's sake I can. This principle has always been exercised in God's government. For Abraham's sake God could bless Abimelech, and Sarah, and almost Sodom. Noah, Daniel and Job are cited as examples of intercessors whom God would hear except under the extreme circumstances of guilt, when the nation had become really ripe for judgments. God's language to Moses is striking and most significant. It was on the occasion of the golden calf, that the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now, therefore, let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of thee a great nation." (Ex. 32:9-10) God could not hear the people, but did hear Moses; indeed, he speaks as if he could not go on in the course of just judgment against the people unless Moses would withdraw his intercession and let him go on. How strong is the view thus given us of the power of prevailing prayer!

To pray for others, and to be heard and answered of God in our prayer, serves greatly to increase our love to God in the form of affection, and our love to man in the form of benevolence. No one ever prayed for another, with real prayer, without feeling an increase of love towards that person, no matter whether it be for a stranger or an acquaintance. So if a community or a church pray for some individual, the more they pray, the better they will love. Prayer creates a bond of union between our souls and the souls of those whom we love. Let one pray for others till he prevails; it results in a wonderful sympathy, like that between parent and child. I have seen extraordinary cases of prayer for others, in which a most mysterious connection seemed to be established between the party praying and the party prayed for, the latter seeming to know that blessings came through prayer, and almost adoring and idolizing the source through which they came.

We can often obtain for others what they cannot for themselves. Abraham prayed for Abimelech, and obtained for him blessings, for which Abimelech's prayers might have been made in vain. Job prayed successfully for his friends and God heard him when he could not hear them. Moses, in like manner, prayed for Aaron and Miriam, and God's hearing him, when he could not hear them, became a loud rebuke of their envy and pride. This illustrates a great principle in God's government, showing both that God means to encourage intercession for others, and that in order to pray acceptably, persons must stand in favor before God--in a position which does not demand his rebuke, but which does at least justify manifestations of his favor. It is on this principle that God can and will hear the prayers of his humble, obedient, trusting children.

I come next to speak of the importance of perseverance in prayer. This text, like that of my last sermon, is designed to teach this doctrine. You will notice how strong the case is made

in our present text. "I say unto you, though he will not rise and give him because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity, he will rise and give him as many as he needeth." This, however, does not teach that God's friendship for his people fails to induce him to give, but it is a strong case to show that Christians get for their importunity what they could not get without. There are cases where nothing short of importunity gains the desired blessing. The case of the Syrophenician woman is to the same point. If she had desisted after the first or the second rebuff, she had surely failed of the great blessing. Daniel prayed on one occasion twenty-one days, and could not give up. At last deliverance came. This being obliged to press out suit so long compels us to study and to understand our case. It leads us into a deeper sympathy with God and with all his views and policy.

We can better appreciate the value of the blessing, by how much the more it costs us and the longer we have to pray for it. The more intensely we feel in our prayer for a given case, the more fully we appreciate the blessing when it comes. It supplies a deeper want of our souls and comes with a more refreshing consolation.

Such persevering prayer develops all the Christian graces. Especially it develops benevolence, the mother of all the rest. It brings this out in all its rich and varied phases.

It is often important that he who prays for another should have time and inducement to remove all obstacles out of the way. It does not, by any means, consist with God's plans of moral government to hear your prayer for the conversion of a soul, so long as you yourself are laying a stumbling-block in his way. God will surely give you time by delaying to answer, for you to search out and remove all such hindrances. Besides, providences must have time and scope to operate. Providential difficulties must be removed out of the way, and time may be requisite for this.

Often God delays that he may bring us lower in the dust before him. He leads us into such views that we shall not be puffed up, and such that the blessing, given, shall not injure us. To secure this object, often delays the answer long. We are not low enough, so that he can give us the blessing without mischief to ourselves. Study carefully the case of that Syrophenician woman. Some said, "Send her away, for she crieth after us." Even Christ said he was not sent save to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This was a dash of cold water upon her warm hopes, for it seemed as if Christ intended to discourage her. As if even this were not enough, he finally went so far as to say--"It is not suitable to take the children's bread and cast it to dogs." Did it not seem to her cruel that he should throw this foul Jewish prejudice into her teeth? But mark, what did she do? Did she resent it? Did she turn away discouraged? By no means. She seemed to say--You don't mean to put me away; you cannot do that, I know the goodness of your heart too well. So she turned the very rebuke into an argument for her case. Truth, said she, but I do not ask for children's bread; I only want the crumbs that fall from the table, and those it is surely proper to give to dogs. Now look at our blessed Lord. All overcome by such blended humility and importunity and faith, he yielded and cried out, "O, woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt." You see the great value of this importunity. All the world over wherever this story has been read, what rich lessons it has taught men on this subject.

The case of Jacob struggling with the angel of the covenant, is in point here. It was only after he had safely passed the crisis, and said, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me," that the Lord blessed him as he prayed.

Sometimes God delays for the sake apparently of drawing us into more and mightier prayer.

We become straitened, and agonized. Then God puts it into our hearts to do something yet more for the soul prayed for. Our experience in prayer reveals this. Then when we have done it, and are in every respect prepared, God sends an arrow and does the work.

Another reason for delay may be, that you may become more deeply unified with the subject of your prayer. Sometimes you pray for a person till you become so unified with him that you say--If that soul goes to hell, I must go with him. I have heard men say this as their own experience in prayer. So Christ himself seems to have prayed for his dying people. He grasped the masses, saying--I must save them or sink to hell with them. Paul had a like experience when he said--"I could wish myself accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." So, often God waits and delays his answer to prayer till the suppliant becomes so unified that in sympathy they cannot be separated. Moses said--"Save this people, or blot my name from this book." I have seen precisely this in many cases. The Holy Ghost gives them such sympathy with the person they pray for, and such a hold of God's promise in prayer, they cry out--I cannot live unless God hear and save! How can I live and see this people die! Now, God loves this spirit and often waits till it comes up. In the case of parents, God frequently waits till they take hold of the case of their children in this very way. I well remember the striking case of a father who was so agonized in prayer for his children he told them he could not live unless he could see the salvation of the Lord among them.

But why do not men pray more for others?

Mainly because they are not benevolent, but selfish only. They are selfish in all the little prayer they do make.

Or, sometimes, they are skeptical and unbelieving, and for this reason they do not lay out their strength in prayer. Or, they are presumptuous, and assume that somebody else will pray enough to answer all purposes. Or, they are too carnal to have any spirit of prayer. Ah, they do not care for the souls of the perishing. Their tender mercies even, are cruel. They see sinners going to hell, but are too carnal to pray for them. They offer no earnest, no agonizing prayer.

Brethren, what is your state of mind in regard to the various objects of prayer around you? How do you feel for the young people gathered here? Do you sympathize earnestly in prayer for the elder members of the church? What is your state of mind towards the impenitent? Are you praying in earnest for those who have long time remained impenitent among us? Do you feel deeply for the strangers who are coming among us? Will you allow me to ask you in all faithfulness, have you the spirit of prayer for others? As a preacher, I think I can tell when you pray by the light I experience in my own mind when I study my sermons, and by the effect my words produce on the minds of my hearers. Do you not know that when some are agonizing in prayer, some sinners are correspondingly struggling under conviction? Just in proportion to the amount and power of struggling prayer will be the struggles of those who are smitten with arrows of convicting truth.

Some of you who once prayed with earnestness and power, I fear have lost that spirit, or have let it sorely languish. Let me ask you all--Have you as much of the spirit of prayer as you once had? Do you feel bowed down with grief because God's work revives no more? Some of you can answer in the affirmative; but some of you cannot. Some of you must say in truth, there has been a great falling off in prayer, and in interest for souls. On one occasion, as I was preaching on this subject, a man who was represented to be one of the

most pious men in the church rose and said, "I am the man--Mr. Finney, you need not say another word; I am the Achan in this camp of Israel; you need not look any further for the Achan--I am he." What he said seemed to have more effect than everything else in the meeting, and was the commencement of a glorious revival.

To the students present, let me say--Are you aware how much you can do by praying for each other? Are you in the habit of meeting in little circles for this purpose? Are some of your classmates in their sins, and can you let them live and die so? Are you not in fault for their impenitence? Have you set your heart so intensely upon the conversion of these souls that you cannot live unless they are converted?

And will you not all pray for your teachers and stay up their hands and make their hearts strong by your sympathies and your prayers in their behalf? Cry unto God for them that they may be made mighty through God for the converting and saving of precious souls. O, if all the church were filled with the spirit of prayer, what a rush we should see towards the kingdom of heaven, even this very night! What is your practice during our meetings of enquiry? Are you instant in prayer then? It always alarms me in a church to find that few or none enquire about the state of these meetings with anxious sinners. It shows that the hearts of the people are not there. Brethren, do you pray for those who have set their faces enduringly towards Zion?

[Return to 1855 Index Page](#)

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