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JULY 1908

PRAYER AND ITS IMPORTUNITY

I.

THE work of the ministry labours under one heavy disadvantage when we regard it as a profession, and compare it with other professions. In these, experience brings facility, a sense of mastery in the subject, self-satisfaction, self-confidence; but in our subject the more we pursue it, the more we enter into it, so much the more are we cast down with the overwhelming sense, not only of our insufficiency, but of our unworthiness. Of course, in the technique of our work we acquire a certain ease. We learn to speak more or less freely and aptly. We learn the knack of handling a text, of conducting church work, or dealing with men, and the like. If it were only texts or men we had to handle! But we have to handle the gospel. We have to lift up Christ—a Christ who is the death of natural self-confidence—a humiliating, even a crushing Christ. We have to handle a gospel that is a new rebuke to us every step we gain in intimacy with it. There is no real intimacy with the gospel which does not mean a new sense of God's holiness. There is no new insight into the Cross which does not bring, whatever else come with it, a deeper sense of the solemn holiness of the love that meets us there. And there is no new sense of the holy God that does not arrest His name upon our unclean lips. If our

I

very repentance is to be repented of, how shall we be proud, or even pleased, with what we may think a success in our preaching? So that we are not surprised that some preachers, after what the public calls a most brilliant and impressive discourse, retire to humble themselves before God, to ask forgiveness for the poor message, and to call themselves most unprofitable servants—yea, even when they knew themselves that they had ‘done well.’ The more we grasp our gospel the more it abashes us.

Moreover, as we learn more of the seriousness of the gospel for human fate, we feel the more that every time we present it we are adding to the judgement of some as well as to the salvation of others. We are not like speakers who present a matter that men can freely take or leave, and agree or differ without moral result. The deeper and surer our gospel the more is our work a judgement on those to whom it is not a grace. This was what bore upon the Saviour’s own soul, and darkened His very agony into eclipse. That He, who knew Himself to be the salvation of His own beloved people, should, by His very love, become their doom! And here we watch and suffer with Him, however sleepily. There is put into our charge our dear people’s life or death. For to those to whom we are not life we are death, in proportion as we truly preach, not ourselves, but the real Christ.

How solemn our place is! It is a sacramental place. We have not simply to state our case, we have to *convey* our Christ, and to convey Him effectually. We are sacramental elements, broken often, in the Lord’s hands, as He dispenses His grace through us. We do not, of course, believe that orders are an ecclesiastical sacrament, as Rome does. But we are forced to realize the idea underlying that dogma—the sacramental nature of our person, work, and vocation for the gospel. We are not saviours. There is only one Saviour. But we are His sacraments. We do not believe in an ecclesiastical priesthood; but we are made to feel how we stand between God and the people as none of our flock do. We bring Christ to them, and them

to Christ, in sacrificial action, in a way far more moral, inward, and taxing than official priesthood can do. As ministers we lead the sacerdotal function of the whole Church in the world—its holy confession and sacrifice for the world in Christ.

We ought, indeed, to feel the dignity of the ministry; we must present some protest against the mere fraternal conception which so easily sinks into an unspiritual familiarity. But still more than the dignity of the ministry do its elect feel its solemnity. How can it be otherwise? We have to dwell much with the everlasting burnings. We have to tend a consuming fire. We have to feed our life where all the tragedy of life is gathered to an infinite crisis in Christ. We are not the fire, but we live where it burns. The matter we handle in our theological thought we can only handle with some due protection for our face. It is one of the dangerous industries. It is continually acting on us, continually searching our inner selves. We cannot hold it and examine it at arm's length. It enters into us. It evokes the perpetual comment of our souls, and puts us continually on self-judgement. Our critic, our judge, is at the door. Self-condemnation arrests denunciation. And the true apostle can never condemn but in the spirit of self-condemnation.

But after all, our doom is our blessing. Our Judge is on our side. For if humiliation be wrung from us, still more is faith, hope, and prayer. Everything that rebukes our self-satisfaction does still more to draw out our faith. He also hath given us the reconciliation. The more judgement we see in the holy cross the more we see it is judgement unto salvation. The more we are humbled the more we 'roll our souls upon Christ.' And we recover our self-possession only by giving our soul again and again to Christ to keep. We win a confidence in self-despair. Prayer is given us as wings wherewith to mount, but also to shield our face when they have carried us before the great white throne. It is in prayer that the holiness comes home as love, and the love is transfigured to holiness. At every

step our thought is transformed to prayer, and our prayer opens new ranges of thought. His great revelation is His holiness, always out-going in atoning love. We receive the reconciliation. We take it home. Then the very wrath of God becomes a glory. The red in the sky is the new dawn. Our self-accusation becomes a new mode of praise. Our loaded hearts spring light again. Our heavy conscience turns to grave moral power. A new love is born for our kind. A new and tender patience steals upon us. We see new ways of helping, serving, and saving. We issue into a new world. We are one with the Christ not only on His cross, but in His resurrection. Think of the resurrection power and calm, of that awful final peace, that infinite satisfaction in the eternal thing eternally achieved, which filled His soul when He had emerged from death, when man's worst had been done, and God's best had been won, for ever and for all. We have our times of entrance into that Christ. As we were one with Him in the likeness of His death, so we are in the likeness of His resurrection. And the same Eternal Spirit which puts the preacher's soul much upon the cross also raises it continually from the dead. We overcome our mistakes, negligences, sins; nay, we rise above the sin of the whole world, which will not let our souls be as good as they are. We overcome the world, and take courage, and are of new cheer. We are in the Spirit. And then we can preach, pray, teach, heal. And even the unclean lips then put a new thrill into our sympathy and a new tremor into our praise.

If it be not so, how shall our dangerous work not demoralize us, and we perish from our too much contact with holy things!

The minister's holiest prayer is hardly lawful to utter. Few of his public would comprehend it. Some would dismiss it with their most opprobrious word. They would call it theological. When he calls to God in his incomprehensible extremity they would translate it into an appeal to Elijah (Matt. xxvii. 47). For to them theology is largely mythology.

We are called at the present day to a reconstruction of the old theology, a restatement of the old gospel. We have to reappropriate and remind the truth of our experienced Christianity. But what a hardship it is that this call should search us at a time when the experimental power of our Christianity has abated, and the evangelical experience is so low and so confused as it often is! It must be the minister's work to recover and deepen this experience for the Churches, in the interest of faith, and of the truth in which faith renders account of itself. For the reformation of belief we must have a restoration of faith. And the engine for such recovery of faith is for us what it was for Luther and his like—prayer; and it is that prayer which is the wrestling of the conscience and not merely the cry of the heart, the prayer for reconciliation and redemption and not merely for guidance and comfort, the prayer of faith and not merely of love.

I saw in a friend's house a photograph from (I think) Dürer—just two tense hands, palms together, and lifted in prayer. It was most eloquent, most subduing. I wish I could stamp the picture on the page here and fit to it Milton's line:

The great two-handed engine at *our* door.

II.

Public prayer is, on the whole, the most difficult part of the work of the minister. To help the difficulty I have always claimed that pulpit notes of prayer may be used. 'The Lord's Prayer' itself is of this nature. It is not a prayer, but a scheme of prayer, heads of prayer, or buoys in the channel. But even with the use of all helps there are perils enough. There are prayers that, in the effort to become real, are much too familiar in their fashion of speech. A young man began his prayer, in my own hearing, with the words, 'O God, we have come to have a chat with Thee.' It was gruesome. Think of it as a sample

of modern piety for the young ! No prayers, certainly no public prayers, should be 'chats with God.' Again, other prayers are sentimental prayers. George Dawson's volume has this fault. The prayers of the Church should not be exposures of the affectional man. The public prayer of the Church, as the company of grace, is the soul returning to God that gave it; it is the sinner coming to the Saviour, or the ransomed of the Lord returning to Zion; it is the sanctified with the Sanctifier; it is not primarily the child talking to the Father—though that note may prevail in more private prayers. We are more than stray sheep reclaimed. We are those whose iniquity has lain upon Christ for us all.

But the root of the difficulty of public prayer lies farther back than in the matter of style. It lies in the difficulty of private prayer, in its spiritual poverty, its inertia, its anaemia. What culture can deal with the rooted difficulty that resides there, out of sight, in the inner man of the heart, for lack of the courage of faith, for sheer spiritual fecklessness? Yet the preparation for prayer is to pray. The culture needed is the practice of prayer. It is only prayer that teaches to pray. The minister ought never to speak before men in God's name without himself first speaking to God in man's name, and making intercession as for himself so for his people.

Intercession ! We are properly vigilant that the minister do not sever himself from his people in any sacerdotal way. But for all that, is the minister's personal and private prayer on exactly the same footing as a layman's? It is a question that leads to the distinction between intercessory and vicarious prayer. The personal religion of the minister is vicarious even when it is not intercessory. Great indeed is the spiritual value of private intercession. The *intercessory* private prayer of the minister is the best corrective of the *critical* spirit which so easily besets and withers us to-day. That reconciliation, that pacification of heart, which comes by prayer opens in us a fountain of private intercession, especially for our antagonists. Only

of course it must be private. But the minister is also praying to his people's good even when he is not interceding on their behalf, or leading them in prayer. What he is for his Church he is with his whole personality. And so his private and personal prayers are vicarious for his people even when he does not know it. No Christian man lives for himself, nor believes for himself. Ten faithful men would have saved Sodom. And if the private Christian in his private prayers does not pray, any more than he lives, unto himself alone, much more is this true for the minister. His private prayers make a great difference to his people. They may not know what makes his spell and blessing: even he may not. But it is his most private prayers; which, thus, are vicarious even where not intercessory.

What he is for his Church, I have said, he is with his whole personality. And nothing gives us personality like true prayer. Nothing makes a man so original. We cannot be true Christians without being original. Living faith destroys the commonplaceness, the monotony of life. Are not all men original in death? *Je mourrai seul*. Much more are they original and their true selves in Christ's death and their living relation to that. For true originality we must be one, and closely one, with God. The most original spirit in history was the man who said, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.' What a reflection on our faith that so much piety should be humdrum and deadly dull! Private prayer, when it is real action, is the greatest forge of personality. It places a man in direct and effective contact with God the Creator, the source of originality, and especially with God the Redeemer as the source of our new creation. For the minister personality is everything—not geniality, as it is the day's fashion to say, but personality; and prayer is the spring of personality. This impressive personality, due to prayer, you may often have in 'the peasant saint.' And in some cases its absence is as palpable. Hence comes vulgarity in prayer, essential vulgarity underlying much

possible fineness of phrase or manner. Vulgarity in prayer lies not so much in its offences to good taste in style as in its indications of the absence of spiritual *habit* and reality. If the theology of rhetoric ousts the theology of reality in the sermon, how much more in prayer?

Prayer is for the religious life what original research is for science—by it we get direct contact with reality. The soul is brought into union with its own vaster nature—God. Therefore, also, we must use the Bible as an original; for indeed the Bible is the most copious spring of prayer, and of power, and of range. If we learn to pray from the Bible, and avoid a mere *cento* of its phrases, we shall cultivate, in our prayer, the large humane note of a universal gospel. Let us nurse our prayer on our *study* of our Bible; and let us therefore not be too afraid of *theological* prayer. True Christian prayer must have theology in it; no less than true theology must have prayer in it and must be capable of being prayed. ‘Your theology is too difficult,’ said Charles V to the Reformers, ‘it cannot be understood without much prayer.’ Yes, that is our arduous puritan way. Prayer and theology must interpenetrate to keep each other great, and wide, and mighty. The failure of the habit of prayer is at the root of much of our light distaste for theology. There is a conspiracy of influences round us whose effect is to belittle our great work. Earnest ministers suffer more from the smallness of their people than from their sins, and far more than from their unkindness. Our public may kill by its triviality a soul which could easily resist the assaults of wickedness. And our newspaper will greatly aid their work. Now, to resist this it is not enough to have recourse to prayer, and to cultivate devotion. Unfortunately there are signs in the religious world to show that prayer and piety alone do not save men from pettiness of interest, thinness of soul, spiritual volatility, the note of insincerity, or foolishness of judgement. The remedy is not prayer alone, but prayer on the scale of the whole gospel and on the range of searching faith. It is prayer which rises above

the childish petitions that disfigure much of our public pietism, prayer which issues from the central affairs of the kingdom of God. It is prayer with the profound Bible as its book of devotion, and a true theology of faith for half of its power. It is the prayer of a mind that moves in Bible passion, and ranges with Bible scope, even when it eschews Bible speech and 'the language of Canaan.'

And yet, with all its range, it is prayer with *concentration*. It has not only thought, but will in it. The great reason why so many will not decide for Christ is that Christ requires from the world concentration; not seclusion and not renunciation merely, but concentration. And we ministers have our special form of that need. I am speaking not of our share in the common troubles of life, but of those specially that arise from the ministerial office and care. No minister can live up to his work on the casual or interjectional kind of prayer that might be sufficient for many of his flock. He must think, of course, in his prayers—in his private prayers—and he must pray his faith's thought. But, still more, in his praying he must act. Prayer is not a frame of mind, but a great energy. He must rise to conceive his work as an active function of the work of Christ; and he must link his faith, therefore, with the intercession which is the energy of Christ in heaven. In this, as in many ways, he must remember, to his great relief and comfort, that it is not he who is the real pastor of his Church, but Christ, and that he is but Christ's curate. The final responsibility is not his, but Christ's, who bears the responsibility of all the sins and frets, both of the world and, especially, of the Church.

The concentration, moreover, should correspond to the positivity of the gospel and the Bible. Prayer should rise more out of God's Word and concern for His Kingdom than even out of our personal needs, trials, or desires. That is implied in prayer in Christ's name or for Christ's sake, prayer from His place in the midst of the Kingdom. *Our*

Prayer-book does not prescribe prayer, but it does more—it inspires it. And prayer in Christ's name is prayer inspired by His first interest—the gospel. Do not use Christ simply to countersign your petition by a closing formula, but to create, inspire, and shape it. Prayer in Christ's name is prayer for Christ's object—for His Kingdom and His promise of the Holy Ghost.

If we really pray for that and yet do not feel we receive it, probably enough we have it; and we are looking for some special form of it not ours, or not ours yet. We may be mistaking the fruits of the Spirit for His presence. Fruits come late. They are different from signs. Buds are signs, and so are other things hard to see. It is the Spirit that keeps us praying for the Spirit, as it is grace that keeps us in grace. Remember the patience of the missionaries who waited in the Spirit fifteen years for their first convert. If God gave His Son *unasked*, how much more will He give His Holy Spirit to them that *ask* it! But let us not prescribe the form in which He comes.

The true close of prayer is when the utterance expires in its own spiritual fullness. That is the true Amen. Such times there are. We feel we are at last laid open to God. We feel as though we 'did see heaven opened, and the holy angels, and the great God Himself.' The prayer ends itself; *we* do not end it. It mounts to its heaven and renders its spirit up to God, saying, 'It is finished.' It has its perfect consummation and bliss, its spiritually natural close and fruition, whether it has answer or not.

III.

In all I have said I have implied that prayer should be strenuously *importunate*. Observe, not petitionary merely, nor concentrated, nor active alone, but importunate. For prayer is not only meditation or communion. Nor ought it to be merely submissive in tone, as the 'quietist' ideal is. We need not begin with 'Thy will be done' if

we but end with it. Remember the stress that Christ laid on importunity. Strenuous prayer will help us to recover the masculine type of religion—and then our opponents will at least respect us.

I would speak a little more fully on this matter of importunity. It is very closely bound up with the reality both of prayer and of religion. Prayer is not really a power till it is importunate. And it cannot be importunate unless it is felt to have a real effect on the Will of God. I may slip in here my conviction that far less of the disbelief in prayer is due to a scientific view of nature's uniformity than to the kind of prayer that men hear from us in public worship. And I would further say that by importunity something else is meant than passionate dictation and stormy pertinacity—imposing our egoist will on God, and treating Him as a mysterious but manageable power that we may coerce and exploit.

The deepening of the spiritual life is a subject that frequently occupies the attention of religious conferences, and of the soul bent on self-improvement. But it is not certain that the great saints would always recognize the ideal of some who are addicted to the use of the phrase. The 'deepening of the spiritual life' they would find associated with two unhappy things.

1. They would recoil from a use of Scripture prevalent in those circles, which is atomistic, individualist, subjective, and fantastic.

2. And what they would feel most foreign to their own objective and penetrating minds might be the air of introspection and self-measurement too often associated with the spiritual thus 'deepened'—a spiritual egoism.

We should distinguish at the outset *the deepening of spiritual life* from the *quickening of spiritual sensibility*. Christ on the Cross was surely deepened in spiritual experience, but was not the essence of that dereliction, and the concomitant of that deepening, the dulling of spiritual sensibility?

There are many plain obstacles to the deepening of

spiritual life, amid which I desire to name here only, prayer conceived merely, or chiefly, as *submission*, resignation, quietism. We say too soon, 'Thy will be done'; and too ready acceptance of a situation as His will often means feebleness or sloth. It may be His will that we surmount His will. It may be His higher will that we resist His lower. Prayer is an act of will much more than of sentiment, and its triumph is more than acquiescence. Let us submit when we *must*, but let us keep the submission in reserve rather than in action, as a ground tone rather than the sole effort. Prayer with us has largely ceased to be *wrestling*. But is that not the dominant scriptural idea? It is not the sole idea, but is it not the dominant?

I venture to enlarge on this last head by way of meeting some who hesitate to speak of the power of prayer to alter God's will. I offer two points—

I. Prayer may really change the will of God, or, if not His will, His intention.

II. It may, like other human energies of godly sort, take the form of resisting the will of God. Resisting His will may be doing His will.

I. As to the first point. If this is not believed the earnestness goes out of prayer. It becomes either a ritual, or a soliloquy only overheard by God; just as thought with the will out of it degenerates into dreaming or brooding, where we are more passive than active. Prayer is not merely the meeting of two moods or two affections, the laying of the head on a divine bosom in trust and surrender. That may have its place in religion, but it is not the nerve and soul of prayer. Nor is it religious reverie. Prayer is an encounter of *wills*—till one will or the other give way. It is not a spiritual exercise merely, but in its maturity it is a cause acting on the course of God's world.¹ It is, indeed, by God's grace that prayer is a real cause, but such it is. And of course there must be in us a faith

¹ This position is excluded by Schleiermacher's view of religion as absolute dependence, because that leaves room for no action of man on God. And it is one of the defects of so great a saint as Robertson.

corresponding to His grace. Of course also there is always, behind all, the readiness to accept God's will without a murmur when it is perfectly evident and final. 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' Yes, but there is also the effort to alter its form according to our sanctified needs and desires. You will notice that in Paul's case the power to accept the sufficiency of God's grace only came in the course of an importunate prayer aiming to turn God's hand. Paul ended, rather than began, with 'Thy will be done.'

'Thy will be done' was no utterance of mere resignation, though it has mostly come to mean this in a Christianity which tends to canonize the weak instead of strengthening them. As prayer it was a piece of active co-operation with God's will. It was a positive part of it. It is one thing to submit to a stronger will, it is another to be one with it. We submit because we cannot resist it; but when we are one with it we cannot succumb. It is not *a* power, but *our* power. But the natural will is not one with God's; and so we come to use these words in a mere negative way, meaning that we cease to resist. We give in and lie down. But is that the sense of the words in the Lord's Prayer? Do they mean that we have no objection to God's will being done? or that we do not withstand any more? or even that we accept it gladly? Do they not mean something far more positive—that we actively will God's will and aid it, that it is the whole content of our own, that we put into it all the will that there can be in prayer, which is the great will-power of the race? It is our heart's passion that God's will be done and His kingdom come. And can His kingdom come otherwise than as it is a passion with us? Can His will be done? God's will was not Christ's will merely, but His meat and drink, the source of His energy and the substance of His task.

Observe, nothing can alter God's grace, His *will* in that sense, His large will and final purpose—our racial blessing, our salvation, our redemption in Jesus Christ. But He is an infinite opportunist. His ways are flexible. His

intentions are amenable to us if His *will* is changeless. The steps of His process are variable according to our freedom and His.

We are living, let us say, in a careless way; and God proposes a certain treatment of us according to our carelessness. But in the exercise of our spiritual freedom we are by some means brought to pray. We cease to be careless. We pray God to visit us as those who hear. Then He does another thing. He acts differently, with a change caused by our freedom and our change. The treatment for deafness is altered. God adopts another treatment—perhaps for weakness. We have by prayer changed His action, and so far His will (at any rate His intention) concerning us. As we pray, the discipline for the prayerless is altered to that for the prayerful. We attain the thing God did not mean to give us unless He had been affected by our prayer. We change the conduct, if not the will, of God to us, the *Verhalten* if not the *Verhältniss*.

Again, we pray and pray, and no answer comes. The boon does not arrive. Why? Perhaps we are not spiritually ready for it. It would not be a real blessing. But the persistence, the importunity of faith, is having a great effect on our spiritual nature. It ripens. A time comes when we are ready for answer. We then present ourselves to God in a spiritual condition which reasonably causes Him to yield. The new spiritual state is not the answer to our prayer, but it is its effect; and it is the condition which makes the answer possible. It makes the prayer effectual. The gift can be a blessing now. So God resists us no more. Importunity prevails, not as mere importunity (for God is not bored into answer), but as the importunity of God's elect, i. e. as a force of the Kingdom, as increased spiritual power, as real moral action, bringing corresponding strength and fitness to receive. I have often found that what I sought most I did not get at the right time, not till it was too late, not till I had learned to do without it, till I had renounced it in principle (though not in desire). That was God's right time—when I could

have it as though I had it not. If it came, it came not to gratify me, but to glorify Him and be a means of serving Him.

One recalls here that most pregnant saying of Schopenhauer: 'All is illusion—the hope or the thing hoped.' If it is not true for all it is true for very many. Either the hope is never fulfilled or else its fulfilment disappoints. God gives the hoped-for thing, but sends leanness into the soul. The mother prays for a son—and he breaks her heart, and were better dead. Hope may lie to us, or the thing hoped may dash us. But though He slay me I will trust. God does not fail. Amid the wreck of my little world He is firm, and I in Him. I justify God in the ruins; in His good time I shall arrive. More even than my hopes may go wrong. I may go wrong. But my Redeemer liveth; and, great though God is as my Fulfiller, He is greater as my Redeemer. He is great as my hope, but He is greater as my power. What is the failure of my hope from Him compared with the failure of His hope in me? If He continue to believe in me I may well believe in Him.

God's object with us is not to give just so many things and withhold so many; it is to place us in the tissue of His kingdom. His best answer to us is to raise us to the power of answering Him. The reason why He does not answer our prayer is because we do not answer Him and His. And His prayer was, as though Christ did beseech us, 'Be ye reconciled.' He would lift us to the exercise of confident business with Him, to commerce of loving wills. The painter wrestles with the sitter till he gives him back himself, and there is a speaking likeness. So man with God, till God surrender His secret. He gives or refuses things, therefore, with a view to that communion alone, and on the whole. It is that spiritual, personal end, and not an iron necessity, that rules His course. Is there not a constant spiritual interaction between God and man as free spiritual beings? *How* that can be is one of the great philosophic problems. But the fact that it is, is of

the essence of faith. It is the unity of our universe. Many systems try to explain *how* human freedom and human action are consistent with God's omnipotence and omniscience. None succeed. *How* secondary causes like man are compatible with God as the Universal and Ultimate Cause is not at once rationally plain. But there is no practical doubt that they are. And so it is with the action of man on God in prayer. We may perhaps, for the present, put it thus, that we cannot change the will of God, which is grace, and which even Christ never changed but only revealed; but we can change the intention of God, which is a manner of treatment, in the interest of grace, according to the situation of the hour.

If we are guided by the Bible we have much ground for this view of prayer. *Does not Christ set more value upon importunity than on submission?* 'Knock, and it shall be opened.' I would refer also not only to the parable of the unjust judge, but to the incident of the Syrophenician woman, where her wit, faith, and importunity together did actually change our Lord's intention and break His custom. Then there is Paul beseeching the Lord thrice for a boon; and urging us to be instant, insistent, continual in prayer. We have Jacob wrestling. We have Abraham pleading, yea haggling, with God for Sodom. We have Moses interceding for Israel and asking God to blot his name out of the book of life, if that were needful to save Israel. We have Job facing God, withstanding Him, almost bearding Him, and extracting revelation. And we have Christ's own struggle with the Father in Gethsemane.

It is a wrestle on the greatest scale—all manhood taxed as in some great war, or some great negotiation of State. And the effect is exhaustion often. No, the result of true prayer is not always peace.

II. As to the second point. This wrestle is in a certain sense a resisting of God. You cannot have wrestling otherwise; but you may have Christian fatalism. It is not mere wrestling with ourselves, our ignorance, our self-will. That is not prayer, but self-torment. It is wrestling

with God. And it is better to fall thus into the hands of God than of man—even your own. It is a resistance that God loves. It is quite foreign to a godless, self-willed, defiant resistance. In love there is a kind of resistance that enhances it. The resistance of love is a quite different thing from the resistance of hostility. The yielding to one you love is very different from capitulating to an enemy.

Two constant lovers, being joined in one,
Yielding unto each other yield to none—

i.e. to no foreign force, no force foreign to the love which makes them one.

So when God yields to prayer in the name of Christ, to the prayer of faith and love, He yields to Himself who inspired it. Christian prayer is the Spirit praying in us. It is prayer in the solidarity of the Kingdom. It is a continuation of Christ's prayer, which in Gethsemane was a wrestle, an *ἀγών* with the Father. But if so, it is God pleading with God, God dealing with God—as the true atonement must be. And when God yields it is not to an outside influence He yields, but to Himself.

Let me make it still more plain. When we resist the will of God we may be resisting what God wills to be temporary and to be resisted, what He wills to be intermediary and transcended. We resist because God wills we should. We are not limiting God's will, any more than our moral freedom limits it. That freedom is the image of His, and, in a sense, part of His. We should defraud Him and His freedom if we did not exercise ours. So the prayer which resists His dealing may be part of His will and its fulfilment.

Does God not will the existence of things for us to resist, to grapple with? Do we ourselves not appoint problems and make difficulties for those we teach, for the very purpose of their overcoming them? We set questions to children of which we know the answer quite well. The real answer to our will and purpose is not the solution but the grappling, the wrestling. And we may properly give

a reward not for the correct answer but for the hard and honest effort. That work is the prayer; and it has its reward apart from the solution.

That is a principle of education with us. So it may be with God. But I mean a good deal more by this than what is called the reflex action of prayer. If that were all it would introduce an unreality into prayer. We should be praying for exercise, not for action. It would be prayer with a theological form, which yet expects no more than a psychological effect. It would be prayer which is not sure that God is really more interested in us than we are in Him. But I mean that God's education has a lower stage for us and a higher, He has a lower will and a higher, a prior and a posterior. And the purpose of the lower will is that it be resisted and struggled through to the higher. By God's will (let us say) you are born in a home where your father's earnings are a few shillings a week, like many an English labourer. Is it God's will that you acquiesce in that, and never strive out of it? It is God's will that you are there. Is it God's will that you should not resist being there? Nay, it may be His will that you should wisely resist it, and surmount His lower, His initial will. It is there for the purpose. That is to say, it is His will that you resist, antagonize, His will. And so it is with the state of childhood altogether.

Again: Is disease God's will? We all believe it often is—even if man is to blame for it. It may be, by God's will, the penalty on human ignorance, negligence, or sin. But let us suppose there were only a few cases where disease is God's will. It was so in the lower creatures, before man lived, blundered, or sinned. Take only one such case. Is it God's will that we should lie down and let the disease have its way? Why, a whole profession exists to say no. Medicine exists as an antagonism to disease, even when you can say that disease is God's will and His punishment of sin. A doctor will tell you that resignation is one of his foes. He begins to grow hopeless if the patient is so resigned from the outset as to make no effort,

if there be no will to live. Resistance to this ordinance of God is the doctor's business, and the doctor's ally. And why? Because God ordained disease for the purpose of being resisted; He ordained the resistance, that from the conflict man might come out the stronger, and more full of resource and dominion over nature.

Again, take death. It is God's will. It is in the very structure of man, in the divine economy. Is it to be accepted without demur? Are doctors impious who resist it? Are we sinning when we shrink from it? Does not the life of most people consist in the effort to escape it, in the struggle for a living? So also when we pray and wrestle for another's life, for our dear one's life. 'Sir, come down ere my child die.' The man was impatient. How familiar we are with him! 'Do, please, leave your religious talk, which I don't understand, and cure my child.' But was that an impious prayer? It was ignorant, practical, British, but not quite faithless. And it was answered as many a similar prayer has been. But, then, if death be God's will, to resist it is to resist God's will. Well, it is His will that we should. Christ, who always did God's will, resisted His own death, slipped away from it often, till the hour came; and even *then* He prayed with all His might against it when it seemed inevitable. 'If it be possible release Me.' He was ready to accept it, but only in the last resort, only if there was no other way, only after every other means had been exhausted. To the end He cherished the fading hope that there might be some other way. He went to death voluntarily, freely but—shall we say reluctantly? *ἐκὼν, ἀέκοντί γε θυμῷ*—resisting the most blessed act of God's will that ever was performed in heaven or on earth, resisting, yet sure to acquiesce when that was God's clear will.

The whole of nature indeed is the will of God, and the whole of grace is striving with nature. It is our nature to have certain passions. That is God's will. But it is our calling of God to resist them as much as to gratify them. They are there as God's will to be resisted as much as

indulged. The redemption from the natural man includes the resistance to it, and the release of the soul from what God Himself appointed as its lower stages—never its dwelling-place, and never its tomb. So far prayer is on the lines of evolution.

Obedience is the chief end. But obedience is not mere submission, mere resignation. It is not always acquiescence, even in prayer. We obey God as much when we urge our suit, and make a *real* petition of it, as when we accept His decision; as much when we try to change His will as when we bow to it. The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence. There is a very fine passage in Dante, *Parad. XX. 94* (Longf.).

Regnum coelorum suffereth violence
 From fervent love, and from that living hope
 That overcometh the divine volition.
 Not in the way that man o'ercometh man;
 We conquer it because it will be conquered,
 And, conquered, conquers by benignity.

It is His will—His will of grace—that prayer should prevail with Him and *extract* blessings. And how we love the grace that so concedes them! The answer to prayer is not the complaisance of a playful power lightly yielding to the playful egoism of His favourites. 'Our antagonist is our helper.' To struggle with Him is one way of doing His will. To resist is one way of saying 'Thy will be done.' It was God's will that Christ should deprecate the death God required. It pleased God as much as His submission to death. But could it have been pleasing to Him that Christ should pray so, if no prayer could ever possibly change God's will? Could Christ have prayed so in that belief? Would faith ever inspire us to pray if the God of our faith must be unmoved by prayer? The prayer that goes to an inflexible God, however good He is, is prayer that rises more from human need than (where Christian prayer should rise) from God's own revelation, or from Christian faith. It is His will, then, that we should pray

against what seems His will, and what, for the lower stage of our growth, is His will. And all this without any unreality whatever.

Let us beware of a pietist fatalism which thins the spiritual life, saps the vigour of character, makes humility mere acquiescence, and piety only feminine, by banishing the will from prayer as much as thought has been banished from it. 'The curse of so much religion,' says Mr. Meredith, 'is that men cling to God with their weakness rather than with their strength.'

The popularity of much acquiescence is not because it is holier but because it is easier. And an easy gospel is the consumption that attacks Christianity. It is the phthisis of faith.

Once come to think that we best say 'Thy will be done' when we acquiesce, when we resign, and not also when we struggle and wrestle, and in time all effort will seem less pious than submission. And so we fall into the ecclesiastical type of religion, drawn from an age whose first virtue was submission to outward superiors. We shall come to canonize decorum and subduedness in life and worship (as the Episcopal Church with its monarchical ideas of religion has done). We shall think more of order than of effort, more of law than of life, more of fashion than of faith, of form than of power. But was subduedness *the* mark of the New Testament men? Our religion may gain some beauty in this way, but it loses vigour. It may gain style, but it loses power. It is good form, but mere aesthetic piety. It may consecrate manners, but it impoverishes mind. It may regulate prayer by the precepts of intelligence instead of the needs and faith of the soul. It may feed certain pensive emotions, but it may emasculate will, secularize energy, and empty character. And so we decline to a state of things in which we have no shocking sins—yes, and no splendid souls; when all souls are dully correct, as like as shillings, but as thin, and as cheap.

All our forms and views of religion have their test in

prayer. Lose the importance of prayer, reduce it to soliloquy, or even to colloquy with God, lose the real conflict of will and will, lose the habit of wrestling, and the hope of prevailing, with God, make it mere walking with God in friendly talk; and, precious as that is, yet you tend to lose the reality of prayer at last. In principle you make it mere conversation instead of the soul's great action. You lose the food of character, the renewal of will. You may have beautiful prayers—but as ineffectual as beauty so often is, and as fleeting. And so in the end you lose the reality of religion. Redemption turns down into mere revelation, faith to assent, and devotion to a phase of culture. For you lose the *power* of the Cross and so of the soul.

Resist God, in the sense of rejecting God, and you will not be able to resist any evil. But resist God in the sense of closing with God, cling to Him with your strength, not your weakness only, with your active, and not only your passive faith, and He will give you strength. Cast yourself into His arms not to be caressed but to wrestle with Him. He loves that holy war. He may be too many for you, and lift you from your feet. But it will be to lift you from earth, and set you in the heavenly places which are theirs who fight the good fight and lay hold of God as their eternal life.

P. T. FORSYTH.