

The Believer and the Spirit

V. - The Holy Spirit and Prayer

“Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart and you shall find rest to your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light [cut to fit]” (Matthew 11:28-30).

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6,7).

The theologians have succeeded in making prayer so complex that believers are left in a great deal of uncertainty as to their capacity to really touch God. Who can ever be absolutely certain that all is well—that there is no flaw to hinder one’s complete communion with Christ? The human mind is very unreliable. We can never be certain of our own self-evaluation. In fact, we are probably more biased about ourselves than we are about others. Fortunately, it does not matter what we think of ourselves, but rather what God thinks of us. According to the Scripture, He is far more generous with us than we are with ourselves. In the nature of human self-evaluation we are usually more concerned about the judgment of God than about His grace. A good antidote is found in a Psalm of David (who certainly ought to know about human failure)—*“He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembers that we are dust”* (Psalm 103:10-14).

Good parents want their children to stay in touch. They are not always happy with their actions, but that does not prevent them from wanting to maintain communication. In fact, that is one of the vital principles of good parenting—to keep the lines of communication open. There may be the need for criticism or discipline or instruction, “but that goes with the territory.” We know from the outset that children are inclined to misbehave from time to time (if not constantly). The essence of discipline is teaching. That is, in fact, the basis of the Word. Any discipline that does not have teaching as its essence is ill-advised.

Applied to the issue of prayer, prayer is simply communication with God. It is always in order, no matter what the human condition may be at the time. The idea that “God will not hear us” is an Old Testament concept that had to do with a relationship to Israel that was external and of a caretaker nature. The Old Testament believers did not have the Spirit within them as we do under the New Covenant. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the fundamental constant of the new birth. We can always talk to God. We can always ask Him for help. He may choose to respond to us in certain circumstances and conditions, but that is up to Him. To talk in terms of “hindrances to prayer” certainly confuses the issue. It causes people to back away from Christ and to fail to get the help that they desperately need at crucial moments. Where else will they get help, if not

from Christ? And His benevolence toward humans is certainly not meted out stingily in terms of human performance; else we are all in serious trouble.

The presence of Christ within us provides the essential ongoing base of communion. Paul makes this very clear to the Romans—*“Likewise also the Spirit himself helps us [assists us together in our stead] in our weaknesses; for we do not know what we should pray for even as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes [meets God on our behalf] with unuttered sighs [zephyrs]; and he who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because he encounters God on behalf of the saints”* (Romans 8:26,27). This is an oft quoted verse, but is so essential to the understanding of the nature of our communion with God. The tendency of us humans is to put too much emphasis on our own capacity rather than on the ultimate energy of God working in us and through us. We are like one who buys a new automobile and then pushes it out of the show room. Again, Paul says to the Ephesians—*“The energy [energeo] from which God raised Christ from the dead energizes us . . .”* (Ephesians 1:19,20).

It is essential for our well-being, to go in the reality of this understanding. If we have problems; if we have things in our life with which He disagrees, He will work with us in them. We may suffer consequences as a result of unsound decisions or unsound practices, but then Paul had the same problems—*“The good that I would, I do not; and the evil [unsound practices] that I would not, I do”* (Romans 7:19). May I remind you that the same concept is expressed to the Philippians, long after Paul had come to the full realization of the Spirit within him—*“We are they who . . . have no confidence in the flesh”* (Philippians 3:3). If this is an oft repeated theme with us, it is because it is so central to our well-being in Christ and to our enablement to enter into our full participation with Christ in the process of our lives on the earth. It is, of course, thus central to our communication with Christ so that we may enjoy the blessings of constant communication with Him, in spite of the inadequacies of the flesh.

In this connection it is well to remember the Altar of Incense in the tabernacle. It is a type of the prayers of the believers in the New Testament (see Revelation 5:8). It burned continuously in the Holy Place. Whatever was going on in the lives of the Israelites, the incense in the tabernacle never ceased to waft its aroma heavenward. The New Testament antetype suggests the continuity of our communion with Christ as depicted in Romans 8:26.

The text that we have been considering says that we should be without anxiety. The Greek word here is *merimnao*, which literally means “without distractions.” It has the idea of “being pulled apart.” Worry is not a sin. Sometimes worry is a benefit in terms of causing us to take care of things that are necessary. One might worry about the budget, for example, and not be out of order. What Paul is talking about here are those things that are debilitating to us. Nor is this even a commandment. Many people have anxieties that are physically oriented and many people have anxieties that are rooted in genetic tendencies. Some people are more or less carefree by nature. That is not always good, because it may suggest irresponsibility. But Paul is merely offering to believers the benefit or blessing of being at peace. It does not mean that the problems are always solved, but rather that we know Christ is with us in spite of the problems.

Paul will say later to the Philippians that this peace goes beyond understanding. Many times we have peace within us that is not reasonable

given the circumstances. That is the kind of peace that Paul speaks of to the Galatians, which is a fruit of the Spirit. By all reason we should be troubled, but we are at peace. This kind of peace actually forms a bulwark against the enemy. The Greek word *phroureo* means literally “to guard.” The enemy may badger and battle and buffet us, but as God assured Paul—“*My grace is sufficient for you*” (II Corinthians 12:9). When Satan batters us, the thing to do is to turn him over to Christ. We are certainly not adequate in our own strength. This, of course, is the essence of Ephesians 6:10, where the pieces of armor that are suggested to us are all the province of Christ. So we have His truth (reality); and He is our righteousness; our peace; sandals for the rough path; our faith; our salvation; our sword (God’s Word to us). It is futile for us to attempt to battle Satan with any of those things which might be based upon our own religious efforts. We cannot fight Satan with our own piety or prayers or perseverance—they will never be enough. But Christ within us possesses all of the power to defeat Satan. He can defeat him with a word, as in the case of the demons whom he sent into the swine. There is no need for voluminous prayers or religious rituals or agonizing vigils. In fact, the religious efforts of believers create a “field day” for Satan who likes to engage our pitifully inadequate weapons. (If the author had to use special tactics to engage Satan in every attack, he would have time for nothing else). The battle to accomplish the work God has given us is continuous. Our peace lies in the reality of the power of Christ to handle him. Make no mistake about it, we are no match for Satan, but Satan is no match for Christ. All through the Psalms we are given the assurance that God is our “shield and buckler.”

So talk to Christ. Don’t worry about whether or not you are any good. Talk to Him about anything and everything. Know that He hears you; know that He cares; know that He embraces you always as His child and wants to talk to you. That is your heritage in the presence of the Holy Spirit within. It is not a special privilege—it is your lifeline. It is not dependent upon your merits; it is dependent upon your new birth. It is easy to be grateful when you know that Christ is always there. It is easy to love Him when you know that He loves you. Rest in the peace of Christ. He invites the weary to come—unconditionally.

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