

on still in darkness. The Scriptures are the best source of patience and consolation. If you neglect them, where can you look for support and comfort, under the changes and chances, the many sorrows and calamities of this mortal life? The Scriptures, finally, are able to make you wise unto salvation. If you neglect them, are you not guilty of neglecting the offer of salvation, of putting from you the gift of eternal life?

Let me, then, again exhort you to the diligent and constant, the *daily* study of the word of God. Pray earnestly to him to enlighten your understanding, and warm your hearts by the influence of that Spirit, by whose inspiration the Scriptures were given. In the words of the excellent collect of our Church, humbly beseech God, who "has caused
" all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning,
" to grant that we may in such wise hear them,
" read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that
" by patience and comfort of his holy word, we
" may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed
" hope of everlasting life, which he hath given us
" in our Saviour Jesus Christ."^d

^d May I be permitted to suggest, that in reading the Scriptures, we should read those parts especially which are most applicable to ourselves, and most suited to our comprehension. Those who are young in years, or young in understanding, will comparatively derive little edification from great part of the prophetic writings; and from those parts of the books of Moses which relate to the building and service of the temple, to the Levitical rites, and to the municipal laws and regulations of the Jews; i. e. the latter part of Exodus, nearly the whole of Leviticus, and part of Numbers and Deuteronomy. Some of St. Paul's Epistles relate in great measure to questions and customs peculiar to the time in which they were written; and the doctrinal parts of his writings contain many things hard to be understood by young and unlearned persons. The twelfth and thirteenth chapters of Romans, the thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians, and the three last chapters of Ephesians, all persons would do well to commit to memory.

SERMON VII.

PRAYER.

1 THESS. v. 17.

Pray without ceasing.

ONE of the most effectual means of maintaining a principle of religion in our hearts, is prayer. In discoursing on this duty, I shall endeavour to set before you, First, some of the principal arguments for, or motives to, prayer; Secondly, the frame and disposition of mind with which our prayers ought to be accompanied; and, Thirdly, the times at which they should be offered up; to point out to you, in short, 1st, *why* we ought to pray; 2dly, *how* we ought to pray; and, 3dly, *when* we ought to pray.

I. One great argument for prayer, is drawn from the consideration of the many necessities of our nature, for the supply of which we depend entirely on the bounty of that Being, to whom our prayers are to be addressed.

Of the body, the wants are numberless, and continually returning. We stand in constant need of food and clothing, of the protection of some roof to shelter us from the weather, of preservation from all kinds of evil accidents; and often of recovery from pain and sickness, or of fresh strength to enable us to bear it. As, for the supply of all

these wants, we are to put our whole trust in the goodness of God, so we are to seek such supply by devoutly calling upon him in prayer. Thus, when the apostle directs us to "be careful," or over anxious, "for nothing;" he immediately adds, "but in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." And our blessed Lord, in the same discourse in which he teaches us for our food and raiment to depend upon him, who feeds the fowls of heaven and clothes the grass of the field, instructs us daily to pray for whatever is essential to life, to implore God to give us, day by day our daily bread.^a

But if the wants of the body furnish a strong motive for prayer, a still stronger one is furnished by the wants of the soul. Such is the nature of man since the fall of Adam, that we cannot serve God acceptably without his grace, without the aid of his Holy Spirit. This grace, however, this assistance of God's good Spirit, is promised to us in answer to our prayers. "Ask, and it shall be given you," says our Lord; "seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."^b And that when he said this, he had particularly in view those spiritual assistances of which I have just spoken, may be inferred from what follows. "If ye being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give his Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" The argument is shortly this. We shall be lost for ever, if we do not receive the assistance of the Holy Ghost; and in order to receive it, we must seek it in diligent prayer.

Another argument for prayer is drawn from the tendency which it has in its own nature to *preserve*

^a Matt. vi. 11.

^b Matt. vii. 7.

us from sin. One of the principal and most constant topics of our supplications to the throne of grace, is deliverance from temptations to evil, and from the bad passions and corruptions of our nature. Now the spirit of that man must be bold and shameless indeed, who can go on praying to God to deliver him from evil, while at the same time he does not try, does not use any exertion on his own part, to avoid what he knows to be displeasing to God, and to conquer the sinful dispositions, the evil propensities within him. It is an old saying, that either praying will make a man leave off sinning, or sinning will make him leave off praying.

Again: there is not one of us but has reason to lament his deficiency in *heavenly-mindedness*. We all probably feel, that our souls are too prone to grovel upon earth, to fix themselves upon worldly things, and are sadly wanting in genuine religious feeling and fervency of spirit. Prayer is the most likely way to correct this evil; not only as it is the appointed means of procuring the aid of God's good Spirit, but also from the tendency which it has in itself to raise and spiritualize our thoughts and affections. The habit of devoutly addressing ourselves to God in prayer, naturally leads our minds away from earthly and visible things, to those unseen things which are eternal; it transports them from the objects of sense and whatever relates to this life only, to the world of spirits and the contemplation of heavenly subjects; and keeps alive and nourishes within us some portion of that religious feeling, which the world and the flesh are continually labouring to extinguish.

But farther; it is our duty to call upon God in prayer, because it is enjoined by numberless precepts in holy writ, and recommended by the example of our blessed Lord himself, and by that of

all the true servants and saints of God. Our Saviour directs us "to pray," as well "as to watch," "that we enter not into temptation."^c He commands us to ask, that we may have; to seek, that we may find; to knock, that it may be opened unto us.^d He has given us in the Lord's prayer a most excellent form for the model or pattern of our devotions; and in two striking parables has instructed us, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.^e His chosen followers enforce these injunctions of their Divine Master. Thus St. James says, "if any of you lack wisdom;" (and we all do lack it,) "let him ask of God."^f Thus St. Paul bids us in the text to "pray without ceasing;" and in other places, to "continue instant in prayer,"^g and to watch unto the same with thanksgiving. He directs us to "pray always with all prayer and supplication," and to "watch thereunto with all perseverance;"^h and in the first Epistle to Timothy, he wills "that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands."ⁱ

Examples of fervency and perseverance in prayer abound in every part of the holy Scriptures, which have recorded many of the sublime and excellent petitions offered up by holy men of old to the throne of grace. I will not pretend to enumerate these, or to tell of the prayers of the patriarchs, of Moses, of Daniel, and of those many pious souls, who, by means of prayer, walked with God while on earth, and whose devotion will in the world to come be rewarded through the merits of Christ with everlasting happiness. Our blessed Lord, who gave us an example that we should follow his steps, was a pattern to us in this as in all other

^c Matt. xxvi. 41. ^d Matt. vii. 7. ^e Luke xi. 5. and xviii. 3.
^f James i. 5. ^g Rom. xii. 12. ^h Eph. vi. 18.
ⁱ 1 Tim. ii. 8.

instances. We read repeatedly of his earnestness in prayer, and that he continued whole nights in prayer to God. His chosen followers were distinguished like their divine Master for the fervency of their devotions; and yourselves well know, that earnest and persevering prayer has always been a leading feature in the character of the true servants of God.

II. I proceed now in the second place to consider the qualifications, the disposition of mind, with which our prayers ought to be accompanied, in order to their being accepted of God; in other words, to point out *how* we ought to pray.

One of the first requisites of acceptable prayer, is a sincere wish and endeavour to get the better of our sins. For, what is it but an instance of gross hypocrisy, an insulting mockery of God, to pray with our lips that he would enable us to overcome our corruptions, while we feel in our hearts no real wish, and in fact do not try to be delivered from them? Thus it is said, "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination;"^k and again, "the sacrifice of the wicked is abomination to the Lord."^l Where you will observe, that it is not the having sinned, or the feeling much of sin still remaining within us, that should prevent our praying to God;—this sense of sin, if attended with an earnest desire to be delivered from it, is one of the strongest arguments for prayer;—but it is the persevering boldly in wickedness, without any endeavour to amend.

Again; our prayers, to be acceptable must be offered in faith. "Let a man ask in faith,"^m says St. James; and our Saviour, "whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer believing, ye shall receive."ⁿ Our

^k Prov. xxviii. 9. ^l Prov. xv. 8. ^m James i. 6. ⁿ Matt. xxi. 22.

prayers must proceed from a firm belief that God is, and that he is a God that heareth prayer; from a full persuasion that his ear is ever opened to receive our supplications, and that he will grant them, if not immediately, yet in his own good time; provided, that is, that they are offered according to his will, and that the granting them will be for our own real benefit. This faith, this belief, is founded upon the promises of his Son, to which I have already referred: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."^o From this promise, and many other passages in holy writ, we know, as the apostle asserts, that "if any man ask according to God's will, he heareth him."

Nearly allied to this qualification of prayer, if indeed it is not rather to be considered as a branch, or part of it, is the precept that our supplications be offered in the name of Christ. Our iniquities you know *had* separated between us and our God. Christ however, by bearing in his own person the punishment of our sins, has reconciled us to his Father, and stands ever ready to make intercession for us, and, as our Mediator and High Priest, to present our prayers before the throne of the Most High. No man can come unto the Father, he tells us, but by him; and it is through him that we have access to the Father. He therefore enjoins us to offer all our prayers in his name. "Whatever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you."^p

Humility and contrition of spirit form another very important qualification of prayer. When we address ourselves to God, we should "fall low on our knees before his footstool," penetrated with a deep sense of our unworthiness, and grieving at

^o Matt. vii. 7.

^p John xvi. 23.

the remembrance of our numberless transgressions. "To this man will I look, saith the Lord, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit;"^q and again, "a broken and a contrite heart God will not despise."^r The gracious acceptance which attended the lowliness of the poor publican in the parable is familiar, I trust, to most of you.

It is indispensably requisite, when we call upon God in prayer, that we should be *attentive* to what we are about. If while we pretend to be praying to him, we wilfully suffer our thoughts to wander to any earthly vanity, we certainly are in some degree chargeable with the guilt of drawing near to God with our lips, while our hearts are far from him. Let not, however, any one be discouraged by this expression. The best men, who are most exemplary in their devotions, are not at all times able entirely to conquer this wandering, this distraction of the mind. It is an instance of human weakness, which, it may be, will cling to us as long as we continue to be clothed in mortality. We must lament it as such, and strive and pray against it. If we wilfully give way without thus contending against it, it is no doubt highly blameable; and we must bear in mind, that in proportion as this wandering of the mind in prayer is suffered to prevail, so far are we wanting in genuine piety, so far do we fall short of that holiness, the attainment of which ought to be the great object of our lives.

But we must not only be attentive in our devotions, we must also be *earnest*, *importunate*, and *fervent*. The spiritual blessings for which we ought principally to pray, are blessings of the greatest importance, blessings without which we shall be lost for ever. We should therefore sue for them with

^q Isaiah lxvi. 2.

^r Psalm li. 17.

no little warmth and earnestness. We should pray with heart and soul, like men who are begging for their life. If we prefer our petitions coldly and languidly, we act as if we had no proper sense of the inestimable value of those blessings which we pretend to implore, almost as if we meant to be refused, or, at least, did not greatly care whether we were refused or not.

And here I would observe—and I must beg you to pay particular attention to the observation—that this attention and earnestness must accompany not only our private devotions, but also the public prayers of the Church. The greater part of those prayers indeed are pronounced aloud by the minister alone, but the whole congregation should take part in them in their hearts, and make them their own, by saying, *Amen*, at the conclusion of each. Some men in church appear to listen to the prayers as they listen to the lessons or to the sermon, without in any way joining in them. But surely this is to defeat one great end of public worship, which was instituted that all might heartily join together in putting up their common supplications to God, and by the united strength of their prayers draw down his blessing upon them. When the prayers in church are pronounced by the minister, he is not praying alone, but is speaking in the name of the whole congregation, who are not merely to listen to what he says, but are themselves to join with earnestness and devotion.

III. And now, in the third place, I will offer a few remarks upon the times at which our prayers should be offered up; will suggest to you *when* you ought to pray. The direction of the Apostle is, that we should pray every where, and at all times, should “pray,” in short, “without ceasing.” Not that we are required to be always on our knees, to be continually without intermission engaged in offi-

ces of devotion. This would be inconsistent with the lawful business of this world. What is required is, that we should always be in a readiness to pray; that we should very often offer up short ejaculations and petitions for protection and spiritual strength; and that we should have stated times for devotion, in the observance of which we should be regular and constant. Of Daniel we read, “that he kneeled on his knees three times a day,”^s and prayed and gave thanks to God. And David says of himself, “at evening, and morning, and at noon—day will I pray, and that instantly.” It were well if we followed the example of these distinguished servants of the Most High; but, at least, every morning and evening we ought to direct our supplications to God, imploring the pardon of our sins, and his protection from dangers spiritual and temporal.

Besides our private devotions, those who are fathers and masters of families, should observe the old and excellent custom of family prayer; and none of us ought ever, without some very sufficient reason, to absent ourselves on the Lord’s Day from the public prayers of the Church.

It has appeared, then, I trust, that it is both our interest and our duty to call upon God in prayer, because prayer is the instituted means of obtaining his blessings, temporal and spiritual; because in itself it has a tendency to keep us from sin, to nourish in us a heavenly frame of mind; and because it is enforced by the precepts of holy writ,

^s Daniel vi. 10.

^t For this purpose, I would recommend either the Lord’s Prayer, General Confession, Collect for the week, and morning and evening Collects; or Bishop Wilson’s Family Prayers; or Bishop Gibson’s; or the selection of Family Prayers from the New Manual, which is published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

and recommended by the example of all the true servants of God.

It has appeared, in the second place, that in order to their being accepted, they must proceed from a humble and penitent heart; must be offered up in faith, and in the name of Christ; must be preferred with attention, with earnestness, and with warmth; and that they must be not only fervent, but also frequent.

My friends, let us seriously examine our own conduct by what has been above urged. Are we in the habit of thus calling upon God, or, as it is in the text, of praying without ceasing? We read of men, who say in their hearts, "What is the Almighty, that we should serve him; or what profit shall we have if we pray unto him;" and of others, who are branded with the censure, that "they have not called upon God." Are we liable to the same reproach? If we are living without prayer, we are living in a state of the utmost danger; from which we may indeed be recovered by divine grace, but one of the first symptoms of our recovery will be found in our calling upon God. Or, though we do sometimes pray with our lips, do we pray without attention, without earnestness? While we outwardly seem to be engaged in our devotions, do we wilfully suffer our thoughts to wander to earthly things, without lamenting and striving against this waywardness of spirit? In proportion as this is the case, we have reason to fear that our hearts are not right with God, that we are but little influenced by real piety, that we are still far from the kingdom of heaven. We must contend against this dulness of religious feeling to the utmost of our power; must beseech God to assist us in our prayers, and to pour into our hearts the genuine spirit of grace and supplication.

To conclude. Let us be frequent and earnest in

private prayer; let us pray in our families constantly and devoutly; and let nothing but some real and weighty hindrance prevent us from taking part in the public service of the Church. In short, let "us pray without ceasing; let us continue instant in prayer, praying always with all prayer and supplication, and watching thereunto with all perseverance."