

THE LORD'S PRAYER I.

"Our Father"

By Rev. Professor Jordan, D.D.

And it came to pass as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased one of his disciples said unto Him, Lord teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples. And he said unto them, when ye pray say Our Father which art in heaven.

—Luke XI 1, 2.

When our Lord taught that "men ought to pray and not to faint" he uttered a truth which finds a response in every living soul. Some may think that is a wild statement but I am convinced that it simply sets forth a great fact, in very simple, sober words. The strictest man of science receives with full confidence truths which have not such broad basis of fact. Perhaps if I were to say a man prays instinctively you would want to know what is meant by instinct and then we might get into a discussion over a word instead of looking at the spiritual reality and recognizing its full significance. Without using this questionable word, let us say that there is in human nature a strong feeling of clinging dependence. This feeling is as much a fact of our spiritual experience as hunger is a fact of our physical life. Very few men are clever enough or foolish enough to explain this feeling away; but the great mass of men have allowed it to lead them to the reasonable conclusion that there is a higher Being upon whom we may depend, and to whom we ought to come in sincere prayer. This feeling, strengthened as it is by the mysterious power of conscience, lies at the root of all religion and of every form of superstition. If it were not for this, cunning priests and eloquent preachers would not have wrought mighty revolutions in the realm of thought and the world of action. Men pray because their nature recoils at the words of Christ saying their ought to pray and not to faint. Religion lives in spite of restless scepticism and corrupt selfishness, because we must completely change our nature before we can get rid of the desire to hang upon the power, wisdom and love of some one higher than ourselves. This human experience varies in strength, and in its modes of expression, but its existence and reality are as clear as the noon day sun. Every rude form of idolatry, every bewitching superstition, as well as every mere station of religious life, cries out, "When my heart is overwhelmed lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

While we cannot believe that this feeling is simply the result of religious education, we know that it needs training and uplifting lest it should cling to something lower than the one true God. Many of us check and curb this desire. Living cold worldly lives we try to coil ourselves up within ourselves; but when we are spiritually awakened we look into the infinite mystery that surrounds us and say, "Lord teach us how to pray." It is well for us when we feel that prayer is such a high privilege, such a solemn duty, that we need to be taught how we may rightly approach God. The man who feels self-sufficient here is in a hopeless condition. There must be a spiritual revolution in his soul before he can commune with the Highest. Most men he taught how to attain the small accomplishments, and perform the little duties which belong to the earth, and shall be perfectly at home in the spiritual sphere without a teacher? Nay, when we try to pray we feel our ignorance and helplessness, and it is well for us if we find the God appointed teacher alone can conquer our selfishness and unbelief by getting in us the real spirit of childlike trust. Such a teacher we have in the Son of God.

It was when the Lord himself had prayed that the disciples said "teach us to pray" for they felt that if one so much wiser and stronger than themselves could find refreshment in prayer, surely they ought to seek the same fountain of life. Only he who prays can teach others how

to pray. Even the Son of God was a man of prayer that he might show us the way to the Divine Presence. He took our life with all its weakness but, without its sin. He went through great spiritual conflicts, shedding sacred tears and uttering mysterious groans; thus was he prepared to be our teacher. And so prayerful man can draw others to the heavenly throne, for prayer is no mere human cleverness, no tricking of words, no mechanical twisting of dead forms; it is the parting of the heart after God, the out-reaching of the soul after purity and love. Our Saviour warns his disciples against vain repetitions, he chases away the false idea that God is to be influenced by much sneaking; and in a few simple words he shows what is the spirit and purpose of real prayer. How wide yet how deep, how simple yet how sublime, is this short prayer. It touches our common life at all its points, and on eagle-wings it rises to the highest heavens. We must not enter into the philosophy of prayer as we wish to lay emphasis upon one great truth; that the Fatherhood of God is the basis of true devotion, or in other words, that we cannot offer the simplest, purest prayer until we learn to say "Our Father."

On the general subject of prayer I will content myself with a few lines from one of our greatest modern poets.

If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are
wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let
thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and
day.
For what are men better than sheep or
goats,
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands
of prayer.
Both for themselves and those who call
them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of
God.

How then does Jesus Christ meet the questioning and longing of the human spirit? What answer has he to give? Surely he will not mock the human heart with the stones of trivial tradition but feed it with the living bread. Let us take a part of the answer, which contains within itself all that is essential and beautiful in Christian prayer. "When ye pray say Our Father which art in Heaven." Consider, one of the most learned and devout students of Scripture which Germany has ever produced, put it very neatly when he says that this sentence represents at the same time our distance from God and our nearness to him. Our distance from God. "Which art in heaven." What does this mean? Where is heaven? I cannot half express the meaning of these words; but they point us upward. They make us feel that although we may approach Him in prayer, yet he is far above us. Who can measure the great distance between Creator and creature? No human science can grasp this thought or put it into clear shape; it must ever stretch above us like the vast expanse of heaven.

Still, it is well that we should think of this and measure our littleness by it, so that our paltry self-conceit may be shrivelled up and our poor pride burned away by the all-consuming fire. Some think much of themselves because they have never thought of anything really great; they have never fallen prostrate while trying to grasp the thought of God. We cannot be satisfied with some small god, some idol of man's making. We only find rest when we soar into the heavens and render worship to Him who is above all. You may want to know where Heaven is, and I cannot tell you; for

we have no map of the great universe by means of which we can fix upon a spot and say this is Heaven. But as character is a higher study than geography, we may say that Heaven is a kingdom not of this world; far from the narrow prejudice, the warring passion, the cruel selfishness which have desecrated this earth. Let us beware of making our little twisted souls the measure of Him who sitteth on the circle of the Heavens!

Our nearness to God. "Our Father." In the compass of this short sentence here is another far-reaching truth; through Jesus Christ we are very near to God. We may call Him "Our Father." When in humble, trusting mood we seek to rise to the thought of God the vision that dawns upon our soul starbles and overawes us. We cry:

Eternal light! Eternal light!
How pure the soul must be
When placed within Thy searching
sight
It shrinks not, but with calm delight
Can live and look on thee.

We feel that such a sight cannot be ours, and when we fall down oppressed by the burden of our sinfulness, the Son of God shows us that He also is a man, and lifting us up he teaches us to say "Our Father." Then God is near to our souls for what other word is so well fitted to express the Divine Presence as this—"Father." It is a homely word, sweet, tender, full of music. King, Lord, Judge, these words seem to lift the Eternal One far above us; but this word—Father—has a revelation in itself and makes us feel that God is not far from anyone of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, and we are also His offspring. Thus we see that the nearness and distance of God are one truth. He is far from our pride, our unbelief, our selfishness, but He is near to the child-like, believing, loving soul. When we are wandering away we think of Him as our King against whom we have rebelled, or as our Judge before whom "all things are naked and open"; but when in penitence and hope we cry: "Lord teach us to pray," we hear our Saviour saying in the calm tones of divine authority, "When ye pray say 'Our Father.'"

The thought of God as Our Father has become more precious to the Christian of late; it is true that Christian men in all ages have rejoiced in the thought of the divine Father, but this truth is now preached more clearly and boldly. I am glad that this is so, for there need not be anything loose or dangerous about such teaching, if we grasp it rightly it will be a fuller and clearer presentation of our Lord's own teaching. Sometimes the thought of God has been presented too exclusively as King and Judge. These two ideas alone have given the color and tone to a great deal of Christian theology and Christian preaching. Men have turned away from stiff scholastic systems of theology; and while some are drifting on a sea of doubt, not knowing where to steer, others, we are thankful to say, have fled for refuge to the life and words of Jesus the Christ. There may be now a tendency to overlook the sterner side of the divine nature, and to forget that a just God is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look upon iniquity. If so, this may be in part a reaction from the hard legal theology of the past and we must meet it by declaring that "whatever a man saith that shall he also reap." God is a Judge before whom we stand self-condemned; he is a King to whom we ought to render grateful service. Still we remember that earthly kings and judges are very imperfect and when man's idea of God has been taken almost altogether from them the aching heart has cried out for a tenderer, more beautiful thought of the most High. Turning to the world we