

“Lord, Teach us to Pray”

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There is a considerable amount of time devoted to teaching young ministers how to preach, but comparatively little in teaching them how to pray. There is a common impression that prayer is not a subject for instruction – that all that is needful is for one to be filled with warm emotions, and then let the tongue loose and let it run at random. The result of this is, that there is a great deal of praying done which reaches no higher than the ceiling, and a great deal that does not reach that high. It is a waste of breath. Such was not the conception of Jesus and the apostles. We find the apostles coming to Jesus once, after he had concluded a season of prayer, and saying to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.” This shows that John the Baptist had made prayer a subject of instruction to his disciples. The twelve remembered, doubtless, what John had taught; and not only so, but they remember what Jesus himself also had taught in the Sermon on the Mount, that instructive passage in the sixth chapter of Matthew. They knew what John had taught them and they knew the main lesson on the subject which their own master had given; why were they not content with these? Why did they still come to the Master and request him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

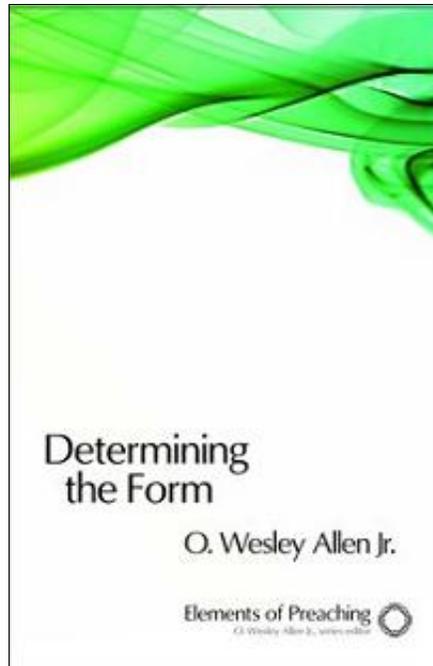
I do not know why, unless it was from the fact that they observed him devoting more time to prayer than they did, or even than did the hypocrites who stood on the corners of the streets with uplifted hands to pray, and stood in the synagogue to pray while others were seated. They had known him to retire into a mountain alone and pray there all night; and there was not one of them that could do that. On one occasion, you remember, three of them went up into a high mountain with him to pray, and while he continued praying they dropped upon the ground and fell asleep. And later, while he was praying in the terrible agonies of Gethsemane, the same three were there and fell asleep, and he waked them up three times. It was impossible for them, and I presume to say it has been impossible since for any man to pray all night. Some may imagine that they had done it, but perhaps they had been asleep more than once and forgot it when they reported that they had prayed all night. Evidently the disciples thought that there was a secret in prayer which he had not revealed to them and that he could teach them what it was, so that they could pray as long as he did. What an earnest desire on their part is manifested in this request! They were doubtless very much surprised at his answer.

He simply repeated to them that little prayer which he had taught them in the Sermon on the Mount, commonly called the Lord's Prayer, adding to it, however, a parable teaching that they should be importunate in prayer and never cease asking until they had obtained. They must be like the man who came to a neighbor at midnight, aroused him, and begged him to give him three loaves of bread, as company had come in and he had no bread to set before them. The neighbor answered, I am in bed with my children and cannot get up to give it to you. But the other continued importuning him, until at last he arose and gave him all he wished. He did not give them any new secret of prayer by which they could pray a long time, or all night, but only that they should be importunate in prayer. If you examine all the instruction that you will find directly and indirectly given, you will find that Jesus never taught the disciples prayers, although he prayed a long time himself. He never taught his own example in this. There was a secret in his mind and heart which they did not possess and which we do not possess, that made it peculiar to him to remain long in prayer. When we remember who he was and whom he addressed, we sometimes wonder that he ever prayed at all. We have two prayers on record which he taught. One I have already referred to, called the Lord's Prayer. Have you ever observed how brief that prayer is in point of time delivery? Look at your watches while I recite it to you. (Recite the Lord's Prayer, not hurriedly, and then says) Less than one-half minute. Now think of that. I read, in addition to the prayer itself that addition to it, "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever," which has proven to be an interpolation.

If you test what is called the intercessory prayer in the fifteenth chapter of John, which is his longest prayer on record, you will find that you can read it deliberately in three minutes. The apostle Paul quotes in various epistles quite a number of prayers that he made for churches and for individuals. The longest of them is the one in the third chapter of Ephesians, and that can be read very deliberately in less than one and one-half minutes. What a rebuke, now, this is to the long prayers that we have sometimes heard in the pulpit, and the stories that we have read about the number of hours every day noble men of whom we read felt compelled to spend in prayer. There is a story told, and it is repeated by the great Cannon Farrar in one of his works, about James, the Lord's brother, that he spent so much time on his knees praying that the skin and flesh became thick and hardened like the knees of a camel. James had too much respect for the teaching of his master to do a thing of that sort. This is a tale gotten up by the monks of the ages – a result of their own superstitious practice. I have sometimes gotten so weary in listening to a long prayer in church that I

have been tempted to take my seat before it was finished; and I think it would be a good lesson to some long-winded preacher to open his eyes and see the whole congregation sitting reading their hymnals because they got so worn out listening to his long prayer. What is the reason of public prayer in an assembly? Is it not for edification and for the worship of God? It is not for the preacher to express his individual desires, but it is for the edification of the church, and it should be something in which all the audience can unite with him. And if he continues until their knees begin to tremble and their minds begin to wander, there is no edification. On the contrary, they are liable to forget before the end of the long thing, anything edifying that had been said at the beginning. Whenever the audience begins to wish that the man leading in prayer would stop, he has already gone farther than he ought. I think this habit grew out of the idea, that when we get up in church to pray we ought to pray for everybody and everything. It is true that some preachers try to cut that short by asking the Lord to bless all whom it is our duty or privilege to pray! But it is better to remember that if the Lord permits you to live you will have a chance to pray again next Sunday. And if you can pray for some of the people and the good things today, then if you live until the next week you may go the rounds; and if you don't live somebody else may take it up in your place.

I have a good deal more to say upon this subject, but I must postpone it for the future lectures of this kind. In the meantime, think solemnly and reverently on the subject of your prayers.



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