No. 164

On the Lord's Prayer

11/10/1822
Matt. vi. 9. — "After this manner, therefore, pray ye:"

Such is the introduction to that form of devotion, so revered, cherished by tunes, called the Lord's Prayer.

For simplicity, conciseness, & force of expression, it stands unrivalled by any human or inspired composition of the same kind. For ages it has been the vehicle of devotion to the disciples of Jesus. From every part in the ten world, its beautiful & fervent expression have borne to heaven the adoration of the devout. Through this, ascriptions of praise & glory have ascended from admiring & grateful hearts. & through this, penitence, softened & enbowed by the remembrance of past neglects & sins, has poured its prayer for mercy. It has wafted to the throne of grace what fervent & earnest petitions for the extension of the Redeemer's kingdom, & has led the
thoughts and meditations of men from every branch of
all branches up to that God, to whom it as-
scribes the kingdom, power, and glory. And this prayer
is yet further hallowed in the breast of every sincere
believer, affectedly expressing the model of that train of
ideas and emotions, in which the soul should pour itself out
its Creator. Though a short, it is yet an important part
of Christian instruction. For, I mean, it seems that from
this plain and touching form of devotion, may be drawn
influences better for the heart, more purifying, endau-
ing, abiding, than from all these hard passages, the
explanation of which has employed the learning, ingenu-
itv of men, as than from the most submissive belief
mysteries of unfathomable depth, or creed of indif-
definite length. For these can but impart to the
mind a barren knowledge of unprofitable specula-
tions, while that fastens itself upon the heart, fixed
as it of earth-born passions, doubts, the altar of th
Most High, as the offering of man to his Maker.

It is my intention to deliver a series of discourses on the Lord's prayer, dividing it into as many different portions as there may be different objections suggested. As a preparation for these, I intend to devote this discourse to some considerations on the origin, nature, and design of the whole prayer, as mere form of devotion. This may serve as an introduction to a more particular view of each part, and prepare us more fully to enter into the spirit and meaning of each.

The occasion, on which we call the Lord's prayer as given as recorded by Luke, as follows: '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.' Then follows the answer of Jesus prescribing to them this model of prayer. The occasion is not mentioned by Matthew, for the sermon on the mount, as given by him, seems to be a collection of the instructions of various subjects, with little or no regard to the time...
when they were spoken. Some of prayer seems to have been in use among the Jews at this time, as they varied probably according to the taste or disposition of their various teachers. Some learned men have supposed that they could trace the prayer of x., even in its expressions, to the Jewish prayers then in use. No is it improbable, that it was fashioned after the manners of the forms customary at that day, though it is being too exact of asserting more than is fairly made out, to say, that we have done, that each of the several forms of the S.'s prayers was the head or commencement of a distinct Jewish form. It seems by the application of the disciples, that John at least had furnished his followers with some such model of devotion, yet it is probable that this was a common custom among the religious teachers of the people.

So, our Saviour, when requested to dictate to his disciples a model to guide their devotions, would not usually enough use either the same expressions or expressions conceived in the similar spirit, with those now already current, as they would have the
advantage of being known. It is then adapted to
the circumstances of the disciples, would be edifying,
without any of the evils sometimes consequent
upon innovations.
As to the end of design for which the Lord's prayer was
given, there are different opinions. Some have suppos-
ed that it was exclusively adapted to the situation
and circumstances of the disciples; others, that it
was intended as a general directory for all times and
ages. It has been maintained (Mackintosh), that
there is through the whole of it one reigning senti-
ment, in fact, but one petition, viz. that the king-
dom of God may be established; i.e. that the moral
purification and improvement of mankind may be pro-
moted and confirmed; of the other petitions are subserv-
ient in some way to this. But this hypothesis seems
to have scarcely the appearance of an argument to
prove it; it can only be maintained by wresting the ex-
pressions of Jesus upon them some unnatural mean-
ing. From the manner in which this prayer is in-
troduced by St. Luke, we must suppose that it was
designed expressly for the use of the disciples of X, consequently that it was framed with the view of giving them the best manner of expressing such petitions, ascriptions, & confessions, as would naturally arise in their minds under the circumstances in which they were placed. Taking this for a leading idea, we shall find the whole harmonious, beautiful, & expressive. The situation of the disciples of X, need I not remind you, was now extraordinary. Surrounding dangers & difficulties, of which they themselves scarcely knew the extent or power, & which certainly they knew not how to meet or shun, they looked to their master of stays, upon him for direction & support. With the spiritual nature of the religious were to publish & defend, they were almost wholly unacquainted. They had strong enemies, who used the arm of power, to persectute, & force to corrupt. When we regard the peculiarity of their condition, are we not to expect, that this mode of devotion, given by their Master, should correspond to the wants & necessities of that condition? John the Baptist
that had taught his followers to pray; i.e. he had
given them a form, serve as a guide to their pray-
ers. Our Lord's disciples desired him to do the same
for them. It was a prayer, appropriate to their condi-
tion as disciples of 
that they requested, one which
be suited to the relations, circumstances of those who
were to use it. And such a one seems evidently
to have given them, in as brief, forcible expression
as possible. Having it with this reference, we may
consider our Lord, as directing his disciples to address
in the first place their devotion to God the Father to
Him alone, to pray that His name might every
where be honoured and revered, that His kingdom, i.e.
the kingdom of the Med. the God, if peace, righteousness,
men, might be extended, promoted, that in order
to the establishment, promotion of the God, angels
were to be its ministers and heralds, might do the
will of God with the same alacrity, fidelity, as the
angels in heaven are supposed to do, that while
they were engaged in this holy service, they might
not be distracted by the cares of the world, but
that by the providence of God their daily bread might be provided for them, that for all the failures in doctrine though a duty, of God they might be guilty of, for all the offences and they might commit, God would grant them pardon and enable them to forgive those who offended them, that they might be guarded against to amidst the powerful temptations with which in the discharge of their sacred office, they would be surrounded, might be save from all evil. They were then to close by ascribing all power, glory and authority to Him who is king of kings and Lord of lords. From this brief statement, we see how appropriate was the prayer to the condition of the disciples at that time. I do not mean to say, that it is exclusively applicable to them of their circumstances. We may find it as powerful a help to our devotion as they did to theirs. But the sense in which they used it, is the idea they attached to it in its expression, must of course have been in a great measure peculiar. In proportion as we are placed in similar
circumstances of theirs, with similar dangers, du
these trials, we may understand & feel the power
with this simple & heart touching prayer must have
moved their souls, & of the circumstances with which they
presented themselves at the altar, to pour out in
words of their Master the desires & confessions of their
hearts.

It has been maintained by some, that the form
of prayer, as we are now considering, is an argu-
ment for the use of forms of prayer in general, &
that our Saviour has thus given His sanction to this
mode of conducting devotion. But this argument
has no force; for there is no evidence that Jesus,
when He said, after this manner, therefore, pray,
intended to prescribe a form which was to be in per-
petual use & from which deviations were ever to be
made. His purpose doubtless was to prescribe
topics & such arrangement of thought, as might
be most suitable to express the devotional feeling
of his disciples. He did not intend that we should
use this prayer, or any other, but that they should
pray "after this manner": in this spirit, with these
views, with these sentiments. It is a model, if
not strictly speaking, a form of prayer. It has
therefore no bearing upon the question, whether set
forms of devotion should be used or not. Written or
printed forms are used by a large portion of the Jewish
community, if they are doubtless a powerful auxilia-
ry to their devotional feelings. The utility of such
forms must depend very much on the habits of qua-
ifications of the individual. To many they are doubt-
less more efficacious and valuable vehicles of excite-
ments of devotion, than any extempore prayer could be.
These, whose education or condition in life have denied
them the power of expressing their devotional senti-
ments in proper or progressive language, should try all
means make use of some of these excellent books of
prayers, which are extant. It is objected by some that
this looks like lip service. But this is an unfounded
objection. God regards the heart only, whether the
heart expresses itself in its own words or in the
words of another, is of no importance in his sight.
Written prayers are composed in the calmness of meditation, when the soul can look around her, considerate expressions are most proper to excite, sustain her devotion. Of what most suited to the solemnity of dignity of the subject, if it is much better to trust the free exercise of the heart to such compositions, than to the incoherent jargon of extemporous prayers expressed in low and unworthy terms. To forms of prayers in general, therefore, I have no objection; but the question concerning the expediency of propriety of these is one, with which the 2d prayer has no concern, though it has often been pressed into the service and made a subject of dispute.

Let us now make one or two remarks on the 2d prayer, considered as a whole.

1. This prayer is a severe reproof of all vain expressions, all pomp of words, all tedious repetitions, all enumerations, in our addresses to God. Nothing can be more simple, sentiment, energetic, & brief, than this model of devotion. Matthew has introduced it into the sermon on the mount, in connexion with the mention of abuses of the sacred duty of prayer: "When thou prayest,"
there shall not be as the hypocrites are. But the
use being not vain repetitions, as the heathen do, for
they think they shall be heard for their much speaking.
And when the Lord is introduced, in substance,
it were to set an example of the joys of the soul
of prayer, to rebuke these. She thought, who
those ambitious prayers to have the more indications of pretences
stirrings in the sight of God. There is a great deal of
this false judgment, if it be nothing worse, with regard to prayer. With some it seems to be a vehicle
for all the vagaries of a perverted imagination, you
use such terms as are almost too familiar, vulgar;
for common intercourse of man with man. There are
those who can never be satisfied till they have brought
within the compass of one prayer all the objects of
supplication in the universe, of prostration and
exercises to such a length, as to weary down and wear
out the spirit of devotion. And some would induce
us to suppose that they imagine God may be overburdened
minds of their reach of flower of speech. Now all such
uses, the prayer of our soul, in its simple, solemn maj-
esty, preserves. And why, what can be more disgrace
tong to me, who loves the spirit of serious devotion, to see the folly of the pride of man stretching themselves out in addresses to God. It has been observed with great animation of beauty, that 'prayer is the application of want to Him.' Only can relieve it, the voice of sin to Him who alone can pardon it. It is the urgency of necessity, the prostration of humility, the fervency of penitence, the confidence of trust. It is not eloquence, but earnestness, not the definition of helplessness, but the feeling of it, not figures of speech, but conjunction of soul. It is the 'I dare us, we perish' of summoning Peter, the cry of faith to the sea of mercy.' If such be the true nature of prayer, how foreign from it are all those addresses to the throne of heaven, of which the object seems to be to weary out God with ceaseless importunity, or which consist of mere sounding phrases as empty ejaculations. If there be any exercise suitable to the soul ought to be humble, lowly, regardless of self, it is the exercise of prayer. In the performance of that duty, we stand in our meanness of helplessness before Him, who alone can give us help; we stand as dependants on that bounty, only we neither deserve it can claim; we stand as sinners
before him, the prerogative of whose mercy it is to
dispense pardon. In such situation—such relation, the natural language would be the short,
serene, a simple language of the heart, without
ostentation, without detail, without refinement; in
which, it would be the language of the prayer of
Jesus.

2. We observe that this language is addressed to the
Father, to him alone: in this point too it is an ex-
ample and guide to all saints. Indeed you may search
the N.T. through, if you will find in the instructions
of no trace of homage paid to any other being, than
God the F. The example of the Saviour confirms this
injunction. He uniformly prays to his Father. Let
him alone, nor does he once intimate to his disciples
that himself, or any other being, beside God, was to be
the object of their prayers. In conformity with this
is the form of devotion we are now considering. This
fact, though very important, nevertheless, I think
it would surely need to be examined, were it
not that since the Apostolic times it has been intro-
never claimed it for himself; he gave all his own ordi-
ty, that the example he has left us as an example,
that we should do, as he has done.

3. We may briefly remark that the subjects of this prayer
are admirably just, proper, & important. They are such sub-
jects, as it is fit for man to introduce in connexion with his
God. They relate to concerns, in which the spirit of devotion
be properly employed; of the lesson which they furnish in this
respect is as necessary, as it is important. We are exceeding-
ly apt to err in the selection of topics for devotion. We some-
times pray for things, which of no consequence, about which
we have no right to pray. If from some undue prejudice, or
casual association of feeling, or possession of education, any
object has received an importance in our eyes, we forthwith
suppose that we must introduce it into our prayers, as if
we would make the Most High himself a party in our
cause, or connect with the purest spiritual things of heaven
the little, noisy, degrading feelings of earth. Hence it is,
that in religious disputes men have dared to lay their
black passions of hatred and party zeal on the altar of God, have
violated the purity of prayer with a corrupt, or malignant feel-
rings... Absolutely certain that they were right is that every body else is wrong, they have thought themselves entitled to pray that their cause might flourish in the smile of heaven, pray that their cause might flourish in the smile of heaven.

In the prayer of every thing else be withered in its form. Is the prayer for temporal blessings we are sometimes guilty of a very improver, particularly as if we imagined we could dictate to God the good things with which we would be supplied. Besides what we regard as good, may be the worst thing that could befall us. With regard to events, we are so ignorant that we know not what to pray for as we ought. Instead of praying for rain or sunshine, for health or wealth, let us pray that God would order all things according to his infinite mercy, so that we may improve under the discipline of this providence, whatsoever it may be.

"Still raise for good the supplicating voice, and not leave to Heav'n the measure of the choice." — Spenser.

Now from all such perversions of the true use of prayer, the true prayer is entirely free. It is a fine example, teaching us not only how to pray, but what we should pray for. The topics selected are free from all human passions, all human littlenes, all bigotry of hatred, free, worthy of the desires and aspirations of the soul.
I have given you these explanations; remarks on their prayers, considered as a whole, seemed to require... Let us not forget, my friend, that the whole efficacy of prayer must help ourselves. Prayer does nothing for us, if it does not help to purify our hearts, or fill them with love to God; and it doth not send us from the sanctuary or the closet, but to fitted for the duties of life, with better spirit, better feelings than we had before... Let us never suppose that God looks upon us with complacency, merely because we sing his praises or invoke his name... We must speak his praises by our lives, as well as by our lips; we must show that his name dwells in our hearts, as well as on our tongues. Let us carry these reflections into all our views of the Lord's prayer: while we feel it to be our duty to worship him in his house, or at the family altar, let us show that the influences of prayer have descended upon our hearts, like the dew upon the tender grass, to nourish and strengthen every virtue of every grace.

At home, Nov. 10, 1822, afternoon.

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