

Chapter Thirteen

The Personal Religion of Jesus in His Preaching

The personal religion of Jesus, indicated through his preaching, presents the religious life at its maximum. He entered into full fellowship with human nature, and to deny to him a real participation in the best part of human experience would be to denature him and to make his human life a phantom. He was preeminently religious. With clear appreciation of his divine and human union the student may seek from the Gospels the indications of the personal religion of the world's Preacher, who can invite followers not only to accept his truth but to imitate his life.

I. Jesus as a Man of Prayer

1. The Prayers of Jesus.—Prayer is the soul's initial movement in religion. Whether it be the cry of the distressed savage, unable to *propitiate* (regain favor, appease) or ward off his angry gods, or the confident voice of the glad child, assured by the revelation of his Heavenly Father's love and goodness that the shadows of woe and fear will not harm him, prayer is the soul's rightful and best effort to reach to fellowship with God. Variety of manifestation may be noticed, crudities in the expected benefits from it may be criticized, selfishness may control the ends of it, but prayer will always abide as the soul's outlet toward God. The prayerless life is abnormal and earthly. Jesus was a man of prayer. He met his brethren around the common mercy-seat.

Prayers of Preparation.—The public ministry of Jesus was begun in prayer. Words of the Thomas Campbell poem *Lochiel's Warning* are here most applicable: "Coming events cast their shadows before." Across his first step of public life fell the shadows that should deepen into the final darkness of Calvary. But his trust in the Father and his own self-confidence would remain sufficient to carry him through the gloom.

He offered his preparatory prayer immediately after his baptism. The years of obscurity had now passed and before him lay his lifework. The years of youth and training had not been without communion with his Father, for the one glimpse of him shows him conscious of his unusual relation to his Father's business. As he knelt upon the bank of Jordan he must have caught a true vision of his task, with the personal temptations from Satan, the intense demands upon his vitality, the bitter hatred of foes, the defections and dullness of disciples, the personal hardships, the shadows of *Via Dolorosa* (way of the cross through streets towards Calvary), the cup of Gethsemane, the crown of thorns, and the cross of Calvary. He prayed for sustaining grace.

Jesus made special preparation in prayer for impending conflicts. The cleansing of the leper resulted in popular excitement, which Jesus saw would bring a conflict with the leaders and himself, for such a deed, if left unchallenged, might turn the entire people toward the wonderful Preacher. Jesus sought retirement for quiet

and prayer. Shortly after this miracle he healed the paralytic in Capernaum and was charged with blasphemy. The opposition had by this time grown so definite and bold as to risk open attacks upon his ministry. Jesus recognized the signs of danger. He sought in prayer the needed strength to meet the foe. He did not underestimate the power of the enemy, but, as a great general might do, he fortified himself; no unseemly fear attaches to this act of prayer.

Jesus prayed for the appointment of the apostolate—Luke 6:12. The salvation of the sinful world could be mediated only through the Savior; the evangelization of the world would be the work of the disciples. Wisdom and discretion were needed in the careful choice of these first interpreters of the new religion. These men were called to bear into Judaism, strong in its prejudices against other forms of religion, and into the Gentile world, indifferent to personal piety and ready for more deities, the message of the lowly Nazarene. They could not claim the support of wealth, social prestige, or political influence. And yet they were to preach a Gospel for a world rather than for a country or a province.

Jesus spent the night in prayer. The records do not lift the curtain upon the scene, but tell us that next day he formally called the Twelve to form the apostolate. The centuries of success for the religion of these simple-hearted and unlettered disciples, whose chief glory is in their true interpretation of the mind of their Master, attest the wisdom of the prayerful Jesus.

“And it came to pass, as he was praying *apart* (separated by a distance), the disciples were with him.” Then came his first definite announcement of his sufferings and death. The Apostle Peter, spokesman for the apostolate, declared belief in Jesus’ Messiahship, though he did not realize the method of fulfilling this divine vocation. The Master first spoke to the Father, and then to his disciples about the coming tragedy. The Cross had its preparation and its supplement in prayer.

The disciples desired to learn the way to the throne of God. The way was that of obedience to the will and plan of God, which for Jesus led to the transfiguration. Accompanied by the inner circle of the three, Peter, James and John, he “went up into the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became white and dazzling.” The praying Jesus became the transfigured Jesus.

The disciples observed Jesus in his devotions. “When he ceased” they presented their request that he should give them the privilege of instruction in prayer, for John had so taught his followers. The impulse toward imitation in prayer was quickened by the example of both the Forerunner and the Lord himself. The request was answered with the Disciples’ Prayer—Luke 11:2-4, commonly called the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus did not present this prayer as a stereotyped form for constant recital, but rather outlined the principles of true prayer, that includes the soul’s attitude to God and man.

Prayers of Renewal.—Prayer should be agonizing and self-giving. The passive soul only repeats the words of prayer. Physical exhaustion accompanies the most

fervent prayer. And yet it is true that sense of mental, spiritual, or physical weakness may lead to this devotion for renewal of powers. Out of the prayer may come the new energy to attempt greater things. The conscious need for such renewal often follows a crisis.

Jesus had preached in the Capernaum synagogue, had healed a demoniac, and restored the mother of Peter's wife; late in the afternoon the crowds gathered around him to hear his words and to have their sick healed. It had been a busy day for the Preacher. Before day he arose to seek the desert for prayer, his great soul feeling its need for renewal of physical and spiritual forces, upon which there had been such severe draughts the previous day. Human greatness indicates its superlative character by the ability to give out "self" in sympathy and service and to make rapid restoration of vital forces.

Another prayer of renewal followed a difficult day. The vast multitudes had accompanied him all the day, and he had preached to them and healed their sick. The 5,000 men with the women and children had been fed with the lad's lunch. Stirred by such marvels, the people came to crown him king, but Jesus again refused this suggestion of Satan that he should take the short way to the throne; he slipped away into the mountain to pray. This day of service and temptation must have been a real trial to Jesus, for his unity of both the divine and the human elements of life left him real on both sides. His fellowship with men was so intimate as to bring him need for renewal of inner strength.

Prayers of Thanksgiving.—By his example Jesus rebuked the *ingrate* (ungrateful person). Thanksgiving is as essential a part of prayer as petition. Jesus thanked the Father that he had revealed the truth to the men of humility. The condition of receiving truth is teachableness, which requires the humble heart. The proud Pharisee was shut off from the truth by his highmindedness. The heart of the Preacher rejoiced that obscurity and lowly position had fitted some men to receive the news of the kingdom. The seer has always been the man of humility. Jesus also thanked God for answered prayer. Before the tomb of Lazarus Jesus publicly thanked God for the former answers to his petitions.

If the Son of man, whose right to the help of the righteous forces of the universe would be unquestioned, considered thanksgiving a duty of his prayer life, surely the obligation comes to his disciples by the measure of their unworthiness. Descriptive of the general attitude of men toward this duty, the following legend may be cited. St. Peter sent from heaven the two angels of Thanksgiving and Petition, each with a basket to gather up the world's thanks and requests. The basket of the former was very large, the latter very small. Upon the return to heaven the baskets were brought to St. Peter.

"The Angel of Petitions bore a sack
Cram full, and bound uncouthly on his back:
Yet even then it seemed that he had lack
Of bag or basket.

"The Angel of Thanksgivings blushed to feel

The empty lightness of his mighty *creel*: (*large basket for carrying fish*)

'But three!' he muttered, turning on his heel
To hide his basket."

Prayers of Intercession.—Jesus prayed that Peter's faith might not fail him in *his hour of trial and sifting* (Editor's note: Peter's probable concern for self-preservation, through his denying Christ). Even in his own dark hours of struggle with the forces of evil for the salvation of the world Jesus did not forget the individual need of others. The impulsive, erring, and boastful Peter would find that his Master's intercession would help to transform him into the intrepid, zealous, and successful preacher, willing to suffer disgrace and imprisonment.

The great intercessory prayer of Jesus gathered into its benefits the disciples of all ages; here were given the relations of the Son to the Father, of the Son to his immediate followers, and of the Son to his disciples of all ages. "And Jesus said, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." None but a divinely enspirited soul could have risen to such unselfish nobility. The jeers of his crucifiers and the agony of death by crucifixion could not make him depart from his life-plan of sacrifice. He came that men might have forgiveness, and in his own death exemplified forgiveness of enemies. What great love was this that would lead one to die for his enemies!

Prayers of the Passion.—Here may be noticed the Prayers of Jesus that have direct bearing upon his suffering. In his last public discourse he said, "Father, save me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour." A great scholar has suggested that the current interpretation of withdrawal from the experiences of the hour be changed so as to make it a prayer for the divine presence and power to bring him safely through the hour of consummated Saviorhood. He had already declared to his disciples the expectation of suffering and death as his portion; he yearned for the conscious touch of the Father's hand.

Similar to this was the *thrice*-repeated (three times) Gethsemane prayer, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done." He was ready to continue his obedience even though it brought him to the most severe trial of the innocent bearing death for the sinful. This cry of soul-agony wrung from Jesus only heightens our appreciation of his greatness, for only a divinely human nature could have fully understood the sacrifice of Saviorhood.

The cry of the forsaken Son of God must be studied with holy reverence and restraint, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The certain appreciation of this experience is yet for the future to bring, for it is a far reach for the human mind to fathom the meaning of the momentary withdrawal of the Father's comfort. The Son was beneath the cloud; let us turn curious eyes from him to our own sinful hearts for whose benefit the shadows had come to him.

Homiletical Observations.—Sixteen times the records say that Jesus prayed, eight times the substance of the prayer being briefly given. Six prayers were offered during his Last Week. The one in Gethsemane is the only one given by the three

Synoptics. Various details of the common narratives are given by the writers. Eight are peculiar to Luke, three to John, and one to Mark. In six cases mention is made of his retirement for prayer.

The habits of the prayer life of Jesus are indicated in these records. He loved the seasons of retirement, when his soul could speak without interruption to the Father; occasionally he permitted the disciples within the circle of this quiet hour. His passion for prayer often continued the devotion through the entire night. He had definite purposes in mind in his petitions for himself or for others and in his thanksgiving; he did not ramble in conversations with God. He used appropriate names and forms of address for God without familiarity such as appears in some Christian customs. Jesus put his soul into his prayers. He did not pray for personal forgiveness. His prayers lacked the contingent and uncertain element, consequently they were answered. (Editor's note: he does not say "please;" yet he says "thanks" often.) The supreme moment of his life came in his renunciation, final and sacrificial, of his own will in obedience to his Father's. His example serves as an inspiration to men for their imitation.

2. The teaching of Jesus about prayer.—A brief supplemental treatment of this topic is needed to present a fair view of Jesus as a man of prayer.

The True Spirit of Prayer.—We are not here concerned with a statement of the question from the theological viewpoint, but Jesus also stressed the true spirit of prayer as a homiletical principle. The parable of *the Pharisee and the Publican* taught this. Self-satisfied with his religious prominence and external piety, the Pharisee thanked God for superiority to his despised fellow-worshiper; the penitent publican with downcast eyes bemoaned his unworthiness. The repentant heart may always be assured of the similar blessing of the publican.

The Subjects of Prayer.—The homiletics of prayer partly define the limits of answerable prayer. Jesus did not present particular lists, but gave the heart a wide outlook. On two occasions he instructed his disciples to pray for an increase of laborers in the harvest of the kingdom. The need for its present repetition is apparent from the great work yet to be done. He advised prayer for the trials that should come when the events of his apocalyptic discourse should be fulfilled in the coming end of Jerusalem and the end of the world. They should also use this safeguard against temptations. To these somewhat definite subjects he added the summary of needs in the "whatsoever" and "everything."

Conditions of Prayer.—Effective prayer must be conditional. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared that the asking should precede the receiving; the heart must speak its needs to the Father, although he fully understands them. The parables of *the Friend at Midnight* and *the Unrighteous Judge* illustrated the earnestness and the persistency of the man, who felt compelled to receive the answer to his prayers. The mountain of difficulty would yield to the faith that could so transcend all laws as to command absolute confidence in God. The abiding in Christ, as the branch abides in the vine, would fit one for the fruitage of which definite requests would form parts. Prayer should be made to the Father on the basis of the Son's work, but direct appeals might be offered even to the Son.

Answers to Prayer.—Expectation conditions answers to prayer. The earthly father but indicates the willingness of the heavenly to bless his children who ask in faith for their needs to be supplied. “Ask, and you shall receive.” Refusal to ask may limit God’s favors to men, for he stands ready to grant many things, but requires the soul to pray. Spiritual power is within the privilege of each child of God, but its exercise will come only as the soul submits the life to God and prays for the power.

“Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath,
The Christian’s native air,
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters heaven with prayer.”—William Cowper, hymn “Behold He Prays”

II. Jesus as a Worshiper

1. Sinlessness.—The sinlessness of Jesus was fundamental to his worship. His incarnation gave him full participation in human life with the exception of sin. Salvation from sin could have been mediated only through a sinless man, whose character included both the human and the divine elements of life. This fact has been an *axiom* (a proposition regarded as self-evidently true) of theology. Jesus professed faith in his own sinlessness and challenged his enemies for the contrary proof: “Which of you convicts me of sin?” The silence of failure held his audience. He claimed equality with the Father and the right to speak the universal duty for men, such a course being presumption in one less unique than the Holy One of God. Consequently Jesus never prayed for personal forgiveness. His worship was free from penitence and the sacrifices for sin. His final victory over sin as the Savior could not have been gained if he had felt the conscious need of freedom from individual guilt.

2. Regularity.—As a worshiper Jesus maintained regular habits. The records do not furnish information about his youth, but they show that his public life was true to the occasions of worship. He was a regular attendant upon the synagogue and the Temple; he journeyed more than once from Galilee to Jerusalem to be present at the great feasts which the pious Jew was expected to attend. “And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and he entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read.”

3. Orthodoxy.—Jesus was only partly orthodox as a Jew. While he accepted the memorials of the Hebrew religion, as these were contained in the sacred literature and the forms and places of worship, he could not accept the current interpretations and expressions of the religious life. He would pay the Temple-tax, and send his beneficiaries to the priests for approval, according to the historic laws, but he could not be bound by the narrow demands for fastings, public prayers, ostentatious alms, and numerous other Pharisaical restrictions and burdens. For the many sacrifices for sin he desired to substitute that of the Lamb of God, himself; for the priesthood of ambitious men he declared in favor of the universal priesthood of believers. He was condemned as the violator of traditions; he was not orthodox. However, he most clearly attained to the true meaning of the divine leadership of Israel and the revelations of Jehovah.

4. Spirituality.—The personal religion of Jesus was deeply spiritual. He put into externals the motive of worship. He best illustrated his own dictum, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Such spirituality characterized his attitude to God, to the Messianic Hope, and to personal service to men as to enrage his foes, who could not transfer religion from the carnal to the spiritual, from the temporal to the eternal, and from the seen to the unseen.

III. Jesus as a Religious Worker

1. The Preacher.—The personal religion of Jesus expressed itself in work. Religious emotions and aspirations should have embodiment. The ministry of truth was Jesus' constant effort to express his faith in God, for men must know the divine methods of worship and service. His preaching taught men to know God.

2. The Healer.—The miracles of Jesus were visible and appreciable tokens of his interest in men. He kept the injunctions of the parable of *the Good Samaritan*. He ministered to men. His ministry of miracles indicates this method of work.

3. The Creator of a New Community.—Jesus as a religious worker created a new community. From him the forces went out for a new horizon for the world. The ages of Christianity testify to his genius of creation.

(End of Chapter 13 – The Personal Religion of Jesus in His Preaching)