

## THE EXERCISE OF PRAYER

Once I had a church – abandoned chicken house behind the airport in Wilmington. I took a little fellow about ten to Sunday School who had never been before, telling him we would first go in to the Junior Department – I think you’ll enjoy the “opening exercises.” “Oh boy!” he said, “I’ll like that!” So we went in – but after sitting through a half-hour of the usual procedures – he looked restless and bored, and tugging at my sleeve, asked with a puzzled frown, “Say, did they forget the opening exercises?”

It took me a few seconds to realize what he meant – that he had fully expected Sunday School to open with exercises – say five minutes of energetic calisthenics, or a brisk game of ball, or some sort of activity that required effort – at any rate, what we were doing sitting down in these pews didn’t look like any opening exercise to him, least wise not of any type he’d ever heard of. And I rather agreed with the boy in a way. For most of us do just get by with a modicum of participation, putting as little intelligence and effort into the so-called “exercises” of worship as possible. We sing the hymns glumly without energy and pay scant attention to the words of the liturgy. If someone substituted “Mary had a little lamb” for “Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world,” next communion, not everybody would notice the switch. Our minds are often not being exercised here – they are asleep. And as for “those prayers” – well, they drone on, rather soothing, like a sedative, blurring and blending our thoughts, so that “give us this day our daily bread” gets mixed up with whether the roast is burning in the oven at home and “thy kingdom come” with what he said last night and what a sight she looked at the party and, Lord, these pews are uncomfortable and my back is killing me and my head’s beginning to swim, will it never end? ... and “Amen.” ...

So in our worship we haven’t really exercised our mind and souls or done anything practical: for God, for man, or for ourselves. We’ve just endured a lot of words and music and all those prayers. Drama – acts -- benediction, etc.

So, naturally we emerge from here-- just about as we came in, as torpid of spirit, as sluggish of soul, as mean of temper, as unhappy and as unhealthy of disposition as when we arrived. For we haven’t really stirred ourselves at all, haven’t flexed our spiritual muscles even once and then wonder why it is worship means so little to us – or why our character is so

underdeveloped, why our courage so flabby in the face of danger, why our zest for, our appetite for the Christian life so seldom hearty.

Truth is, if worship is to have any practical results, you can't simply sit here. You must put some intelligent effort into it. What on earth good would it do you to go over to the YMCA Gym just to watch the instructor work out? His being a strong and clever athlete won't help you one bit unless you join in. So what in heaven's name is the good of coming to Church just to hear the "parson" work out? He may be a strong and clever preacher but that won't help you one bit unless you join in – take part, participate, for God's sake, and for your own sake, and for the family's sake too – that you and I may be fit to live with. Worship if not a spectator sport – you're on the team here. So, if there's going to be any practical results let us participate creatively in the strenuous exercise of worship. Sing the hymns with gusto – read the words with sense. Say the creed with strength, with conviction, with understanding. Let us hear the Bible read as God's true and lively word for us – and listen to the preaching with an alert and critical ear. Ask does the sermon proclaim the kerygma, any practical good news, any gospel of God's salvation in the life and death of Jesus Christ? Does it teach the disciple, me, anything new about how this salvation ought to be practiced, how it shows up in my mind, my manners and my morals? Did the sermon sock me into some thinking and action or just soothe and confirm me in my old set ways, my pet peeves? Did it arouse me or just amuse me? Ask – Did the sermon leave me alone or lead me somehow to Lord God? There's a question for you.

Indeed, has the whole service of worship really exercised me in any vital way? Has it given my motives a working over? Stirred up my indignation over my easy acceptance of my usual sins? Replaced or rearranged some of my life's goals? If not – it hasn't been salty enough, it's been too sweet.

And as for those prayers – they especially – ought to be practical – ought to give the soul a workout, a good going over. For to the Christian – prayer is nothing short of having a spirited conversation with holy God. Prayer is dialogue between you and your maker – and that's a shattering thing to engage in – just the thought of prayer ought to be enough to shock us wide awake – just the thought of conversing with the maker of the universe ought to be enough to make us exercise every faculty we possess to say what we mean and mean what we say. (With none of this pious sweet talk in devotional tones (Holy Gawd, etc) as though we could fool the

good God as to what sort of rascals we really are) – but short, sensible, simple, straight talk to the God who for all practical purposes sees right through us – that’s what prayer is. True our Master had little patience with public prayer – might as well admit that – he felt public prayer was such a temptation to hypocrites to pray in synagogues and on street corners to be heard of men. He favored private prayer as more practical – just the soul and God having it out alone – no company. Well, if he preferred private prayer, I suppose what you better do in listening to public prayer – is to exercise our minds to make it private as quickly as we can – by following the leader – the minister – phrase by phrase as he prays and saying either “Amen.” – “So be it,” “me too,” “Lord, I agree with what the man said, that’s my prayer exactly, I feel just that thankful, just that penitent, just that forgiven.” Or shaking your head and saying to God, “not Amen” but me genoito (may it not be God forbid). “Not me, Lord Christ, that prayer’s not for me – that petition may be pretty Presbyterian, but it makes no practical sense, I don’t know what he means or he’s just showing off. That’s not the way I feel at all, O Lord, but maybe I’ll agree with the next petition. Wait and see.”

The practice of honestly saying amen or me genoito will make those public prayers you hear quite private – and it will exercise your mind and soul a bit in the process and make it all quite practical. But as Christians – most of our praying ought to go on outside of public Church. The Lord never intended for us to spend most of our lives in here, we only come in here to renew, in worship, our loyalty to him—praise his judgment! Prayer is to renew life like for when we get back to other useful work. So it is in family and in daily personal prayer that worship is most practical – we’ll get our best exercise of soul. Strange - so many think that private prayer is a way to get God to do something practical for us – stir him up, get him going for our benefit, doing things for us, but that’s sympathetic magic, whereas prayer in the Christian sense is basically God’s way of getting us to do something practical, stirring us up, getting us going for his benefit, doing things for him.

Here, for example is a practical prayer of confession looking right in to the face of the good God, say in a simple, straight out way: “My God, you know I have a terrible temper. I like flinging fits. It’s not easy for me to give it up. But here and I now I give it to you. Take it away – and from now on I will control my tongue. I will use the jaw muscles you gave me to keep my mouth shut.”

Or we might pray – “Oh God, I have a hobby of seeing the fault in everything. It’s great sport for me. I pick guests to pieces. I’ve come to enjoy it. But I’m making the family miserable. So for your sake and theirs I give it up – right now. Help me to see good in all things God – to make the others glad they are alive instead of wishing they were dead. Let me be kind and understanding.”

Or may it be a practical prayer of supplication: “Oh God, you know what a chronic worrier I am – how often afraid – from now on I shall live my faith – one day – one hour at the time – and live the future with you.”

Or it could be a prayer of intercession: “Lord, revive the church, beginning with me.”

Or, “Lord, I pray for my family. Give me the compassion to care for those who look to me, who need me. Give me the right words to encourage them – the sense and strength to help them, not harm them.”

You see – private prayers like these – that talk to God – in a plain, salty, simple, straight out specific way – (strength for nothing in particular, courage for no special reason) – God hears and answers – for through them – he exercises us, our best faculties, stirs us up, gets us going – doing things for Him with joy.

Yes, “You draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.”