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A SERMON

by

REV. C WISTAR HODGE,
D. D.

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A SERMON

BY

REV. C. WISTAR HODGE, D. D.,

Professor in the Theological Seminary,

PRINCETON, N. J.



A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

United Congregational Church,

AT NEWPORT, R. I.,

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 1881,

BY

REV. C. WISTAR HODGE, D. D.,



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MATT. XVIII., 19. *"If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in Heaven."*
Comp. John. XIV., 13, 14; XV., 7; XVI., 23; James V., 15, 16.

The period through which we have been passing since the 2nd of last July, has been filled with more profound feeling than has ever before come into the lives of any of us, as called out by a common cause. The painful and long continued suspense, the extreme alternations of hope and despair, the anxiety about the effect upon public affairs, have weighted the crisis. The universal and most tender sympathy with the sufferer, the love and admiration caused by his heroic courage, his patience, his unflinching Christian faith, have deepened the common feeling. Sympathy and admiration for the bearing of those most nearly concerned in the sorrow, have added their influence. Every word, every pain, every change, has been anxiously watched. Never before have any of us felt so keenly and so deeply, except when our own nearest and dearest have entered upon the conflict with death. And the feeling has been simultaneous throughout the whole country. Fifty millions of people, or rather two continents, have sustained

this tension of feeling through all these weary days. Never before has a single case been brought home so immediately to such multitudes. Every city and every hamlet in the broad land has eagerly watched the tidings. The people of Canada, and of England, and of the Continent, the rulers and leaders of the nations, the Queen of England and the Pope of Rome, and emperors of heathen countries, have manifested a heartfelt sympathy. The splendid fight for life, made with every resource of science and appliance of wealth; the magnificent service of great corporations of railroad and telegraph, have made the days memorable. We never saw anything like it; there never was anything like it in all the annals of history. The aged will carry the remembrance of these scenes to their latest days with ever renewed emotion. And children will, in days to come, recall the facts and feelings in which they have had a share, with ever increasing appreciation of their significance.

And to the Christian, from a religious point of view, one of the most remarkable elements of this experience has been the illustration of prayer. Apart from the character of the man, now passed into history as one of the proudest and most cherished in our galaxy of patriotism, and apart from the lessons to be derived in the conduct of our public affairs, this subject of the prayers that have been offered for the recovery of the stricken President, forces itself upon every thoughtful mind, and demands consideration. It is not exaggeration to say that so many and so earnest prayers were never before offered for any one man. Many men unac-

customed to prayer, who have not believed in prayer, have earnestly and honestly besought God to bless him, and to spare him, and to pity his family, and to help him in the service of his country. Christians have never prayed with more unanimity, nor with more pleading urgency, for this boon from Heaven. They have prayed in private, and in concert, in meetings spontaneously assembled or formally convened at the call of the Governors of the States. And their cause has been a good one, and their motives have been right. They have believed that the life were better spared than lost, that the country would be better with him than without him for its head. They have pleaded by the mercy of God, by the truth of His promises, and by the intercession of Christ. And the President is dead. Had he lived, we would have said to the skeptic and the scoffer, here is a signal instance of a life snatched from the utmost danger, by the hand of God, and at the instance of the prayer of faith. Shall the unbeliever, therefore, say that the result proves that prayer has had, and could have had, no influence in the case? Is the granting of our desires evidence of the power of prayer, and their failure no evidence to the contrary? Undoubtedly this will be said; it is said. Men who have not prayed hitherto will be discouraged, and will say that they will not be so deceived again. And undoubtedly there is in this a trial to the faith of Christians, and they need not fear to acknowledge it. We have prayed in concert, we have prayed for the good of the nation and of the Church; we have

tried to pray with humility, and with submission to the will of God, and we have prayed with faith. No greater effort, by prayer, was ever made. And with all the imperfection and sin which belong to our best efforts, the conditions of acceptable prayer were never more religiously observed. And now, we ask ourselves, what encouragement is there for us to pray again? Or is prayer of use only to ourselves, for the nourishment of the spiritual life, but without influence on external results? And what are we to say of the express promises of the Bible, that prayer shall be answered?

Now it is an obvious, but not unimportant remark, that there is nothing new, in this instance, as to the principles involved. It is conspicuous, and will be influential, because of the scale upon which the effort has been conducted, and because of the intensity of the feeling which has been involved. But there are few of us who have not before this engaged in the struggle for the life of those most dear to us, when we have prayed as well as we knew how to pray for life; but death has been the answer. We have felt the trial to faith, and the difficulty of submission, more strongly perhaps before, than now. The principle is the same, and, therefore, there is now no new reason for discouragement. If in all the Providential dealing with us hitherto, there has not been discovered reasonable ground to distrust the efficacy of prayer, there is no new ground for distrust in the existing case. God is faithful to His promises, although His ways be hidden to us in thick darkness.

I. But the idea too commonly expressed that the prayer of faith necessarily procures as its direct answer the object prayed for, betrays a false conception of the very nature of prayer. It has been said in public, that God was shut up to granting the life of the President; that there had been too much prayer for him to be suffered to die. And, since the event, it has been said that the reason for his death must have been some failure to comply with the conditions of believing prayer. That had we prayed aright, and had he himself believed aright, he must have lived. Clerical enthusiasts and lay exhorters have combined in such assertions. It is, therefore, though not unusual, a fundamental and very injurious mistake, betraying no less ignorance of the express teaching of the Bible, than of the principles which govern all God's providential dealing with us, and all our communion with Him in prayer. Leaving out of view all account of the conditions of true prayer, supposing all these conditions to be acceptably complied with, it still can never be true that God has bound Himself to grant precisely that which we ask for, or prayer is no longer prayer. Because it is involved in the idea of prayer that there is a personal God, who determines by His will that which shall be, and who may choose to give or to withhold, as seems good to Him. The possibility of refusal is pre-supposed in the very offering of a petition. We recognize the full right to withhold, as well as the power to grant, in the very approach to God in prayer. To suppose, therefore, that the observance of any conditions on man's part, so

binds the truth of God that we may confidently expect the granting of our desires in the exact form in which we present them, is to pervert the very nature of prayer, is inconsistent with the essential relations which prayer implies, and betrays a want of true faith and of submission to the divine will, which are the very conditions of acceptance.

The precise error which is at the base of this way of thinking, is that it would subject the will of God, which acts in accordance with His omniscient intelligence, to the limited intelligence of His creatures. It supposes it to be possible for God so to limit himself by His promise, that the decision as to what He shall do in a given case, passes from Himself, and is made over to the agreement of His believing people. The sceptre of the universe changes hands! So far as we can see, what we pray for would be the best for us, and for every good cause. God sees all the conditions and relations involved in our request, and sees that for higher ends, and better results, the refusal is necessary. The little child sees its highest good in that which most attracts it at the moment, or which satisfies his most urgent, momentary want. The parent knows what is for the good of the child, and love, guided by superior intelligence, withholds the longed-for benefit. Not otherwise is it between us and our Father in Heaven. There may come a time in the experience of every one of us, when we can see neither wisdom nor love in the procedure of Divine Providence. But we must walk by faith, and not by sight. We must believe that infinite

wisdom and infinite love are there. And we must submit, not sullenly, as to necessity, but with child-like trust, assured that He doeth all things well.

Suppose the contrary were true, and that it were possible for God so to limit himself by the conditions of believing prayer as that the answer must inevitably follow; and what would be the result? What we think to be best would always occur, and not what God thinks best. What right thinking man, considering all the consequences involved, would be willing to incur the responsibility of making his requests? Who would ever be found willing to undergo the chastisement of severe sorrow, however necessary to the development of his character? Who would not be tempted to postpone his requests for spiritual good, if sure he could have for the asking, and who would not become degraded by grasping at the nearest and most pressing earthly desire? With every change of mind the petitioner would expect answers as inconsistent as his moods. And men of different minds would pray for opposite results, and demand immediate answer. The farmer would pray for rain, and the seaman for fair winds and clear skies. Believing hearts would go into every battle, on each side, praying for victory. Human affairs would become involved in utter confusion. Reverence for God as the Sovereign Ruler would be destroyed, and religion become impossible. No, thank God that even a Christian faith does not govern the world. Thank God, that not the multitude of prayers, however earnest and pure, but the One Infinite Will, guided by infinite knowledge and love, directs

events. Thank God that we can pray, saying, Our Father, which art in heaven. Thank God, that incarnate, crucified and exalted love, and that when we pray, we leave our requests in His hands, to give or to withhold. Paul prayed, earnestly, that the thorns in the flesh might be removed from him. Not surely for personal relief only, but for his efficiency in his work. And he prayed thrice over. The thorns remained, but his answer was, "My grace is sufficient for thee." And a greater sufferer wrestled, with strong crying and tears, in the garden, praying "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." And He prayed thrice over. He also, as the apostle tells us, "was heard in that he feared." And yet He drank the cup which the Father had given Him to drink.

II. But then the difficulty arises, if God will determine every issue, and not our petitions, His will cannot be influenced by our prayers. All events are fixed in His purpose, and that purpose is determined to the highest ends. He knows what is best, He knows what He intends. Prayer cannot change His purpose; and, therefore, as He has commanded us to pray, it must be out of regard only to our own minds. Prayer is for the comfort and strength of the soul, and for communion with God. In a word, the value of prayer is to be sought exclusively in its reflex influence on ourselves.

As to the whole difficulty, two things are to be said, and they seem to be sufficient. In the first place we must dismiss the alternative that the value of prayer is to be discovered only in its reflex influ-

ence, as a dishonest conception. Shall the prayer of faith, believing, expecting, importuning for an answer, be offered by a man who feels all the while that he is acting a part—that he is only expressing himself—and that, in reality, God cannot be influenced by him if he would? Faith in God's willingness and power, expectance of the answer, could never enter as elements of prayer under such conditions. In other words, on this theory prayer becomes a totally different thing. Confession, adoration, communion, might remain, but no sincere prayer for help for our souls or amid the afflictions of life, would any longer be possible. Prayer, indeed, has its reflex influence. It is, in an important sense, its own answer. It is the life-breath of faith and love; it is communion with God. It is indeed impossible to overestimate or to overstate the importance of this influence of prayer. But the reality and truth of this reflex influence depend altogether upon the assurance that prayer is an efficient cause in bringing about the results prayed for. It can have no influence on ourselves unless we believe that it prevails with God. Its reflex influence is immediately lost, if we cease to believe the promise, that what we pray for God will give us.

Then, as to the main difficulty, that God's purposes are fixed, in the light of His divine knowledge and love, and therefore cannot be influenced by prayer; He tells us, on the contrary, that they are. The whole trouble is in our understanding, not in His conduct, in regard to our prayers. We cannot see in any relation, the point of contact between

the Infinite Mind and our limited and faith lines. We cannot understand the relation of His purpose to our free will. Yet we know that God acts as God, divinely; that we act as men, freely. The difficulty with regard to prayer is no other than in reconciling the use of means in any case, with the fixity of the divine purpose. The problem is intellectually insuperable, in the nature of the case, because we cannot comprehend infinity. And yet we are not reduced to an absolutely blind faith in this respect. Because we can see this much, that there is a connection between our praying and God giving; that our prayers, with all their appended conditions, go in among the elements of God's purposes, and are no less fixed as means than the events are fixed as results in God's ordinance. God knows what the harvest shall be. We know that unless we sow we shall not reap. God's knowledge of the harvest includes also his knowledge of our sowing and reaping. When we are sick we send for the physician. God knows whether life shall be spared or not. But His purpose includes within it the skill of the physician, and also the prayer of faith, by both of which He will bring to pass the result. When we prayed for the life of the President, God knew from the outset, and through all those anxious burdened days, what was to come. But He included in His purpose all the prayer that was offered, all the efforts made, all the skill lavished, all the influence on personal character, and on the future of the nation. The prayers were means to His ends. They were as efficacious as any other means. They

were a part of the conditions of His purpose. So that while we may never know that we shall receive precisely what we ask, we may know that except we ask we will not receive. And more, that if we ask we shall receive, either that which we ask for directly, or something which God sees to be better. We see but a very little way, and along a very narrow line, along which we would push our requests, not knowing what other lines or interests of Christ's kingdom may be covered by what seems best to us. God's knowledge pervades, as from the centre, a limitless sphere, embracing all lines, and interests, and destinies of men, and all purposes of God. In this infinite sphere our lines are included, and their highest interests secured by myriad conditions of whose action we are ignorant. But among them, with every best result prayer is bound up, as one of the necessary conditions, and most powerful secondary means.

The chief danger lies in allowing mistaken reasoning to have an injurious influence on our faith and our practical life. Because we cannot see how, is no reason why God cannot, and will not. Let us dismiss all trouble from speculations which are necessarily beyond our grasp, and return to the attitude of children, assured that it is not alone of faith, but by the light of the truest and highest intelligence of which we are capable, that we pray. And that we know that God hears when we say, "Our Father, which art in heaven."

III. But a difficulty of another sort is, perhaps, even more commonly felt by reason of which many

reject the belief that prayer can have any influence in modifying, or bringing about effects in the external world. It is said that nature works by her own laws, so that the sequence of cause and effect in the material world is never interrupted, and that to pray to God to interfere with their results is contrary to all our observation and experience of His methods. The materialistic philosophy which is prevalent affects the thought of unscientific men, and even of religious men, so far as this, that some are ready to say that the influence of prayer must be confined to the moral and spiritual world, but that God does not interfere with the operation of natural causes which bring rain, or which have to do in the recovery of the sick. From the extreme materialism which finds the adequate cause of all things in the universe without God, through all gradations of opinion as to the nature of God and his relation to the world, there runs this tendency to deny the power of prayer in the external world. Either we do not know that God is, or He has created forces which have outgrown his control ; He has so limited Himself in creation that He can have no part in bringing about external events.

At this point it is very necessary for us, for practical purposes, to discriminate. An interruption of the sequence between cause and effect, or the production of any effect by the act of God's will without the agency of a material cause, we call a miracle. And we do not pray to God to perform miracles. Not because that we do not believe that He has the power now as well as when the Son of

God was upon earth. Not that we do not recognize even more wonderful evidences of His power in His works now, as in the greatest of miracles. But only because the specific conditions of miracles, and the reason which is given us for their production do not now exist. The objection, therefore, strikes wide of the mark. We do not pray for the suspension or interruption of any law of nature.

But within the sphere of the operation of natural law to deny the power of God to direct, combine, and to influence towards certain ends, is to deny to Him what we claim for ourselves, and what constitutes the very field of scientific achievement.

Are we to believe that when the thermometer registered 95° in that sick chamber in the stifling atmosphere of the Potomac, the ingenuity of men using the simplest device could supply cooled air in such proportions that the temperature could be kept equally at 75° from hour to hour, and yet that God, because He does not work with hands, and by the rude, external modes of human interference, cannot by His will so co-ordinate and arrange these natural forces, that with no interruption of their acting, and no contradiction of their nature, He can send rain or wind, or heat or cold, a pestilence or health, or raise the sick to life, if He so ordain? Are we to believe that by the wit or skill of man, only combining and arranging in accordance with natural laws, using a line of wire, and some acid and metals, the bulletins of every change in the sufferer's condition could be flashed, hour by hour, to the most

remote cities and villages of this vast country, and beneath the sea to other countries, causing the hearts of all to beat as one heart, in the alternations of hope and of despair, causing the tenderest and most spiritual sympathies of men to be thus communicated regardless of time and distance ; and are we to deny that God can produce any effect or exert any influence over the works of His own hands ? Can we believe that a man, wounded to death, to whom an untoward motion might be fatal, could be carried along the lines of a great railway, with its quick following trains thundering in both directions a distance of two hundred and fifty miles in the quarter of a day, yet softly, quietly, gently, every train arrested as he passed, not a bell or a whistle sounded, nor even the hiss of escaping steam allowed ; while the people from Maine to California waited with hushed breath to learn the result of the experiment ; and that God has no part in bringing about the effect of those forces which are in operation about us every day, and which exert so great an influence in the mind and spiritual sphere ? May God forgive the impious suggestion. Thank God ! These tremendous forces, whose delicate and precise adjustment are necessary to afford the conditions of the life of men upon the earth, are not left to themselves. Life does not depend upon the balancing and ordering of such forces, without intelligence in the management. This rush of worlds through space, these powers engendered by the heat of the sun, these springing forces bound up in air and earth, one little effort of which beyond their appointed limit would send us hurtling to destruction

are in the hands of the Heavenly Father. Which is right, this universal instinct of men, that we are in the hands of God, and which, when danger threatens, or a great sorrow hangs over them, sends men of all creeds and classes to prayer to God for help; or the speculations of a few proud, emancipated philosophers, who have entered into the heritage of discovery left them by greater men than they, men of reverence and faith in God, who would have us believe that the crucible, and the microscope and the scales, are instruments by which we can discern all causes and forces which are acting in the universe. Rather let us believe that these natural laws are themselves not only God's instruments, but the evidence of his activity. That He upholds them in being, and causes them to be as they are. That a miracle is no more truly the exhibition of His immediate energy, than are those of His mediated energy. That the intelligence and love which we discern in the adaptation of nature, were not only impressed in the creation, but are manifested every moment, and in every change. That wherever we see the evidence of wisdom, we see God. Wherever there is evidence of beneficence there is God. Wherever there is power directed to an end, there is the manifested presence of the personal God, conducting all things to their best results. Let us believe that in Him we live and move, and have our being. That we sleep in quiet, and awake refreshed, because He not only watches over us, but sustains us. That every breath, every pulse, all our immunity from danger, all our security in the ordered sequence of the seasons, and in the

stability of society, and the progress of the world, depend upon His presence, and on the manifestations of His presence and of His power. That He is not a God afar off, but nigh us and within us and about us. And let us pray to Him therefore, when trouble comes, or in peaceful scenes, for the continuance of his care, sure that He hears us, and saying with the confidence of children, "Our Father which art in heaven."

IV. But we do not reach the end of this matter, and fully understand the fidelity of God to His promise, until we take into the account that prayer may be answered in other ways than by the granting of the express desire. The withholding of the request may be the very condition of blessing greater than we hoped. The blessing may come in the form of chastisement. Though here we trench upon another subject, and must be careful not to fall into the danger of interpreting the afflictive dispensation of Providence as uniform evidences of His displeasure. But we should also mistake if, at a time like this, we did not ask whether we have no national sins to repent of. May it not be the purpose of our heavenly Father to arrest us in our national pride, and cause us to look into things which have been suffered to go wrong, and use our best endeavors to purify our national life? Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.

Can we not see an answer to prayer in the wonderful exhibition of our unity as a people, notwithstanding all differences of condition and of opinion, and of interest, in this world-wide sym-

pathy, in this coming into power of the better and more spiritual elements of our common nature? Is it quite true that men are gone mad after material things, and have no sense of God and the hereafter, after the exhibitions such as we see to-day? The possibilities of religious life, and of power for God, which have been shown in this and other praying peoples, should be a lesson to us in the future.

May it not be, God grant it may, that we shall see our prayers answered in a more elevated and unselfish spirit in our public men, in their continuing to act on the lesson they have so deeply felt and accepted, in the elevation of our method of political procedure, to a better, purer and more hopeful basis. May it not be that dangers which threaten us may be greatly diminished, and our institutions secured for many years through this discipline and in accordance with our petitions? May it not be that the mantle of the murdered President may fall upon his successor, even as the mantle of Elijah fell upon Elisha, and that the prayers which have ascended as a thick cloud before the throne of mercy, may continue to shed gracious influence upon his spirit, and that we may yet come to acknowledge that God has given us better than we asked?

Should it not be for each of us, that the individual example of character, of patience, faith, and courage in the face of death, should impress us deeply with the necessity for the culture of all the elements of Christian manhood, and show us the true source of character in the Christian life? And that the deep and memorable experience through

which we are passing may leave us better than they found us. In all the strange, exciting story, no picture is more full of pathos than that of the dying man, propped up upon his pillows to gaze out upon the sea he loved so well, fittest emblem of God's eternity, and His love, for the few last days before his spirit passed out to the Father of Spirits, and to the bosom of eternal love. Surely he has shown us how to die. And so to die it is necessary that we pray—pray without ceasing.

It is matter for devout thankfulness that the President of the United States, undeterred by the seeming failure of previous prayers, calls upon the Nation again to humble itself before God tomorrow, and to pray for National blessings.

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