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Communications.

Prayer, a reasonable Duty.

The obligation to perform this important duty, seems to grow out of the very relation in which a moral agent must necessarily stand to the Creator and Governor of the universe. It is, therefore, one of the earliest and highest duties incumbent on a dependent moral agent. Deny it; you annihilate dependence. There will then exist a moral being who *needs* nothing from God—who has no *want* to be supplied—who enjoys no bounty he would *wish* to be continued! Such a being must be independent!

The generic nature of prayer consists in a *sense of need, and desire of supply*. It has been invested with modifications of an adventitious character, arising out of particular emergencies. The attributes of prayer have been modified by the *fall*. It is essentially necessary to its acceptability, that it be in the *name of Christ*. This modification will, I conceive, continue through eternity. Confession of sins, is in the present state, a necessary concomitant of prayer. This will be unknown in the regions of glory. Thanksgiving unto God, for his *unspeakable gift*, and all the blessed results, now is, and will eternally continue, an ingredient of this *delightful duty*, so characteristic of the Christian.

If these premises be true, prayer will be a duty for ever incumbent

on, and for ever exercised by a saint in glory, as a necessary result of his moral dependence on the God who made him, and continues to be to him, the author of every good and of every perfect gift. A sense of need, and a desire for a supply, are perfectly compatible with our notions of a felicity competent to moral beings even of unsullied perfection. Had our first parents in the state of primeval innocence, never felt the painful sensation of hunger, they could never have experienced the pleasure arising from the gratification of this appetite. Indeed, in our present state, it is as hard to form an idea of *enjoyment*, without a previous sense of want, as to conceive a notion of a fine portrait, in which all were *light*, without one single *tinge of shade*! This principle is deeply inlaid in our constitution, and strongly evinced in the progressive development of the human character.

This idea, moreover, does perfectly coincide with that indefinite and progressive expansion of the human mind, which we are warranted to believe, will be going on in endless advances in perfection, in the mansions of glory. Now, in the order of nature, expansion must precede impletion, or the capacity must be enlarged, before there can be any void to be filled. But the very existence of a void will generate a sense of *want*. This sense of want, must of course be followed by a desire of enjoyment; and the very existence of this desire in a saint in

glory, involves in it the *essence* of prayer. But, independently of this reasoning, it would be difficult to conceive such a state of apathy in the glorified saints, that they should have no *desire* of farther enjoyment, or *wish* for the continuance of their felicity. This desire is prayer. I have already mentioned, that the confession of sin, is no essential part of the generic nature of prayer. It is only an exotic graft, the badge of our apostacy from God; but can never have access to that holy place, into which no unclean thing shall enter.

It must be admitted, objections apparently formidable, have been advanced against prayer. It has been alleged that prayer is repugnant to the *immutability*, *omniscience*, and *infinitude* of the Deity. 1st. God, say the objectors, is unchangeable. Our petitions cannot alter his purposes. The very same will be the result, therefore, whether we pray, or totally neglect supplicating the throne of grace. Prayer, therefore, must be unavailing; nay, impious, as it presupposes the mutability of Him who is the same yesterday, to day, and for ever. 2d. We can give God no *information* by our prayers. He knows what we need, and what is fitting for us, better than we ourselves do. Is it not rather arrogant presumption, to attempt to dictate to an omniscient God? 3d. Prayers can have no merit, so as to procure or purchase even the smallest blessing. But prayer supposes some merit in the performance of the service. Something is supposed to be procured by prayer, which otherwise would not have been obtained. But prayer can merit nothing at the hand of God. It is absurd to suppose that any finite being can lay an infinite being under obligation, or establish any claim of merit on the score of his services.

Let us proceed to examine these objections to this most interesting and important duty. We shall find, they are more specious than solid.

We will admit, that God is immutable—that prayer can operate no change on his purposes. These shall remain unaltered from eternity to eternity. It would be impious to suppose, that by our prayers we could change the determinations of the immutable Jehovah. “His counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure.” We have no less hesitation to admit the truth contained in the second objection, viz.: that it is impossible by our petitions to convey any information to an omniscient God. With equal readiness we admit the truth of the third objection, while we utterly deny the propriety of the application of any of them. The highest perfection of created worth, can merit nothing from God. An infinite being cannot be laid under obligation, but by himself. Thus God has condescended to bind himself by his word and by his oath. Yet, after all these admissions, we do unhesitatingly contend, that prayer is a duty of indispensable necessity; and that it is as *reasonable* as any other duty, to the performance of which, moral agents are called.

To the heart completely subjugated by the grace of God, it is sufficient that he hath enjoined any duty. “Thus saith the Lord,” will, to such, be equivalent to the most luminous demonstration. Yet still, if our reason can recognise the propriety of the command, we are bound to appreciate it, that so in the language of the poet, we may

“—— Assert eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.”

That we may see, whether the duty of prayer be inconsistent with the divine immutability, let us for a moment compare it, with some other duties of acknowledged obligation. What deist, or fatalist would deny, that if any person should accidentally fall overboard, he ought to use every possible exertion to avoid being drowned? Was it ever reckoned an absurdity to eat and drink,

for the sustenance of the animal economy? Was it ever imagined to be incompatible with any of the attributes of the divinity, to cultivate the ground, with a view to a future harvest? Who would not be justly pitied as *insane*, who should question the propriety of employing the aid of our active fire companies to extinguish the fury of a desolating conflagration? Yet all these *unquestionable* duties, and all others that could be named, are no less affected by the objections mentioned, than the duty of prayer is. Now, I should wish to know, whether there be any connexion between the causes and effects, or rather between the means and ends, in these duties of acknowledged obligation, which does not exist between prayer and the obtainment of the blessings resulting? Is there such a connexion between the exertion of swimming and the preservation of the life of the individual, that it effects a change in the divine purposes, in his favour? This, none will dare to allege. Does it give God any information respecting the propriety of saving the life of the drowning man? This would be equally inadmissible. Does it merit the life of the man at the hand of God? Such a position would be preposterous. The plain matter of fact is this. There is no *necessary* connexion between *means and ends*. The efficacy of means, therefore, is referrible to the sovereign will of God, who has a right to establish whatever connexions he pleases. All the means, stamp'd with his authority, whether in the kingdom of grace, or in the volume of nature, are equally legitimate and equally reasonable.

The intelligent Christian, in addressing the throne of grace, is so far from anticipating any change in the *will of God* concerning him, that his great object is a change on himself, and his own condition. Let us illustrate this idea by the following similitude. Suppose a rope to be thrown from a rock or from the

shore to a drowning man, with a command to lay hold upon it, and thereby tow himself to a place of safety. He eagerly obeys, seizes the rope, mounts the rock, and is thus rescued from a watery grave. But the rock remains unmoved. It has not suffered even the shadow of change. *He alone*, has been the subject of mutation. From being in the most imminent jeopardy, he is now in possession of perfect safety. But the rock remains unmoved. Even so it is with the Rock of ages. It is "the same yesterday, to-day and for ever." The poor sinner alone, experiences the change. He is taken from the fearful pit, and miry clay, his feet established on the rock, and his way made perfect. Through the medium of prayer, he receives the choicest blessings of the everlasting covenant. His heart is disposed by the grace of God, to solicit such blessings, as his heavenly Father is about to bestow on him. "For these things will I be inquired at of the house of Israel, that I may do them for them."

In the same manner we might illustrate the *reasonableness* of the duty of prayer, by instituting a comparison between it, and the other acknowledged duties abovementioned. We might easily show, that between the food we eat, and the sustenance of our bodily system, there is no other ultimate connexion, than the will of God. The same is true, with regard to the contact of water, and the extinction of fire. Let us take a slight glance at the connexion between the cultivation of the ground, and the expected harvest. Who is so foolish as to expect the harvest, and yet live in the habitual neglect of that agricultural process, which is known to be subservient thereunto? Equally vain to expect the blessings of salvation, and yet live in the habitual neglect of *asking* them. But these means affect not the determinations of the Deity. The cultivation of the ground conveys to him no informa-

tion, that the season of vegetation has arrived—that the spring should now pour forth her genial influences, and enrich the fields with luxuriant fecundity. Neither does our *prayer* to God, give him any information of our wants. Yet both are means which divine wisdom has connected with, and rendered subservient to ends most interesting and most important. The opening of the bosom of the soil, and its subjugation to the empire of the ploughshare, the mattock and the hoe, have no merit in procuring a crop. No more have our prayers and supplications, in procuring any thing at the hand of our heavenly Father. When we have done all, we are only unprofitable servants. Yet in each of these duties, we are encouraged humbly to expect the realization of the aphorism, “The hand of the diligent maketh rich.” The duty of prayer, therefore, is as reasonable as the cultivation of the ground, or any other duty whose indispensability of obligation is universally acknowledged. Between none of those phenomena *called* causes and effects in the physical world, is there any *necessary* connexion. For aught we know, or can know, the presence of caloric might have congealed water, and its absence might have been followed by fluidity. All depends on the *will* of the Author of the universe. What are usually denominated the laws of nature, are wholly destitute of efficiency. The phenomena of the universe, are the result of the energy of “a present Deity.” In him we live, move, and have our being. His operations are *uniform* and *medial*. The uniformity of operation, which it pleases God to observe in the production of the phenomena of nature, is termed a *law*. Material substances, for example, are attracted to a certain centre. Their uniform tendency to this point is called the *law of gravitation*. The slightest examination will show, that the law has no agency. It is totally destitute of

efficiency. It is nothing more than the *rule*, according to which a competent agent is wont to act. God himself is the great agent in the volume of nature. In the language of the poet, he

“ Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
Glow in the stars, and blossoms in the trees :
Lives thro’ all life, extends thro’ all extent :
Spreads undivided, operates unspent.”

How interesting to the believer, is the idea of an ever present God ! “I will never leave thee nor forsake thee,” coming from the mouth of his heavenly Father, and appreciated by a realizing faith, affords him more joy than the wicked have when their corn and wine abound most plentifully. He can lie down in peace and sleep in safety. His God sustains his life. Thus it is “though the earth remove, he will not be afraid ; though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea ; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled ; though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof ;” because “God is his refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Although God could accomplish all his purposes instantaneously by a *word of power*, he chooses to work by *means*, and has made it our duty to be diligent in their observance. We are so prone to dwell on the visible surface of the effect, that we are in danger of ascribing to the mere machinery in the hand of the Deity, that agency which ought to be referred to the efficiency of an omnipresent spirit. While, therefore, Christianity inculcates the diligent use of the means of grace generally, and of prayer particularly, it at the same time cautions against resting in them. We must look through them and beyond them to their divine Author, who alone can render them efficacious for the purposes for which they were intended.

There is no feature more charac-

teristic of the Christian than a *disposition* to pray, and a *delight* in the duty. These are an immediate result of the *new birth*, "Behold he prayeth." Where this disposition does not exist, there is no evidence of spiritual life. We do not deny, that in spiritual as well as natural life, there may be temporary swoons and occasions of suspended animation: but we do aver, that a continued habitual neglect of this medium of holy intercommunion with God, is as decisive evidence of a state of spiritual death, as a continued cessation of breathing would be, of the soul's departure from its clay tenement. The true Christian, therefore, will be diligent and careful in the performance of this duty. He will endeavour to be careful for nothing, but in all things, by prayer and supplication, make his requests known unto God, who will abundantly supply all his wants, according to his riches in glory which is by Christ Jesus. S. B. W.

FOR THE PRESBYTERIAN MAGAZINE.

Religious Feeling.

That the doctrines of Biblical religion are addressed to the understanding of men there can be no reasonable doubt. "I speak as to wise men; (saith Paul) judge ye what I say." 1 Cor. x. 15. "Be ready always (saith Peter) to give an answer to every man who asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you." 1 Peter iii. 15. Thus it appears, that those who were first employed in promulgating the evangelical system, conceived it to be a system that would bear the test of a rational investigation.

It must be clear, however, that no very accurate examination can be made into any system of religious doctrine, while the mind is under the violent impulse of agitated feeling. A person, in such a state of mind, may embrace doctrines, which are absolutely false—or reject doctrines, which are really true.

If this then be granted as an event which may naturally occur to a mind completely subjected to the influence of excited passion—it will at once be allowed also, that it is a matter of the greatest importance that those, who are under the impetus of religious feeling, should carefully examine the source whence such excitement may have sprung.

If actions of a moral nature be tried by the motive of the agent—we think that which lays claim to the high appellation of religious feeling, should be tried likewise by the nature of the exciting cause. Should the exciting cause, therefore, have nothing to do with religion, we do not think that the feeling produced by it, however high the excitement may be, has any claim to be inserted in the catalogue of those feelings, which are denominated religious.

This goes to show that, in religious matters, men's judgments ought to be addressed rather than their passions. To excite the passions, by florid, unmeaning declamation, and to convince the judgment, by sound, logical reasoning, are two very different things. The former mode of address may produce among the weaker part of an auditory an abundance of temporary feeling and noise; but the latter alone can, under the blessing of God, make men rational and consistent believers. Can the florid orator say to his hearers, with any degree of propriety, "I speak to you as to wise men; judge ye what I say." Ought he not rather to say, "I speak to you as to fools, therefore I hope you will banish as far from you as possible all reason and judgment." A religion, founded upon such a basis, must very strongly resemble a house built upon the sand: it may stand well enough while the excitement lasts; but, when the trials, temptations, and storms of life assail it, it will soon be swept away, and leave hardly a wreck behind.