

*John Henry Newman, considered the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century, delivered this sermon as the Anglican vicar of Saint Mary the Virgin University Church in Oxford on 13 December 1829. Although he did not become a Catholic until 1845, his Protestant sermons contain nothing that is contrary to Catholic teaching—and they are as fresh and challenging today as they were 180 years ago.*

## Mental Prayer

“Pray without ceasing.”<sup>1</sup>

**T**HERE are two modes of praying mentioned in Scripture; the one is prayer at set times and places, and in set forms; the other is what the text speaks of,—continual or habitual prayer. The former of these is what is commonly called prayer, whether it be public or private. The other kind of praying may also be called holding communion with God, or living in God’s sight, and this may be done all through the day, wherever we are, and is commanded us as the duty, or rather the characteristic, of those who are really servants and friends of Jesus Christ.

These two kinds of praying are also natural duties. I mean, we should in a way be bound to attend to them, even if we were born in a heathen country and had never heard of the Bible. For our conscience and reason would lead us to practise them, if we did but attend to these divinely given informants. I shall here confine myself to the consideration of the latter of the two, habitual or inward prayer, which is enjoined in the text, with the view of showing what it is, and how we are to practise it; and I shall speak of it, first, as a natural duty, and then as the characteristic of a Christian.

1. At first sight, it may be difficult to some persons to understand what is meant by praying always. Now consider it as a natural duty, that is, a duty taught us by natural reason and religious feeling, and you will soon see what it consists in.

What does nature teach us about ourselves, even before opening the Bible?—that we are creatures of the Great God, the Maker of heaven and earth; and that, as His creatures, we are bound to serve Him and give Him our hearts; in a word, to be religious beings. And next, what is religion but a habit? and what is a habit but a state of mind which is always upon us, as a sort of ordinary dress or inseparable garment of the soul? A man cannot really be religious one hour, and not religious the next. We might as well say he could be in a state of good health one hour, and in bad health the next. A man who is religious, is religious morning, noon, and night; his religion is a certain character, a mould in which his thoughts, words, and actions are cast, all forming parts of one and the same whole. He sees God in all things; every course of action he directs towards those spiritual objects which God has revealed to him; every occurrence of the day, every event, every person met with, all news which he hears, he measures by the standard of God’s will. And a person who does this may be said almost literally to pray without ceasing; for, knowing himself to be in God’s presence, he is continually led to address Him reverently, whom he sets always before him, in the inward language of prayer and praise, of humble confession and joyful trust.

All this, I say, any thoughtful man acknowledges from mere natural reason. To be religious is, in other words, to have the habit of prayer, or to pray always. This is what

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thess. 5.17.

Scripture means by doing all things to God's glory; that is, so placing God's presence and will before us, and so consistently acting with a reference to Him, that all we do becomes one body and course of obedience, witnessing without ceasing to Him who made us, and whose servants we are; and in its separate parts promoting more or less directly His glory, according as each particular thing we happen to be doing admits more or less of a religious character. Thus religious obedience is, as it were, a spirit dwelling in us, extending its influence to every motion of the soul; and just as healthy men and strong men show their health and strength in all they do (not indeed equally in all things, but in some things more than in others, because all actions do not require or betoken the presence of that health and strength, and yet even in their step, and their voice, and their gestures, and their countenance, showing in due measure their vigour of body), so they who have the true health and strength of the soul, a clear, sober, and deep faith in Him in whom they have their being, will in all they do, nay (as St. Paul says), even whether they "eat or drink,"<sup>2</sup> be living in God's sight, or, in the words of the same Apostle in the text, live in ceaseless prayer.

If it be said that no man on earth does thus continually and perfectly glorify and worship God, this we all know too well; this is only saying that none of us has reached perfection. We know, alas! that in many things all of us offend. But I am speaking not of what we *do*, but of what we *ought to do*, and must aim at doing,—of *our duty*; and, for the sake of impressing our duty on our hearts, it is of use to draw the picture of a man perfectly obedient, as a pattern for us to aim at. In proportion as we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Saviour, so shall we approximate to Him in obedience, who is our great example, and who alone of all the sons of Adam lived in the perfection of unceasing prayer.

Thus the meaning and reasonableness of the command in the text is shown by considering it as a natural duty, religion being no accident which comes and goes by fits and starts, but a certain spirit or life.

2. Now, secondly, I will state all this in the language of Scripture; that is, I will confirm this view of our duty, which natural reason might suggest, by that other and far clearer voice of God, His inspired word.

How is religious obedience described in Scripture? Surely as a certain kind of life. We know what life of the body is; it is a state of the body: the pulse beats; all things are in motion. The hidden principle of life, though we know not how or what it is, is seen in these outward signs of it. And so of the life of the soul. The soul, indeed, was not possessed of this life of God when first born into the world. We are born with dead souls; that is, dead as regards religious obedience. If left to ourselves we should grow up haters of God, and tend nearer and nearer, the longer we had existence, to utter spiritual death, that inward fire of hell torments, maturing in evil through a long eternity. Such is the course we are beginning to run when born into the world; and were it not for the gospel promise, what a miserable event would the birth of children be! Who could take pleasure at the sight of such poor beings, unconscious as yet of their wretchedness, but containing in their hearts that fearful root of sin which is sure in the event of reigning and triumphing unto everlasting woe? But God has given us all, even the little children, a good promise through Christ; and our prospects are changed. And He has given not only a promise of future happiness, but through His Holy Spirit He implants here and at once a new principle within us, a new spiritual life, a life of the soul, as it is called. St. Paul tells

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 10.31.

us, that “God hath quickened us,” made us *live*, “together with Christ, . . . and hath raised us up together” from the death of sin, “and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Now how God quickens our souls we do not know; as little as how He quickens our bodies. Our spiritual “life” (as St. Paul says) “is *hid* with Christ in God.”<sup>4</sup> But as our bodily life discovers itself by its activity, so is the presence of the Holy Spirit in us discovered by a spiritual activity; and this activity is the spirit of continual prayer. Prayer is to spiritual life what the beating of the pulse and the drawing of the breath are to the life of the body. It would be as absurd to suppose that life could last when the body was cold and motionless and senseless, as to call a soul alive which does not pray. The state or habit of spiritual life exerts itself, consists, in the continual activity of prayer.

Do you ask, where does Scripture say this? Where? In all it tells us of the connexion between the new birth and faith; for what is prayer but the expression, the voice, of faith? For instance, St. Paul says to the Galatians, “The *life* which I now live in the flesh” (i.e. the new and spiritual life), “I live by the *faith* of the Son of God, who loved me.”<sup>5</sup> For what, I say, is faith, but the looking to God and thinking of Him continually, holding habitual fellowship with Him, that is, speaking to Him in our hearts all through the day, praying without ceasing? Afterwards, in the same Epistle, he tells us first that nothing avails but faith working by love; but soon after, he calls this same availing principle a new creature: so that the new birth and a living faith are inseparable. Never, indeed, must it be supposed, as we are indolently apt to suppose, that the gift of grace which we receive at baptism is a mere outward privilege, a mere outward pardon, in which the heart is not concerned; or as if it were some mere mark put on the soul, distinguishing it indeed from souls unregenerate, as if by a colour or seal, but not connected with the thoughts, mind, and heart of a Christian. This would be a gross and false view of the nature of God’s mercy given us in Christ. For the new birth of the Holy Spirit sets the soul in motion in a heavenly way: it gives us good thoughts and desires, enlightens and purifies us, and prompts us to seek God. In a word (as I have said), it gives a spiritual *life*; it opens the eyes of our mind, so that we begin to see God in all things by faith, and hold continual intercourse with Him by prayer; and if we cherish these gracious influences, we shall become holier and wiser and more heavenly, year by year, our hearts being ever in a course of change from darkness to light, from the ways and works of Satan to the perfection of Divine obedience.

These considerations may serve to impress upon our minds the meaning of the precept in the text, and others like it which are found in St. Paul’s Epistles. For instance, he enjoins the Ephesians to “pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit.” To the Philippians he says, “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known unto God.”<sup>6</sup> To the Colossians, “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving.” To the Romans, “Continue instant in prayer.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus the true Christian pierces through the veil of this world and sees the next. He holds intercourse with it; he addresses God, as a child might address his parent, with as clear a view of Him, and with as unmixed a confidence in Him; with deep reverence indeed, and godly fear and awe, but still with certainty and exactness: as St. Paul says, “I

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<sup>3</sup> Eph. 2.5,6.

<sup>4</sup> Col. 3.3.

<sup>5</sup> Gal. 2.20.

<sup>6</sup> Eph. 6.18. Phil. 4.6.

<sup>7</sup> Col. 4.2; Rom. 12.12.

know whom I have believed,”<sup>8</sup> with the prospect of judgment to come to sober him, and the assurance of present grace to cheer him.

If what I have said is true, surely it is well worth thinking about. Most men indeed, I fear, neither pray at fixed times, nor do they cultivate an habitual communion with Almighty God. Indeed, it is too plain how most men pray. They pray now and then, when they feel particular need of God’s assistance; when they are in trouble or in apprehension of danger; or when their feelings are unusually excited. They do not know what it is either to be habitually religious, or to devote a certain number of minutes at fixed times to the thought of God. Nay, the very best Christian, how lamentably deficient is he in the spirit of prayer! Let any man compare in his mind how many times he has prayed when in trouble, with how seldom he has returned thanks when his prayers have been granted; or the earnestness with which he prays against expected suffering, with the languor and unconcern of his thanksgivings afterwards, and he will soon see how little he has of the real habit of prayer, and how much his religion depends on accidental excitement, which is no test of a religious heart. Or supposing he has to repeat the same prayer for a month or two, the cause of using it continuing, let him compare the earnestness with which he first said it, and tried to enter into it, with the coldness with which he at length uses it. Why is this, except that his perception of the unseen world is not the true view which faith gives (else it would last as that world itself lasts), but a mere dream, which endures for a night, and is succeeded by a hard worldly joy in the morning? Is God habitually in our thoughts? Do we think of Him, and of His Son our Saviour, through the day? When we eat and drink, do we thank Him, not as a mere matter of form, but in spirit? When we do things in themselves right, do we lift up our minds to Him, and desire to promote His glory? When we are in the exercise of our callings, do we still think of Him, acting ever conscientiously, desiring to know His will more exactly than we do at present, and aiming at fulfilling it more completely and abundantly? Do we wait on His grace to enlighten, renew, strengthen us?

I do not ask whether we use many words about religion. There is no need to do this: nay, we should avoid a boastful display of our better feelings and practices, silently serving God without human praise, and hiding our conscientiousness except when it would dishonour God to do so. There are times, indeed, when, in the presence of a holy man, to confess is a benefit, and there are times when, in the presence of worldly men, to confess becomes a duty; but these seasons, whether of privilege or of duty, are comparatively rare. But we are always with ourselves and our God; and that silent inward confession in His presence may be sustained and continual, and will end in durable fruit.

But if those persons come short of their duty who make religion a matter of impulse and mere feeling, what shall be said to those who have no feeling or thought of religion at all? What shall be said of the multitude of young people who ridicule seriousness, and deliberately give themselves up to vain thoughts? Alas! my brethren, you do not even observe or recognize the foolish empty thoughts which pass through your minds; you are not distressed even at those of them you recollect; but what will you say at the last day, when, instead of the true and holy visions in which consists Divine communion, you find recorded against you in God’s book an innumerable multitude of the idlest, silliest imaginings, nay, of the wickedest, which ever disgraced an immortal being? What will you say, when heaven and hell are before you, and the books are opened, and therein you find the sum total of your youthful desires and dreams, your

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Tim. 1.12.

passionate wishes for things of this world, your low-minded, grovelling tastes, your secret contempt and aversion for serious subjects and persons, your efforts to attract the looks of sinners and to please those who displease God; your hankerings after worldly gaieties and luxuries, your admiration of the rich or titled, your indulgence of impure thoughts, your self-conceit and pitiful vanity? Ah, I may seem to you to use harsh words; but be sure I do not use terms near so severe as you will use against yourselves in that day. Then those men, whom you now think gloomy and over-strict, will seem to you truly wise; and the advice to pray without ceasing, which once you laughed at as fit only for the dull, the formal, the sour, the poor-spirited, or the aged, will be approved by your own experience, as it is even now by your reason and conscience. Oh, that you could be brought to give one serious hour to religion, in anticipation of that long eternity where you *must* be serious! True, you may laugh now, but there is no vain merriment on the other side of the grave. The devils, though they repent not, tremble. *You* will be among those unwilling serious ones then, if you are mad enough to be gay and careless now; if you are mad enough to laugh, jest, and scoff your poor moment now on earth, which is short enough to prepare for eternity in, without your making it shorter by wasting your youth in sin. Could you but see who it is that suggests to you all your lighter thoughts, which you put instead of Divine communion, the shock would make you serious, even if it did not make you religious. Could you see, what God sees, those snares and pitfalls which the devil is placing about your path; could you see that all your idle thoughts which you cherish, which seem so bright and pleasant, so much pleasanter than religious thoughts, are inspired by that Ancient Seducer of Mankind, the Author of Evil, who stands at your side while you deride religion, serious indeed himself while he makes you laugh, not able to laugh at his own jests, while he carries you dancing forward to perdition,—doubtless you would tremble, even as he does while he tempts you. But this you cannot possibly see, you cannot break your delusion, except by first taking God's word in this matter on trust. You cannot see the unseen world at once. They who ever speak with God in their hearts, are in turn taught by Him in all knowledge; but they who refuse to act upon the light, which God gave them by nature, at length come to lose it altogether, and are given up to a reprobate mind.

May God save us all from such wilful sin, old as well as young, and enlighten us one and all in His saving knowledge, and give us the will and the power to serve Him!