

Prayer at the Workplace

A Talk on Prayer in Daily Work

Sermon Prayer, Repentance and the Spiritual Life Annual Family Retreat, 2009

Romans 12:12

Colossians 4:2

1 Peter 4:7

Philippians 4:6

Jude 20-21

Preamble

Two years ago, my talk was "Living as God's people at the workplace." Last year, it was "Living with the mind of Christ at the workplace." I therefore had half my title ready — "... at the workplace" — even before I was given this year's theme. Filling in the gap, it becomes "Prayer at the workplace."

I found myself worrying over the outline for weeks, without really getting anywhere; I had the same trouble an old motor car has starting up. That is when I went off on a tangent, and began thinking instead of a title with a little more effect. I eventually settled on "Jesus too works 24/7 — stay connected." I did not realise, at the time, how closely that title would point me towards my actual outline. Jesus really does run a help line, all day and all night, entirely by Himself, and we shall never hear Him say, "Your call is important to Me, but I am busy attending to other believers; please stay on the line, or call Me again later." He is available to us at all times, from eternity past to eternity future — we know that well enough. My focus, then, is on the "stay connected" part of my title: we shall examine how to stay connected to Jesus at our workplaces, through the medium of prayer.

Some Definitions

Let me set the stage for our discussion with a few definitions, offered as an aid rather than as the last word — these are simply the line of thinking I have adopted for today, and there are several other ways of looking at the same matter, which we shall hear more of in the course of this camp.

Workplace. Each of us here will picture something a little different when we imagine a "workplace" — nothing wrong in that; we naturally picture whatever is, or has long been, familiar to us. Some of us are still working, or engaged in a profession or business; others have retired, and others again are homemakers, and might suppose that the workplace is not really their concern. That is not so. All of us come into contact with workplaces all the time, whether or not we ourselves work there, and this discussion is meant for all of us, whatever our present working status. A workplace, put simply, is any premises, or part of a premises, that is not domestic, and is made available as a place of work

to anyone at all — and that word "anyone" matters, since it is not restricted merely to where you or I happen to work. We need to see "workplace" in the broadest sense. Here is a simple illustration: would you not say a word of prayer for safety when you drive past a flyover, or a Metro line, under construction? You are not working there, but others are — a battlefield, a cemetery, a church, and a humble roadside stall are all, in their own way, workplaces, and this list is by no means exhaustive; you are welcome to add to it yourselves.

Let me argue this line of thinking from the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, as He walked this earth. He was always about His Father's business — on a hilltop, sitting in a boat, in the synagogue, at a wedding feast, walking on the water, riding a donkey, and even nailed to the Cross. Whatever He did, and wherever He did it, He did it with a prayer upon His lips. Do we need a better example than that?

Prayer. I would rather leave the theologians among us, with far greater knowledge and experience, to define prayer properly over the course of this camp's sessions. But let me offer two definitions I have come across in my own reading, both of which fit the direction I wish to take today.

The first: "Prayer is the mother and daughter of tears. It is an expiation of sin, a bridge across temptation, a bulwark against affliction... Prayer is future gladness, action without end, wellspring of virtues, source of grace, hidden progress, food of the soul, enlightenment of the mind, an axe against despair" (Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 28, "On Prayer," seventh century).

The second: "As the lungs expand to draw in the life-giving elements of air by breathing, so do the depths of our inner self open and expand during prayer, and our spirit mounts up to God to receive the gift that allows us to be united with Him; and as the oxygen received by the blood is conveyed to the entire body to vitalise it, so the gift received from God permeates everything that is in us, and vitalises our entire inner being" — prayer, in short, as the breathing of the spirit.

The Act of Praying

Having settled our definitions of workplace and of prayer, let us briefly examine the act of praying itself. Praying, for the Christian, is like petrol for a car — without it, we make no progress at all in our Christian journey. Praying is essentially the time we spend being conscious of being in the presence of God, and desiring to know and love Him more, all the time; it is not the presenting of a shopping list of things we want. This fits well with our first definition, of the spirit opening and expanding, and mounting up to God in prayer.

Let me repeat, at the cost of some repetition: every time we pray from our inner self, we are in communion with Jesus. If we accept that, we

must find a way to remain continually in union with Him. The act of praying, then, cannot be understood as something we set apart for a particular hour of the day or week, but as something we can do as we work, run, eat, talk, wait for an appointment, and yes, even as we sleep. Jesus will be our constant companion, and we shall then be able to turn to Him so easily — not only in our most difficult and critical moments, but even when we see no particular reason to pray at all.

Just think of it: do we not, at times, ring up a friend or relative simply to say hello? Next time you have nothing else to do, say hello to Jesus instead — in other words, stay connected to Him all the time.

Christian Challenges at the Workplace

To stay connected to Jesus at all times is by no means an easy task. It requires a believer to know Him intimately, and to practise the principles He has given us, in whatever we happen to be doing. Let us look at three such principles, critical to our effort to remain connected to Christ at our workplaces.

Spiritual equity: accepting Christ as our Master. Paul, in his epistles, expounds at length the principles that govern the Christian's life at work. Whatever position we hold at our workplace, whether boss or subordinate, all of us serve one Master, Jesus Christ. Whatever the relationship at work, there is a spiritual equity: all are spiritually equal in the sight of our Lord, and, in the final analysis, all will give account to Him on the same footing. Consider what a sanctifying influence that understanding would bring into our workplaces — what an impact it would have on our employees, or on our boss, once we truly see Jesus as our final Judge, and act accordingly. Some might call this a kind of socialism; but the socialism of Christianity does not abolish distinctions between people — it levels all of us equally beneath Christ.

Working as unto Christ. Secondly, we need to understand, from Paul's own writing, that as far as Christian principle and value are concerned, no distinction exists between the secular and the spiritual worlds of the believer. We cannot say, "This is my business, or my employment, and this is my Christian life" — Paul reminds us that our employment must be unto Christ, whatever our calling may be. Living according to Christian principle, at home, at work, and everywhere else, is not the preserve of those in "full-time" Church service; that phrase is really only a convenient expression for evangelists, missionaries, pastors, and bishops, and, going by Paul, has no real scriptural basis. According to Paul, all of us are in the full-time service of the Lord, for all of us are to be working as unto Christ; everything we do should be for Jesus Christ, and to His glory. The humblest task, however small, becomes a song of prayer and praise to Jesus when we do it "as unto the Lord." Prayer then becomes an ongoing process, running alongside whatever task is in hand, done to the best of our ability, with no trace of deceit or

dishonesty in deed or thought, because we do it as unto Christ, understanding that we are always in His presence, and always accountable to Him. What better prayer could any of us offer while we work?

Representing Christ at the workplace. In an ideal world, a Christian would not need to move an inch to help others learn of Christ. Each of us can serve God, and spread the love of Christ, in our own place of work, whatever our job may be. At work, Christians can speak of their faith with confidence, and give an attractive example of the Christian life, simply by doing our jobs well, "as unto Christ." In this way, Christians may imitate Christ, and share in the evangelising mission of the Church, in the ordinary course of every working day.

It is not easy, however, being a Christian at the workplace, especially in a country such as ours, where we number barely three per cent of the population. Secular thinking is so pervasive in our working environment that we often find it hard to fit into the culture of our own office; many of us simply "flow with the tide," going along with secular attitudes and values rather than risk being disliked, or ridiculed, for defending the truth of Christianity, and the moral clarity of a distinctively Christian outlook.

This subject deserves a talk entirely its own, but here are a few points worth considering, for those who wish to take "faith at work" seriously. To manage our faith well in this setting, we need to see people as Jesus does, as bearers of God's own image; to let Jesus Himself motivate our love and our service; to view our daily work as a genuine ministry, done for the Lord, rather than a merely secular occupation; to prepare *for* our work through spiritual discipline; to practise spiritual disciplines *in* the course of our work itself; and to let our own spiritual formation take place *through* our work, rather than apart from it.

Prayer without Performance

All around us, in our own society, we see people of other faiths praying, or engaged in worship of one kind or another; workplaces are decorated with pictures of the deities they honour, and some give their devotion to money, and to other forms of earthly wealth, or perform elaborate rituals in its pursuit. We are all familiar enough with this, and it needs no further comment from me here. The conduit for staying connected, for the Christian, is prayer; and the question before us is how we are to pray without ceasing, especially in workplaces of the kind we so often encounter in this country.

Christians can pray without any outward show at all. To repeat what we said earlier: praying is essentially the time we spend being conscious of being in the presence of God, desiring to know and love Him more. We are not called to any performance, in order to be in His presence.

Praying Perpetually

Perseverance in prayer is a condition of receiving; we must pray always, if we wish to grow in faith and in experience. We are counselled to be "instant in prayer" (Romans 12:12), to "continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Colossians 4:2); Peter exhorts us to be "sober, and watch unto prayer" (1 Peter 4:7); Paul directs us, "in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Philippians 4:6); and Jude encourages believers, "praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God... looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (Jude 20-21). There is, in truth, no time and no place in which it is inappropriate to lift up a prayer to God; nothing can prevent us from lifting up our hearts in earnest prayer, whether in the crowds of the street, or in the midst of a business meeting, sending up a petition and pleading for His guidance (compare Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, chapter 11, "The Privilege of Prayer," 1892).

In other words, we should learn to pray perpetually — offering prayer to Jesus throughout the day and night, as we go about our business. Sometimes these are prayers for help; sometimes a simple thank you; sometimes a prayer for someone in need; sometimes an offering of praise and gratitude; and sometimes an act of penitence. They are usually very simple and very short, but they remind us that we cannot do anything of ourselves, that our Lord is the giver of all things, and that none of us stands alone. Such silent, short prayers allow us to listen for Jesus, to be conscious of Him within, and, in a sense, simply to soak in God; it is a precious activity indeed, and without it we make little progress in our own lives. This is how we stay connected to Jesus at all times, conscious of Him in every moment of our existence. As Saint John Climacus wrote of prayer, in the passage quoted above, it is a bridge across temptation, and a wall against affliction; and, as it has also been well said, unceasing prayer is the unbroken union of the soul with God, so that life from God flows into our life, and, from our life, purity and holiness flow back to Him (compare *Steps to Christ*, chapter 11).

Sadly, we function rather differently in our ordinary lives. When things go wrong, we panic, or simply grumble, when all we need to do is say, "Jesus, I need You." When we see others in trouble, or suffering, we say, "Poor fellow, I pity him — he brought it upon himself," or words to that effect; we could say instead, "Jesus, he needs You, though he may not know You," or "Jesus, use me as an instrument of his comfort." When we see others achieve success, we grow envious; we could say, instead, "Jesus, let me be glad for him." When we ourselves succeed, we most often keep our thanksgiving for Sunday, if we find the time to go to church; all we need to say, from within, is, "Lord Jesus, this is Your blessing — show me a way to thank You." When we drive past a

construction site, we might say a word of prayer for those who work there too.

One could go on endlessly in this vein. These are not the standard, set prayers we already know; they are prayers that rise up spontaneously from within us. There are times when we find it impossible to put a prayer into words at all; at such times, it is enough simply to say the name "Jesus." He knows us well enough, and needs no further explanation from us; He will surely bless us just the same.

Perpetual prayer is, at bottom, simply talking with God continuously — expressing our hearts, and spending time with Him. It is not a one-way activity: Jesus speaks, and we listen; we speak, and Jesus listens to our hearts. Prayer can be exciting, powerful, and deeply fulfilling.

How Do We Get There?

Many people think that prayer and worship mean only the singing of songs, and the following of an order of service in church — but it is so much more than that. It is also a condition of the heart: a willingness to exalt God, and to yield to His will. All of us long to connect with someone who can identify with our own circumstances, and share in our day-to-day life; prayer is just that — a personal experience, an intimate connection with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We first need to accept this as the foundation for practising perpetual prayer. The next step is to take Jesus with us to our workplace. We often say a word of prayer before leaving for work, and leave Him behind at home — as if to say, "So long, Jesus; let me get on with my work now!"

If He is not with us — if we do not learn to experience His presence at all times — then the prayers we say will remain merely words from our mouths, and not something rising from within us. When we run into trouble at work, we either forget to speak to Jesus, and try to resolve matters on our own, or find it hard to connect with Him even when we wish to bring our petition to Him. The next step, then, is to take Jesus with us wherever we go, including to our workplace — to make Him our companion, and to keep talking with Him all the time.

Let us pray: Merciful Master, Jesus Christ, grant that our spirits be drawn out and upward, that You may bless us with a breath of the heavenly atmosphere. May we keep so near to You at all times, that in every moment of our lives our thoughts turn to You as naturally as the flower turns to the sun. Amen.

