

What Saith the Scripture?

<http://www.WhatSaithTheScripture.com/>

# On Prayer

by Charles Grandison Finney  
President of Oberlin College

from "The Oberlin Evangelist" Publication of Oberlin College

Lecture I

January 3, 1855

Public Domain Text  
Reformatted by Katie Stewart

Text.--Luke 18:1: "He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint."

In discussing the subject of prayer, presented in our text, I propose to inquire,

*I. Why men should pray at all;*

*II. Why men should pray always and not faint;*

*III. Why they do not pray always;--with remarks.*

## **I. Why men should pray at all.**

- 1. Our dependence on God is universal, extending to all things. This fact is known and acknowledged. None but atheists presume to call it in question.
- 2. Prayer is the dictate of our nature. By the voice of nature this duty is revealed as plainly as possible. We feel the pressure of our wants, and our instincts cry out to a higher power for relief in their supply. You may see this in the case of the most wicked man, as well as in the case of good men. The wicked, when in distress, cry out to God for help. Indeed, mankind have given evidence of this in all ages and in every nation;--showing both the universal necessity of prayer, and that it is a dictate of our nature to look up to a God above.
- 3. It is a primitive conviction of our minds that God does hear and answer prayer. If men did not assume this to be the case, why should they pray? The fact that men do spontaneously pray, shows that they really expect God to hear prayer. It is contrary to all our original belief to assume that events occur under some law of concatenation, too rigid for the Almighty to break, and which He never attempts to adjust according to his will. Men do not naturally believe any such thing as this.

- 4. The objection to prayer that God is unchangeable, and therefore cannot turn aside to hear prayer, is altogether a fallacy and the result of ignorance. Consider what is the true idea of God's unchangeableness. Surely, it is not that his course of conduct never changes to meet circumstances; but it is this--that his character never changes; that his nature and the principles which control his voluntary action remain eternally the same. All his natural--all his moral attributes remain for ever unchanged. This is all that can rationally be implied in God's immutability.

Now, his hearing and answering prayer, imply no change of character--no change in his principles of action. Indeed, if you ask why he ever answers prayer at all, the answer must be, because he is unchangeable. Prayer brings the suppliant into new relations to God's kingdom; and to meet these new relations, God's unchangeable principles require him to change the course of his administration. He answers prayer because he is unchangeably benevolent. It is not because his benevolence changes, but because it does not change, that he answers prayer. Who can suppose that God's answering prayer implies any change in his moral character? For example, if a man, in prayer, repents, God forgives; if he does not repent of present sin, God does not forgive;--and who does not see that God's immutability must require this course at his hands? Suppose God did not change his conduct when men change their character and their attitude towards him. This would imply fickleness--an utter absence of fixed principles. His unchangeable goodness must therefore imply that when his creatures change morally, he changes his course and conforms to their new position. Any other view of the case is simply absurd, and only the result of ignorance. Strange that men should hold it to be inconsistent for God to change and give rain in answer to prayer, or give any needed spiritual blessings to those who ask them!

- 5. Intercourse with God is a necessity of moral beings, demanded by creatures as a necessity of their natures. No doubt this is true in heaven itself, and the fact that this want of their natures is so gloriously supplied there, makes heaven. The Bible represents spirits in heaven as praying. We hear them crying out--"How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10). True, their subjects of prayer are not in all respects the same as ours; we have things to pray for which they have no occasion to ask for themselves. They are neither sick nor sinful; but can you suppose they never pray, "Thy kingdom come?" Have they lost all sympathy with those interests of Zion? Far from it. Knowing more of the value of those interests, they no doubt feel more deeply their importance, and pray more earnestly for their promotion. From the nature of the case, God's treatment of the inhabitants of heaven must be conditioned on their voluntary course in regard to him and his kingdom. It must be governed and determined by their knowledge, their progress in knowledge, and their improvement of the means and powers at their command. Obviously their voluntary worship, gratitude, thanksgiving, and service of every sort, must vary their relations to God, and consequently, his course towards them. He will do many things to them and for them which he could not do if they did not pray, and praise, and love, and study, and labour. This must be true even in heaven, of apostles, and prophets, and of all glorified saints. God makes to them successive revelations of himself, each successively higher than the preceding, and all dependent on their voluntary devotion to him and to his glory. They are for ever advancing in

his service, full of worship, praise, adoration, and this only prepares them the more to be sent on missions of love and service, and to be employed as the interests of God's kingdom require. Hence, we see that God's conduct towards saints in heaven depends on their own voluntary course and bearing towards him. This is a necessity of any and every moral system. If saints in heaven are moral agents, and God's government over them is also moral, all these results must follow. In this world sin exists; and in this fact we see an obvious necessity for this law of moral administration. But the holy in heaven are no less moral and responsible than the sinning on earth. The great object of God's administration is to assimilate moral beings to himself; hence, He must make his treatment of them depend on their moral course towards him.

In regard to saints on earth, how can God do them any good unless he can draw them to himself in prayer and praise? This is one of the most evident necessities that can be named. Men irresistibly feel the propriety of confession and supplication, in order to achieve forgiveness. This feeling lies among the primitive affirmations of the mind. Men know that if they would be healed of sin they must seek and find God.

## **II. But why pray so much and so often? Why the exhortation to pray always and not to faint?**

The case presented in the context is very strong. Whether it be history or supposition does not affect the merits of the case as given us to illustrate importunity in prayer. The poor widow persevered. She kept coming and would not be discouraged. By dint of perseverance simply, she succeeded. The judge who cared not for God or man, did care somewhat for his own comfort and quiet, and therefore thought it wise to listen to her story and grant her request. Upon this case our Lord seized to enforce and encourage importunity in prayer. Hear his argument. "Shall not God,"--who is by no means unjust, but whose compassions are a great deep--"shall not such a God avenge his own elect, who cry day and night unto him, though he seem to bear long" in delaying to answer their prayers? "I tell you he will avenge them speedily."

- 1. Men ought to pray always, because they always need the influence of prayer. Consider what is implied in prayer and what prayer does for you. Prayer bathes the soul in an atmosphere of the divine presence. Prayer communes with God and brings the whole mind under the hallowed influence of such communion. Prayer goes to God to seek pardon and find mercy and grace to help. How obvious, then, that we always need its influence on our hearts and lives. Truly, we need not wonder that God should enjoin it upon us to pray always.
- 2. God needs prayer from us as a condition of his doing to us and for us all he would. He loves us and sees a thousand blessings that we need, and that he would delight to bestow; but yet he cannot bestow them except on condition that we ask for them in Jesus' name. His treatment of us and his bestowment of blessings upon us must depend upon our views and conduct, whether we feel our dependence on him, whether we confess and forsake all sin--whether we trust him and thoroughly honour him in all things. His action towards us must depend upon our attitude towards him. It is essential in the management of a moral system that we should pray and trust, in order that he may freely and abundantly give, and especially that he may give in a way safe to us and honourable to himself. Nothing can be substituted for our own praying, either in its relations to God or to ourselves. We cannot get along without the personal benefit of prayer, confession, trust, and praise. You cannot substitute instruction, ever so much or so good; for

these things must enter into the soul's experience; you must feel them before God, and carry out the life and power of these truths in your very heart before the Lord; else they are worse than unknown to you. You are not likely to understand many of these things without prayer; and even if you were to understand them, and yet not pray, the knowledge would only be a curse to you.

- 3. What can be so useful to us, sinners, as direct communion with God--the searching of the heart which it induces--the humility, the confessions, the supplications? Other things have their use. Instruction is good; reading God's word may be a blessing; communion with the saints is pleasant;--but what are they all, compared with personal intercourse with God? Nothing else can make the soul so sick of sin, and so dead to the world. Nothing else breathes such spiritual life into the soul as real prayer.
- 4. Prayer also prepares us the better to receive all blessings from God, and hence should be constant.
- 5. Prayer pleases God as governor of the universe, because it puts us in a position in which he can bless us and gratify his own benevolence.
- 6. Search the history of the world, and you will find that where there has been most true prayer, and the soul has been most deeply imbued with the divine presence, there God has most abundantly and richly blessed the soul. Who does not know that holy men of old were eminent for usefulness and power according as they were faithful and mighty in prayer?
- 7. The more we pray, the more shall we be enlightened, for surely they are most enlightened who pray most. If we go no farther in divine things than human reason can carry us, we get little indeed from God.
- 8. The more men pray, the more they will love prayer, and the more will they enjoy God. On the other hand, the more we pray--in real prayer--the more will God delight in us. Observe this which I say, Delight; the more will God truly DELIGHT in us. This is not merely the love of benevolence, for God is benevolent to all; but he delights in his praying children in the sense of having complacency in their character. The Bible often speaks of the great interest which God takes in those who live near him in much prayer. This is naturally and necessarily the case. Why should not God delight in those who delight in him?
- 9. The more we pray, the more God loves to manifest to others that he delights in us, and hears our prayers. If his children live lives of much prayer, God delights to honour them, as an encouragement to others to pray. They come into a position in which he can bless them and can make his blessings on them result in good to others--thus doubly gratifying the benevolence of his heart.
- 10. We can never reach a position in which we shall not need prayer. Who believes that saints in heaven will have no need of prayer? True, they will have perfect faith, but this, so far from precluding prayer, only the more ensures it. Men have strangely assumed, that if there were

only perfect faith, prayer would cease. Nothing can be more false and groundless. Certainly, then, we never can get beyond prayer.

- 11. If I had time I should like to show how the manner of prayer varies as Christians advance in holiness. They pray not less, but more, and they know better how to pray. When the natural life is mingled largely with the spiritual, there is an outward effervescing, which passes away as the soul comes nearer to God. You would suppose there is less excitement, and there is less of animal excitement; but the deep fountains of the soul flow in unbroken sympathy with God.
- 12. We can never get beyond the point where prayer is greatly useful to us. The more the heart breathes after God, and rises towards him in heavenly aspirations, the more useful do such exercises become. The aged Christian finds himself more and more benefitted in prayer as he draws more and more near to God. The more he prays, the more he sees the wisdom and necessity of prayer for his own spiritual good.
- 13. The very fact that prayer is so great a privilege to sinners makes it most honourable to God to hear prayer. Some think it disgraceful to God. What a sentiment! It assumes that God's real greatness consists in his being so high above us as to have no regard for us whatever. Not so with God. He who regards alike the flight of an archangel and the fall of a sparrow--before whose eye no possible event is too minute for his attention--no insect too small for his notice and his love,--his infinite glory is manifest in this very fact that nothing is too lofty or too low for his regard. None are too insignificant to miss sympathy--none too mean to share his kindness.
- 14. Many talk of prayer as only a duty, not a privilege; but with this view of it they cannot pray acceptably. When your children, full of wants, come running to you in prayer, do they come because it is a duty? No, indeed! They come because it is their privilege. They regard it as their privilege. Other children do not feel so towards you. And it is a wonderful privilege! Who does not know it and feel it to be so? Shall we then ever fail to avail ourselves of it?
- 15. Finally, we are sure to prevail if we thoroughly persevere and pray always, and do not faint. Let this suffice to induce perseverance in prayer. Do you need blessings? And yet are they delayed? Pray always and never faint; so shall you obtain all you need.

### **III. Our third general inquiry is, Why do not men pray always? Many reasons exist.**

- 1. In the case of some, because the enmity of their hearts towards God is such that they are shy and dread prayer. They have so strong a dislike to God, they cannot make up their minds to come near to him in prayer.
- 2. Some are self-righteous and self-ignorant, and therefore have no heart to pray. Their self-righteousness makes them feel strong enough without prayer, and self-ignorance prevents their feeling their own real wants.
- 3. Unbelief keeps others from constant prayer. They have not confidence enough in God as ready to answer prayer. Of course, with such unbelief in their hearts, they will not pray always.

- 4. Sophistry prevents others. I have alluded to some of its forms. They say, God being immutable, never changes his course; or they urge that there is no need of prayer, inasmuch as God will surely do just right, although nobody should pray. These are little sophistries, such as ignorant minds get up and stumble over. It is wonderful that any minds can be so ignorant and so unthinking as to be influenced by these sophistries. I can recollect how these objections to prayer came up many years since before my mind, but were instantly answered and set aside, they seemed so absurd. This, for instance,--that God had framed the universe so wisely that there is no need of prayer, and indeed no room for it. My answer was ready. What was God's object in making and arranging his universe? Was it to show himself to be a good mechanic, so skilful that he can make a universe to run itself, without his constant agency? Was this his object? No! But his object was to plant in this universe intelligent minds and then reveal himself to them and draw them to love and trust their own infinite Father. This object is every way noble and worthy of a God. But the other notion is horrible! It takes from God every endearing attribute and leaves him only a good mechanic!
- 5. The idea that God mingles his agency continually in human affairs, prevails everywhere among all minds in all ages. Every where they have seen God revealing himself. They expect such revelations of God. They have believed in them, and have seen how essential this fact is to that confidence and love which belong to a moral government. It seems passing strange that men can sophisticate themselves into such nonsense as this! Insufferable nonsense are all such objections!

On one occasion, when it had been very wet and came off suddenly very dry, the question arose--How can you vindicate the providence of God? At first the question stung me; I stopped, considered it a few moments, and then asked, What can his object be in giving us weather at all? Why does he send, or not send, rain? If the object be to raise as many potatoes as possible, this is not the wisest course. But if the object be to make us feel our dependence, this is the wisest course possible. What if God were to raise harvests enough in one year to supply us for the next ten? We might all become atheists. We should be very likely to think we could live without God. But now every day and every year he shuts us up to depend on himself. Who does not see that a moral government, ordered on any other system, would work ruin?

- 6. Another reason is, men have no real sense of sin or of any spiritual want; no consciousness of guilt. While in this state of mind, it need not be expected that men will pray.
- 7. In the other extreme, after becoming deeply convicted, they fall into despair and think it does no good to pray.
- 8. Another reason for not praying much is found in self-righteous conceptions of what is requisite to success in prayer. One says, I am too degraded, and am not good enough to pray. This objection is founded altogether in self-righteous notions--assuming that your own goodness must be the ground or reason for God's hearing your prayer.
- 9. A reason with many for little prayer is their worldly-mindedness. Their minds are so filled

with thoughts of a worldly nature, they cannot get into the spirit of prayer.

Again, in the case of some, their own experience discourages them. They have often prayed, yet with little success. This brings them into a skeptical attitude in regard to prayer. Very likely the real reason of their failure has been the lack of perseverance. They have not obeyed this precept which urges that men pray always, and never faint.

## **REMARKS.**

1. It is no loss of time to pray. Many think it chiefly or wholly lost time. They are so full of business, they say, and assume that prayer will spoil their business. I tell you, that your business, if it be of such sort as ought to be done at all, will go all the better for much prayer. Rise from your bed a little earlier, and pray. Get time somehow--by almost any imaginable sacrifice, sooner than forego prayer. Are you studying? It is no loss of time to pray, as I know very well by my own experience. If I am to preach, with only two hours for preparation, I give one hour to prayer. If I were to study anything--let it be Virgil or Geometry, I would by all means pray first. Prayer enlarges and illumines the mind. It is like coming into the presence of a master spirit. You know how sometimes this electrifies the mind, and fires it with boundless enthusiasm. So, and much the more, does real access to God.

Let a physician pray a great deal; he needs counsel from God. Let the mechanic and the merchant pray much; they will testify, after trial of it, that God gives them counsel, and that, consequently, they lose nothing and gain much by constant prayer.

2. None but an eminently praying man is a safe religious teacher. However scientific and literary, if he be not a praying man, he cannot be trusted.

A spirit of prayer is of much greater value than human learning without it. If I were to choose, I would prefer intercourse with God in prayer before the intellect of Gabriel. I do not say this to disparage the value of learning and knowledge, for when great talents and learning are sanctified with much prayer, the result is a mind of mighty power.

Those who do not pray cannot understand the facts in regard to answers to prayer. How can they know? Those things seem to them utterly incredible. They have had no such experience. In fact all their experience goes in the opposite direction. State a case to them; they look incredulous. Perhaps they will say--You seem to think you can prophesy and foreknow events! Let them be answered, that "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him." Those who keep up a living intercourse with God know many things they do not tell, and had better not tell. When I was a young convert, I knew an aged lady whose piety and prayer seemed to me quite extraordinary. You could not feel like talking much in her presence; there was something in it that struck you as remarkable. The subject of sanctification came into discussion, and meeting me on one occasion, she said--"Charles, take care what you do! Don't do things to be sorry for afterwards." A son of hers became a Christian and was astonished at the manifestations of his mother's piety. She had prayed for him long and most earnestly. When, at length, his eyes were opened, she began to say--"I did not tell anybody my experiences, but in fact I have known nothing about condemnation for thirty years past. In all this time I am not aware that I have committed a known sin. My soul has enjoyed uninterrupted communion with God, and constant access to his mercy-seat in prayer."

3. Prayer is the great secret of ministerial success. Some think this secret lies in talent or in tact; but it is not so. A man may know all human knowledge, yet, without prayer, what can he do? He cannot move and control men's hearts. He can do nothing to purpose unless he lives in sympathy and open-faced communion with God. Only so can he be mighty through God to win souls to Christ. Here let me not be understood to depreciate learning and the knowledge of God. By no means. But prayer and its power are much greater and more effective. Herein lies the great mistake of Theological Seminaries and of gospel ministers. They lay excessive stress on learning, and genius, and talents; they fail to appreciate duly the paramount importance of much prayer. How much better for them to lay the principal stress on bathing the soul in God's presence! Let them rely first of all on God, who worketh mightily in his praying servants through his Spirit given them; and mediately, let them estimate above all other means, prayer--prayer that is abundant, devout, earnest, and full of living faith. Such a course would be an effectual correction of one of the most prevalent and perilous mistakes of the age.

### GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.



5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.