

The Insistency of Prayer

by P.T. Forsyth

Prayer is an act of will that cooperates with God's will, and it can change His intention or manner of treatment.

Scripture: Genesis 32:24, Psalm 18:6, Matthew 15:21, Mark 14:32, Luke 11:9, Romans 8:26, Ephesians 6:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Hebrews 5:7, James 5:16

Topics: "Persistent Prayer", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

P.T. Forsyth emphasizes the importance of importunate prayer, highlighting the need for persistent, fervent, and active prayer that engages in a real conflict of wills with God. He challenges the idea of prayer as mere submission or resignation, urging believers to wrestle with God and resist His will in a way that aligns with His higher intentions. Forsyth explores how prayer can change God's intention, emphasizing the power of prayer to alter situations, deepen spiritual life, and bring about blessings through persistent faith and love.

Transcript

In all I have said I have implied that prayer should be strenuously importunate. Observe, not petitionary merely, nor concentrated, nor active alone, but importunate. For prayer is not only meditation or communion. Nor ought it to be merely submissive in tone, as the "quietist" ideal is. We need not begin with "Thy will be done" if we but end with it. Remember the stress that Christ laid on importunity. Strenuous prayer will help us to recover the masculine type of religion--and then our opponents will at least respect us.

I would speak a little more fully on this matter of importunity. It is very closely bound up with the reality both of prayer and of religion. Prayer is not really a power till it is importunate. And it cannot be importunate unless it is felt to have a real effect on the Will of God. I may slip in here my conviction that far less of the disbelief in prayer is due to a scientific view of nature's uniformity than to the slipshod kind of prayer that men hear from us in public worship; it is often but journalese sent heavenwards, or phrase-making to carry on.

And I would further say that by importunity something else is meant than passionate dictation and stormy pertinacity--imposing our egoist will on God, and treating Him as a mysterious but manageable power that we may coerce and exploit. The deepening of the spiritual life is a subject that frequently occupies the attention of religious conferences and of the soul bent on self-improvement. But it is not certain that the great saints would always recognize the ideal of some who are addicted to the use of the phrase.

The "deepening of the spiritual life" they would find associated with three unhappy things. 1. They would recoil from a use of Scripture prevalent to those circles, which is atomistic individualist, subjective, and fantastic. 2. And what they would feel most foreign to their own objective and penetrating minds might be the air of introspection and self-measurement too often associated with the spiritual thus "deepened"--a spiritual egoism. 3. And they would miss the note of judgment and Redemption.

We should distinguish at the outset the deepening of spiritual life from the quickening of spiritual sensibility. Christ on the cross was surely deepened in spiritual experience, but was not the essence of that dereliction, and the concomitant of that deepening, the dulling of spiritual sensibility? There are many plain obstacles to the deepening of spiritual life, amid which I desire to name here only one; it is prayer conceived merely, or chiefly, as submission, resignation, quietism.

We say too soon, "Thy will be done"; and too ready acceptance of a situation as His will often means feebleness or sloth. It may be His will that we surmount His will. It may be His higher will that we resist His lower. Prayer is an act of will much more than of sentiment, and its triumph is more than acquiescence. Let us submit when we must, but let us keep the submission in reserve rather than in action, as a ground tone rather than the stole effort. Prayer with us has largely ceased to be wrestling.

But is that not the dominant scriptural idea? It is not the sole idea, but is it not the dominant? And is not our subdued note often but superinduced and unreal? I venture to enlarge on this last head, by way of meeting some who hesitate to speak of the power of prayer to alter God's will. I offer two points: I. Prayer may really change the will of God, or, if not His will, His intention. II. It may, like other human energies of godly sort, take the form of resisting the will of God.

Resisting His will may be doing His will. I. As to the first point. If this is not believed the earnestness goes out of prayer. It becomes either a ritual, or a soliloquy only overheard by God; just as thought with the will out of it degenerates into dreaming or brooding, where we are more passive than active. Prayer is not merely the meeting of two moods or two affections, the laying of the head on a divine bosom in trust and surrender. That may have its place in religion, but it is not the nerve and soul of prayer.

Nor is it religious reverie. Prayer is an encounter of wills--till one will or the other give way. It is not a spiritual exercise merely, but in its maturity it is a cause acting on the course of God's world.[7] It is, indeed, by God's grace that prayer is a real cause, but such it is. And of course there must be in us a faith corresponding to the grace. Of course also there is always, behind all, the readiness to accept God's will without a murmur when it is perfectly evident and final.

"My grace is sufficient for thee." Yes, but there is also the repeated effort to alter its form according to our sanctified needs and desires. You will notice that in Paul's case the power to accept the sufficiency of God's grace only came in the course of an importunate prayer aiming to turn God's hand. Paul ended, rather than began, with "Thy will be done." The peace of God is an end and not a beginning. "Thy will be done" was no utterance of mere resignation; thought it has mostly come to mean this in a Christianity which tends to canonize the weak instead of strengthening them.

As prayer it was a piece of active cooperation with God's will. It was a positive part of it. It is one thing to submit to a stronger will, it is another to be one with it. We submit because we cannot resist it; but when we are one with it we cannot succumb. It is not a power, but our power. But the natural will is not one with God's; and so we come to use these words in a mere negative way, meaning that we cease to resist. Our will does not accept God's, it just stops work.

We give in and lie down. But is that the sense of the words in the Lord's Prayer? Do they mean that we have no objection to God's will being done? or that we do not withstand any more? or even that we accept it gladly? Do they not mean something far more positive--that we actively will God's will and aid it, that it is the whole content of our own, that we put into it all the will that there can be in prayer, which is at last the great will power of the race? It is our heart's passion that God's will be done and His kingdom come.

And can His kingdom come otherwise than as it is a passion with us? Can His will be done? God's will was not Christ's consent merely, nor His pleasure, but His meat and drink, the source of His energy and the substance of His work. Observe, nothing can alter God's grace, His will in that sense, His large will and final purpose--our racial blessing, our salvation, our redemption in Jesus Christ. But for that will He is an infinite opportunist. His ways are very flexible. His intentions are amenable to us if His will is changeless.

The steps of His process are variable according to our freedom and His. We are living, let us say, in a careless way; and God proposes a certain treatment of us according to our carelessness. But in the exercise of our spiritual freedom we are by some means brought to pray. We cease to be careless. We pray God to visit us as those who hear. Then He does another thing. He acts differently, with a change caused by our freedom and our change. The treatment for deafness is altered.

God adopts another treatment--perhaps for weakness. We have by prayer changed His action, and, so far, His will (at any rate His intention) concerning us. As we pray, the discipline for the prayerless is altered to that for the prayerful. We attain the thing God did not mean to give us unless He had been affected by our prayer. We change the conduct, if not the will, of God to us, the Verhalten if not the Verhältniss. Again, we pray and pray, and no answer comes. The boon does not arrive.

Why? Perhaps we are not spiritually ready for it. It would not be a real blessing. But the persistence, the importunity of faith, is having a great effect on our spiritual nature. It ripens. A time comes when we are ready for answer. We then present ourselves to God in a spiritual condition which reasonably causes His to yield. The new spiritual state is not the answer to our prayer, but it is its effect; and it is the condition which makes the answer possible. It makes the prayer effectual.

The gift can be a blessing now. So God resists us no more. Importunity prevails, not as mere importunity (for God is not bored into answer), but as the importunity of God's own elect, i.e. as obedience, as a force of the Kingdom, as increased spiritual power, as real moral action, bringing corresponding strength and fitness to receive. I have often found that what I sought most I did not get at the right time, not till it was too late, not till I had learned to do without it, till I had renounced it in principle (though not in desire).

Perhaps it had lost some of its zest by the time it came, but it meant more as a gift and a trust. That was God's right time--when I could have it as though I had it not. If it came, it came not to gratify me, but to glorify Him and be a means of serving Him. One recalls here that most pregnant saying of Schopenhauer: "All is illusion--the hope or the thing hoped." If it is not true for all it is true for very many. Either the hope is never fulfilled or else its fulfilment disappoints.

God gives the hoped for thing, but sends leanness into the soul. The mother prays to have a son--and he breaks her heart, and were better dead. Hope may lie to us, or the thing hoped may dash us. But though He slay me I will trust. God does not fail. Amid the wreck of my little world He is firm, and I in Him. I justify God in the ruins; in His good time I shall arrive. More even than my hopes may go wrong. I may go wrong. But my Redeemer liveth; and, great though God is as my Fulfiller, He is greater as my Redeemer.

He is great as my hope, but He is greater as my power. What is the failure of my hope from Him compared with the failure of His hope in me? If He continue to believe in me I may well believe in Him. God's object with us is not to give just so many things and withhold so many; it is to place us in the tissue of His kingdom. His best answer to us is to raise us to the power of answering Him. The reason why He does not answer our prayer is because we do not answer Him and His prayer.

And His prayer was, as though Christ did beseech us, "Be ye reconciled." He would lift us to confident business with Him, to commerce of loving wills. The painter wrestles with the sitter till he gives him back himself, and there is a speaking likeness. So man with God, till God surrender His secret. He gives or refuses things, therefore, with a view to that communion alone, and on the whole. It is that spiritual personal end, and not an iron necessity, that rules His course.

Is there not a constant spiritual interaction between God and man as free spiritual beings? How that can be is one of the great philosophic problems. But the fact that it is is of the essence of faith. It is the unity of our universe. Many systems try to explain how human freedom and human action are consistent with God's omnipotence and omniscience. None succeed. How secondary causes like man are compatible with God as the Universal and Ultimate Cause is not rationally plain.

But there is no practical doubt that they are compatible. And so it is with the action of man on God in prayer. We may perhaps, for the present, put it thus, that we cannot change the will of God, which is grace, and which even Christ never changed but only revealed or effected; but we can change the intention of God, which is a manner of treatment, in the interest of grace, according to the situation of the hour. If we are guided by the Bible we have much ground for this view of prayer.

Does not Christ set more value upon importunity than on submission? "Knock, and it shall be opened." I would refer also not only to the parable of the unjust judge, but to the incident of the Syrophenician woman, where her wit, faith, and importunity together did actually change our Lord's intention and break His custom. There there is Paul beseeching the Lord thrice for a boon; and urging us to be instant, insistent, continual in prayer. We have Jacob wrestling. We have Abraham pleading, yea, haggling, with God for Sodom.

We have Moses interceding for Israel and asking God to blot his name out of the book of life, if that were needful to save Israel. We have Job facing God, withstanding Him, almost bearding Him, and extracting revelation. And we have Christ's own struggle with the Father in Gethsemane. It is a wrestle on the greatest scale--all manhood taxed as in some great war, or some great negotiation of State. And the effect is exhaustion often. No, the result of true, prayer is not always peace.

II. As to the second point. This wrestle is in a certain sense a resisting of God. You cannot have wrestling otherwise; but you may have Christian fatalism. It is not mere wrestling with ourselves, our ignorance, our self-will. That is not prayer, but self-torment. Prayer is wrestling with God. And it is better to fall thus into the hands of God than of man--even than our own. It is a resistance that God loves. It is quite foreign to the godless, self-willed defiant resistance.

In love there is a kind of resistance that enhances it. The resistance of love is a quite different thing from the resistance of hostility. The yielding to one you love is very different from capitulating to an enemy:

Two constant lovers, being joined in one,

Yielding unto each other yield to none -

i.e. to no foreign force, no force foreign to the love which makes them one. So when God yields to prayer in the name of Christ, to the prayer of faith and love, He yields to Himself who inspired it, as He swore by Himself since none was greater. Christian prayer is the Spirit praying in us. It is prayer in the solidarity of the Kingdom. It is a continuation of Christ's prayer, which in Gethsemane was a wrestle, an *sgwnia* with the Father. But if so, it is God pleading with God, God dealing with God--as the true atonement must be.

And when God yields it is not to an outside influence He yields, but to Himself. Let me make it still more plain. When we resist the will of God we may be resisting what God wills to be temporary and to be resisted, what He wills to be intermediary and transcended. We resist because God wills we should. We are not limiting God's will, any more than our moral freedom limits it. That freedom is the image of His, and, in a sense, part of His. We should defraud Him and His freedom if we did not exercise ours.

So the prayer which resists His dealing may be part of His will and its fulfilment. Does God not will the existence of things for us to resist, to grapple with? Do we ourselves not appoint problems and make difficulties for those we teach, for the very purpose of their overcoming them? We set questions to children of which we know the answer quite well. The real answer to our will and purpose is not the solution but the grappling, the wrestling. And we may properly give a reward not for the correct answer, but for the hard and honest effort.

That work is the prayer; and it has its reward apart from the solution. That is a principle of education with us. So it may be with God. But I mean a good deal more by this than what is called the reflex action of prayer. If that were all it would introduce an unreality into prayer. We should be praying for exercise, not for action. It would be prayer with a theological form, which yet expects no more than a psychological effect. It would be a prayer which is not sure that God is really more interested in us than we are in Him.

But I mean that God's education has a lower stage for us and a higher. He has a lower will and a higher, a prior and a posterior. And the purpose of the lower will is that it be resisted and struggled through to the higher. By God's will (let us say) you are born in a home where your father's earnings are a few shillings a week, like many an English labourer. Is it God's will that you acquiesce in that and never strive out of it? It is God's will that you are there. Is it God's will that you should not resist being there?

Nay, it may be His will that you should wisely resist it, and surmount His lower, His initial, will, which is there for the purpose. That is to say, it is His will that you resist, antagonize, His will. And so it is with the state of childhood altogether. Again: Is disease God's will? We all believe it often is--even if man is to blame for it. It may be, by God's will, the penalty on human ignorance, negligence, or sin. But let us suppose there were only a few cases where disease is God's will.

It was so in the lower creatures, before man lived, blundered, or sinned. Take only one such case. Is it God's will that we should lie down and let the disease have its way? Why, a whole profession exists to say no. Medicine exists as an antagonism to disease, even when you can say that disease is God's will and His punishment of sin. A doctor will tell you that resignation is one of his foes. He begins to grow hopeless if the patient is so resigned from the outset as to make no effort, if there be no will to live.

Resistance to this ordinance of God's is the doctor's business and the doctor's ally. And why? Because God ordained disease for the purpose of being resisted; He ordained the resistance, that from the conflict man might come out the stronger, and more full of resource and dominion over nature. Again, take death.

It is God's will. It is in the very structure of man, in the divine economy. It is not the result of sin; it was there before sin. Is it to be accepted without demur?

Are doctors impious who resist it? Are we sinning when we shrink from it? Does not the life of most people consist in the effort to escape it, in the struggle for a living? So also when we pray and wrestle for another's life, for our dear one's life. "Sir, come down ere my child die." The man was impatient. How familiar we are with his kind! "Do, please, leave your religious talk, which I don't understand; get doing something; cure my child." But was that an impious prayer? It was ignorant, practical, British, but not quite faithless.

And it was answered, as many a similar prayer has been. But, then, if death be God's will, to resist it is to resist God's will. Well, it is His will that we should. Christ, who always did God's will, resisted His own death, slipped away from it often, till the hour came; and even then He prayed with all his might against it when it seemed inevitable. "If it be possible, release Me." He was ready to accept it, but only in the last resort, only if there was no other way, only after every other means had been exhausted.

To the end He cherished the fading hope that there might be some other way. He went to death voluntarily, freely, but--shall we say reluctantly?--resisting the most blessed act of God's will that ever was performed in heaven or on earth; resisting, yet sure to acquiesce when that was God's clear will. The whole nature, indeed, is the will of God, and the whole of grace is striving with nature. It is our nature to have certain passions. That is God's will. But it is our calling of God to resist them as much as to gratify them.

There are there as God's will to be resisted as much as indulged. The redemption from the natural man includes the resistance to it, and the release of the soul from what God Himself appointed as its lower stages--never as its dwelling place, and never its tomb. So far prayer is on the lines of evolution. Obedience is the chief end. But obedience is not mere submission, mere resignation. It is not always acquiescence, even in prayer. We obey God as much when we urge our suit, and make a real petition of it, as when we accept His decision; as much when we try to change His will as when we bow to it. The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence. There is a very fine passage in Dante, Parad. xx. 94 (Longfellow):

Regnum coelorum suffereth violence

From fervent love, and from that living hope

That overcometh the divine volition.

Not in the way that man o'ercometh man;

We conquer it because it will be conquered,

And, conquered, conquers by benignity.

It is His will--His will of grace--that prayer should prevail with Him and extract blessings. And how we love the grace that so concedes them! The answer to prayer is not the complaisance of a playful power lightly yielding to the playful egoism of His favorites. "Our antagonist is our helper." To struggle with Him is one way of doing His will. To resist is one way of saying, "Thy will be done." It was God's will that Christ should deprecate the death God required. It pleased God as much as His submission to death.

But could it have been pleasing to Him that Christ should pray so, if no prayer could ever possibly change God's will? Could Christ have prayed so in that belief? Would faith ever inspire us to pray if the God of our faith must be unmoved by prayers? The prayer that goes to an inflexible God, however good He is, is prayer that rises more from human need than from God's own revelation, or from Christian faith (where Christian prayer should rise). It is His will, then, that we should pray against what seems His will, and what, for the lower stage of our growth, is His will.

And all this without any unreality whatever. Let us beware of a pietist fatalism which thins the spiritual life, saps the vigour of character, makes humility mere acquiescence, and piety only feminine, by banishing the will from prayer as much as thought has been banished from it. "The curse of so much religion" (I have quoted Meredith) "is that men cling to God with their weakness rather than with their strength." The popularity of much acquiescence is not because it is holier, but because it is easier.

And an easy gospel is the consumption that attacks Christianity. It is the phthisis to faith. Once come to think that we best say "Thy will be done" when we acquiesce, when we resign, and not also when we struggle and wrestle, and in time all effort will seem less pious than submission. And so we fall into the ecclesiastical type of religion, drawn from an age whose first virtue was submission to outward superiors. We shall come to canonize decorum and subduedness in life and worship (as the Episcopal Church with its monarchical ideas of religion has done).

We shall think more of order than of effort, more of law than of life, more of fashion than of faith, of good form than of great power. But was subduedness the mark of the New Testament men? Our religion may gain some beauty in this way, but it loses vigour. It may gain style, but it loses power. It is good form, but mere aesthetic piety. It may consecrate manners, but it impoverishes the mind. It may regulate prayer by the precepts of intelligence instead of the needs and faith of the soul.

It may feed certain pensive emotions, but it may emasculate will, secularize energy, and empty character. And so we decline to a state of things in which we have no shocking sins--yes, and no splendid souls; when all souls are dully correct, as like as shillings, but as thin, and as cheap. All our forms and views of religion have their test in prayer. Lose the importunity of prayer, reduce it to soliloquy, or even to colloquy, with God, lose the real conflict of will and will, lose the habit of wrestling and the hope of prevailing with God, make it mere walking with God in friendly talk; and, precious as that is, yet you tend to lose the reality of prayer at last.

In principle you make it mere conversation instead of the soul's great action. You lose the food of character, the renewal of will. You may have beautiful prayers--but as ineffectual as beauty so often is, and as fleeting. And so in the end you lose the reality of religion. Redemption turns down into mere revelation, faith to assent, and devotion to a phase of culture. For you lose the power of the Cross and so of the soul. Resist God, in the sense of rejecting God, and you will not be able to resist any evil.

But resist God in the sense of closing with God, cling to Him with your strength, not your weakness only, with your active and not only your passive faith, and He will give you strength. Cast yourself into His arms not to be caressed but to wrestle with Him. He loves that holy war. He may be too many for you, and lift you from your feet. But it will be to lift you from earth, and set you in the heavenly places which are their who fight the good fight and lay hold of God as their eternal life.

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