

LECTURES ON THE LORD'S PRAYER

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Lectures on the Lord's prayer by F. Edwards

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F. EDWARDS

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REV. F. EDWARDS, B.A.,
HARLOW, ESSEX.

"AFTER THIS MANNER, THEREFORE, PRAY YE."—MATT. VI. 9.

LONDON:
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LECTURES ON THE LORD'S PRAYER.

I.

Our Father which art in Heaven.

By THE REV. F. EDWARDS, B.A., HARLOW, ESSEX.

"After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in Heaven."
—MATT. vi. 9.

THE question respecting forms of prayer in our private devotion, and perhaps that also respecting the use of liturgies in our public services, is one which no close and complete exposition of Scripture can possibly leave unnoticed. The circumstances which have led to the supply of these aids to devotion in the Modern Church, existed under the Old Dispensation as well. Jewish historians tell us that the heads of the different schools into which they were divided prepared definite forms of prayer for the use of their disciples. From the direct statement made to our Lord respecting the custom of John the Baptist, it also appears that he performed a similar service on behalf of his followers. But, at the establishment of Christianity, it might have been presumed that these forms—indications of weakness and feebleness as they were—would be entirely

dispensed with; we might say, with Neander, that "it was more natural that the religious life of our Lord's disciples should be developed from within, than that it should receive its starting-point from without." And, indeed, the relationship into which Christianity was designed to introduce us with God, is such as to beget that confidence which would warrant the communication of our entire wants and feelings to God. Under such circumstances, it might have been presumed that all forms of prayer would be rejected, as being too stiff, and formal, and restrained, for the use of those who could plead with God as children, on whom the Spirit of adoption had been poured out. And that we are right in such conjectures, may, I think, be argued from the fact, that it was not until his disciples, actuated by a sense of want, expressed their desire for a form of prayer, that our Lord furnished them with one. It is perfectly true that, in his Sermon upon the Mount, he might teach them what he meant by the babbling and much speaking of the heathen; he gave them a pattern for their prayers, saying,—"*After this manner therefore pray ye.*" But the pattern did not merge into the form until the disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples;" and then our Lord said, "When ye pray, *say ye.*" From which we must not fail to observe, that the same prayer which furnishes the model according to which the Christian's prayers should be fashioned, may be made the form into which they may be cast; so that in this prayer we have at once the model and the form of ours.

The knowledge of human wants and requirements which this prayer evidences is surprising and comprehensive. It came from the lips of the only One who, knowing what was in man, knew what things we had need of. It would be scarcely possible for us to conceive a more comprehensive prayer than this, and, indeed, it is not possible for us to realize any want, or to express any desire, the expression of which is not already here. We may shape our prayers differently, we may cast them into a different form, but if the prayer be the result of the intercession within us of that Spirit which Jesus gave, our prayer must, in effect, be one with this; so that, in the contemplation of this prayer, a double end may be attained. The prayer, though of course primarily to be regarded as the expression of desires already realized, may have the secondary advantage of teaching us the condition in which we are, and thus of opening our minds to the things we most deeply require; and thus, however multiplied the occasions may become on which we make use of this prayer, its reception will never become tautological,

because its words will always have an ever increasingly comprehensive meaning.

You will observe that the prayer, besides the address to God with which it commences, and the ascription of praise with which it closes, contains seven separate petitions—three of which have reference to God in his relation to us, and the remaining four to ourselves in our relation to God. We shall, I believe, find abundant material for reflection at the present time in this opening part. Let me then ask you to *consider the manner in which our Saviour teaches his disciples to address God in prayer.* "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven"! From which the following truths may be gathered.

I. IN PRAYER, WE ADDRESS ONE WHO SUSTAINS THE RELATIONSHIP OF FATHER TO US.

The view of God with which the mind is impressed at the commencement of prayer, impacts its character to the whole petition which follows. The degree of reverence, or of confidence, or of freedom, which will characterize the prayer, may be regarded as decided as soon as the invocation has been uttered. The invocation will contain, wrapped up in it, the elements of the prayer which is to come.

I regard this as worthy of note, in connection with the teachings of Jesus upon prayer. On all occasions, one alone excepted, when our Saviour is represented by the Evangelists as praying to God, he does it not to him as God, or as Creator, or as Lord, or as Sovereign simply, but as one who, because he is all this, is therefore Father. And, I believe, there is no limitation necessary to the statement, that he always tells his disciples to pray to God as to their Father. We may take the following as specimens of his teachings upon this point. "When ye pray, enter into your closet, and pray to your Father who seeth in secret." "Be ye not like unto the heathen... for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him." " whatsoever ye ask the Father believing, ye shall receive." "I say not I will pray the Father for you, for the Father himself loveth you." And now in our text: "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven."

And remember, that we are not to address God as Father, simply in the technical and theological sense, in which those who believe in Christ are spoken of as being adopted. God is the universal Father; and every one, whether reclaimed from sin or not, may

call him by this tender name. But have not our multiplied offences and transgressions altered him? Nay, he is in one mind. Though we have violated our relationship to him, his relationship to us remains unchanged. His purposes towards us are still merciful—such, indeed, as a father might be supposed to cherish towards his children. But does not this put us in a wrong position in respect of God? You say, "Begin with telling men that God is their Creator and Lawgiver, and that ultimately he will be their Judge, and when you have humbled them sufficiently, and filled their minds with reverence and fear, then pass on to tell them that God is their Father." Oh, my friends, the foolishness of God is wiser than men! Men do not need this preparation for the gospel: Christ is wiser than we are. He says, "Father," at once. That includes it all. Tell them that at once; and if that does not win their heart, nothing else can. This includes everything else; and whilst this is our strongest plea with God, it necessitates the highest acknowledgment of God, and the completest submission of our hearts and lives to him. Our Father! In prayer, then, we go to him from whom we originated. There are sparks of divinity about us all. If it were not for this, the heavenliness of our origin—being solely of the earth, we should be earthly and worldly; it is true we are earthly and worldly enough as it is; but we should be more so, were we not the children of God. On this ground, we can account for the good which it is useless to deny that we possess. Our Father! then we may be sure that the good which is in us will be well pleasing to him. We may be anxious to find out one another's faults: not so God. Just as a father loves to mark the good qualities of his child; so God will be pleased to trace in us the surviving features of that image in which we were created. Our Father! then the evil which adheres to us will excite his pity, and love, and compassion; because he is our Father, he will strengthen the good which is in us, and remove our weakness, so that we may be able to combat successfully with our evil.

But how much more expressive is this name, "Father," to those who have the Spirit of adoption! And this privilege may be possessed by us all.

II. IN PRAYER, WE DIRECT OUR THOUGHTS TO ONE WHO IS ABOVE US.

We are to address God not only as our Father, but as our Father in heaven—or in the heavens. The Scriptures represent heaven