

**THE LORD'S PRAYER: NINE
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE
CHAPEL OF LINCOLN'S INN, IN
THE MONTHS OF FEBRUARY,
MARCH AND APRIL, 1848**

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The Lord's Prayer: Nine Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Lincoln's Inn, in the Months of February, March and April, 1848 by Frederick Denison Maurice

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FREDERICK DENISON MAURICE

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NINE SERMONS PREACHED IN THE CHAPEL
OF LINCOLN'S INN

IN THE MONTHS OF FEBRUARY MARCH AND APRIL 1848

BY THE REV.

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INCUMBENT OF ST. PETER'S, ST. MARVLEBONE.

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SERMON I.

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 18, 1848.

MATTHEW VI. 9.

AFTER THIS MANNER THEREFORE PRAY YE: 'OUR FATHER
WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.'

'AFTER *this* manner,' and therefore any manner but this is a wrong manner; a prayer which has any other principle or method than this, is not the Lord's Prayer.

The remark may seem superfluous, but it is not so. The Paternoster is not, as some fancy, the easiest, most natural, of all devout utterances. It may be committed to memory quickly, but it is slowly learnt by heart. Men may repeat it over ten times in an hour, but to use it when it is most needed, to know what it means, to believe it, yea, not to contradict it in the very act of praying it, not to construct our prayers upon a model the most unlike it possible, this is hard; this is one of the highest gifts which God can bestow upon us; nor can we look to receive it without others that we may wish for less; sharp suffering, a sense of wanting a home, a despair of ourselves.

At certain periods in the history of the Church, especially when some reformation was at hand, men have exhibited a weariness of their ordinary theological teaching. It seemed to them that they needed something less common, more refined than that which they possessed. As the light broke in upon them, they perceived that they needed what was less refined, more common. The Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, were found to contain the treasures for which they were seeking. The signs of such a period are surely to be seen in our day. We can scarcely think that we require reformation less than our fathers. I believe, if we are to obtain it, we too must turn to these simple documents; we must enquire whether there is not a wisdom hidden in them which we do not meet with elsewhere; whether they cannot interpret the dream of our lives better than all the soothsayers whom we have consulted about it hitherto.

I. Much of the practical difficulty of the prayer lies assuredly in the first word of it. How can we look round upon the people whom we habitually feel to be separated from us by almost impassable barriers; who are above us, so that we cannot reach them, or so far beneath us, that the slightest recognition of them is an act of gracious condescension; upon the people of an opposite faction to our own, whom we denounce as utterly evil; upon men whom we have reason to despise; upon the actual wrong-doers of society, those who have made themselves vile, and are helping to

make it vile: and then teach ourselves to think that in the very highest exercise of our lives, these are associated with us; that when we pray, we are praying for them and with them; that we cannot speak for ourselves without speaking for them; that if we do not carry sins to the throne of God's grace, we do not carry our own; that all the good we hope to obtain there, belongs to them just as much as to us, and that our claim to it is sure of being rejected, if it is not one which is valid for them also? Yet all this is included in the word 'Our'; till we have learnt so much, we are but spelling at it; we have not learnt to pronounce it. And what man of us—the aptest scholar of all—will venture to say that he has yet truly pronounced it; that his clearest utterance of it has not been broken and stammering? Think how many causes are at work every hour of our lives to make this opening word of the prayer a nullity and a falsehood. How many petty disagreements are there between friends and kinsfolk, people dwelling in the same house—so petty that there is no fear of giving way to them, and yet great enough to cause bitterness and estrangement, great enough to make this 'Our Father' a contradiction. How often does my vanity come into collision with another man's vanity, and then, though there be no palpable opposition of interests between us, though we do not stand in the way of each other's advancement, what a sense of separation, of inward hostility, follows! As the mere legal, formal, distinctions of caste become less marked, how apt are men to indemnify themselves

for that loss by drawing lines of their own as deep, and more arbitrary! As persecution in its ruder shapes becomes impossible, what revenge does the disputatious heart take under this deprivation, by bitter manifestations of contempt for an adversary, by identifying him more completely with his opinions, by condemning him, if not for them, then for the vehemence and bigotry with which he supports them! How many pretexts have the most tolerant amongst us for intolerance! How skilful are the most religious in finding ways for explaining away the awful command, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged!'

II. But when we say 'Father,' are we more in earnest? Do we mean that He whom we call upon is a Father actually, not in some imaginary metaphorical sense? Alas! in stumbling at the first word, 'Our,' we do, I fear, destroy the next also. For though all countries and nations had a dim vision of this name; though men, in whom the reverence for fathers had any strength, were taught by a higher wisdom than their own, to connect that reverence with their thoughts of the unseen world, and of One who ruled it; though the sense of this connexion was a balance to the tendency which they felt to idolize the powers of Nature, and yet kept them from a mere abstract, formal notion of the Divinity; though by it they learnt to realize, in a measure, their own spiritual existence; yet the revelation which fulfils the heathen expectation, which turns the dream of a Father into substance, is that which is

expressed in the words, 'He hath sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons,' and in those which are inseparable from them, 'Because ye are sons, He hath sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.' Now this revelation is grounded upon an act done on behalf of Humanity—an act in which all men have a like interest; for if Christ did not take the nature of every rebel and outcast, he did not take the nature of Paul and John. Therefore the first sign that the Church was established upon earth in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, was one which shewed that it was to consist of men of every tongue and nation; the baptized community was literally to represent mankind. If it be so, the name Father loses its significance for us individually, when we will not use it as the members of a family. No doubt it is a true name; it expresses an actual relation; and therefore, if we attain by ever so unfair a process, through ever so narrow a chink, to the perception of it, we may be thankful. But the possession is an insecure one: if some feelings or apprehensions give us a title to it, the title will become uncertain with every variety of our feelings and apprehensions. We shall regard the Unchangeable as a Father to-day, and not to-morrow. And then what becomes of the Lord's Prayer as a fixed manner or model for all prayer? What becomes of it as a resource in times of tribulation, when our feelings and apprehensions are in the lowest, most miserable, state? What is its worth when we are tempted by

suggestions addressed to these very feelings and apprehensions—suggestions which overmaster them, and get possession of them? Does any one answer, that God is called the Father of our spirits, that He is said to beget us to a new life, that as natural men we are not His *children*, though we are His creatures? All this is true and most important; and it is precisely what we assert, when we say that God has redeemed mankind in Christ. We mean that He has not left us to be fleshly creatures, to be animals, as we are naturally inclined to be, and would be altogether, if He were not upholding us; we mean that He has owned us as spiritual creatures, has claimed us in that character to be His servants and children, has given us His Spirit. We say that when a man arises and goes to his Father, he renounces his vile, selfish, exclusive life, and takes up that human privilege which God has given him in Christ; he enters upon his state as a man when he confesses God as his Father. If, instead of doing this, he will stand upon certain feelings and apprehensions of his, which separate him from his kind, he is not a penitent; he is still a self-exalting, self-glorious man; he has not been brought to feel that he is nothing; he has not been forced to cast himself wholly and absolutely upon the love and mercy of God in Christ. And, surely, such dependence, such self-renunciation, such willingness to take up a common position as portions of a family, is very difficult for creatures proud as we are, eager to have something of our own, always hoping to make out for ourselves special pleas of