

PRAYING TOGETHER

by Ray C. Stedman

This is the seventh in the series on prayer. Perhaps some of you are saying, "How long, O Lord, how long?" If you are, I am tempted to respond with the story of the preacher, new at his church, who preached a sermon mighty and powerful on stealing, and his congregation was very much moved by it. The next Sunday morning he preached exactly the same message and they wondered about this, and on the third Sunday he preached the same message once again. After this, a committee of deacons waited on him, and asked if he did not have some other message. He said yes, he had many. They said how long are you going to preach on stealing? He said I am going to preach on stealing until you stop stealing, and when you stop then I will change my message.

Now I am not attempting any such thing on prayer for I have been encouraged by the number who have begun to attend our weekly prayer meetings in the homes and at the church, but I am trying by God's grace to explore some of the tremendous secrets of prayer, especially those revealed to us by Jesus Christ himself.

I would like to turn to the 18th chapter of Matthew for our word on prayer today, beginning with Verse 18. Jesus said at the close of his word concerning problems and discipline in the church,

"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." {Matt 18:18-20 RSV}

These are almost frightening words! They reveal to us the most attractive yet fearsome thing about prayer, and that is its authority. Prayer is a powerful thing. "Prayer has already divided seas and rolled up flowing rivers, it has made flinty rocks gush into fountains, it has quenched flames of fire, it has muzzled lions, disarmed vipers and poisons, it has marshaled the stars against the wicked, it has stopped the course of the moon and arrested the sun in its race, it has burst open iron gates and recalled souls from eternity, it has conquered the strongest devils and commanded legions of angels down from heaven. Prayer has bridled and chained the raging passions of men and destroyed vast armies of proud, daring, blustering atheists. Prayer has brought one man from the bottom of the sea and carried another in a chariot of fire to heaven." That is not mere hyperbole, that is historical fact. Prayer has done a great many things beside. It is an awesome, mighty force in the world of men.

But, of course, great power has to be thoroughly understood or it is very dangerous. A number of years ago Mr. George Speaks, who will be exhibiting the *Sermons from Science* at the New York World's Fair this summer, was here in Palo Alto. On one occasion when we two were alone together as he was setting up some of his equipment on the stage, I asked him if he would let me stand on the great coil from which a million volts of electricity would flow through my body and light a torch held in each hand, as he did in his demonstration. He looked at me and said, "Well, I don't mind, except there is one thing. It would be all right as long as everything goes well. But if something goes wrong and you don't know what to do, it would be disastrous." Somehow that had a peculiar effect upon me, so I gave in readily to his argument.

Now, in this passage of Scripture, we have in these verses three very illuminating insights into prayer, from the greatest authority on prayer in all the world.

In Verse 18 we see that prayer is an authority which operates in mystery:

"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." {Matt 18:18 RSV}

Binding and loosing. As you read these words, it sounds almost like magic, doesn't it? In the fairy tales that we read as children there was always some magic object, a lamp, a ring, or a magic word with which, once the person possessed it, he could do the strangest things. He could turn people into toads or animals, he could cast spells of enchantment and create instant castles and bridges and whatever else that he needed. He could travel by carpet or even on the wind and in general behave quite out of the ordinary. In this one point at least, prayer is indeed somewhat like magic. For what our Lord is unquestionably saying here is that it is possible for quite ordinary humans like you and me to exercise extraordinary power, that heaven would in some sense ratify what is done on earth, that we would be put in touch with a world beyond the commonplace world which is visible to our senses.

This is certainly what he means by the contrast between heaven and earth in this verse. Surely we must take these words seriously. We realize that it does not mean that prayer is magic, that we can do whatever we fancy, acting by caprice and changing people into all kinds of strange objects. There are limitations to prayer and these we will observe as we go into this study. But I think we, first, must understand what Jesus means when he speaks of heaven and earth. This verse is frequently misunderstood because we fail to understand what he means, especially what he means by heaven. What is heaven? Where is heaven?

To ask the latter is to reveal a basic misunderstanding of heaven, for too often we think of it in terms of space. That is, earth is "down here," heaven is "up there" somewhere. The Russians, of course, have made a great deal of this concept. They say they launched their cosmonauts into space and looked for heaven, but could not find it. There was no sign of it "up there," and so they have drawn the conclusion that it simply does not exist. We say, "How pitiful that men should be so ignorant as to think that they could see heaven in terms of physical things." Yet I am afraid we reveal the same weakness in our own thinking about heaven, for this verse is taken often to mean that the Lord is saying that down here on earth we are given certain powers to bind or loose and God up in heaven is forced to ratify our actions and to agree with them.

On this concept is based the Catholic doctrine of forgiveness. They say the Catholic Church is empowered by this verse to forgive sins and when the priest says, *Absolvo te* (your sins are forgiven), that God in heaven must forgive sins on the basis of this verse.

Unfortunately, this is all the result of faulty thinking about heaven. Heaven is not spatially determined, it is not "up there" while we are "down here," nor is it to be thought of in terms of time. We think of earth as now, that is, this life. Heaven then, is later -- heaven is what comes after death. But I do not think the Scriptures use it in that sense. It is true that heaven exists after life, but what our Lord Jesus is saying here is that heaven exists at the same time as earth -- both are part of this life. This is more than saying that the decisions which we make in this life produce ultimate results in heaven after death. This is true, of course, but this is not what he is saying here. What he is saying is simply that heaven is the silent, invisible, spiritual kingdom which lies all about us, encompassing us, enclosing us, embracing us, waiting for us to recognize it. When we enter the kingdom of heaven we recognize that kingdom, we believe it, we act upon its reality. Jesus, in the Beatitudes, gave us the clue to entering. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3}. Earth, as opposite to heaven, is the world of sense -- we touch and feel and see and sense through our five senses. Heaven is not merely future, heaven is also present. Heaven is equally real as earth. It parallels our familiar physical world, Jesus is saying, and the doors between these two worlds are open.

This verse says there is a correspondence between heaven and earth. The outer world of time and space and events and history with which we are so familiar is but a reflection of that inner world, that invisible world which lies all about us, which is God's spiritual kingdom. In other words, earth is in some sense a reflection of heaven. With our physical senses we cannot see that inner world. All we see is its reflection in the outer world of history. It is somewhat like the back of your head, which you have never seen. All you can see, at best, is but a reflection of it as the barber holds a mirror up before you after cutting your hair. Then you see the back of your head, not in actuality, but in reflection. You see only the image of it.

In very many ways, the Christian philosophy of history is simply that. The events which appear in our daily newspapers, which we read about this morning, are simply reflections of what has taken place in the invisible world of spirit, heaven, if you like, which is within us and around us. And the amazing thing that Jesus is

saying here is that the invisible things that take place in heaven, which will be reflected in earth, are determined not in heaven, but on earth, in the heart of a praying Christian. "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." Whatever you bind in this outward life of ours, in this conscious life, in touch with the things of sense, shall be determined upon in that invisible world and shall find its reflection again in earth, in the things of this life.

Now, admittedly, there is much of mystery here. I do not think any of us can understand exactly why it is God waits till Christians pray before he begins to do what he has intended all along, and even announced that he will do, but the fact remains, indisputably, that *that* is what he does. He waits till someone prays before he moves. We read that when Daniel, as an old man, read in the account of Jeremiah that the Babylonian captivity was about to reach its close, having run the predicted course of seventy years, that Daniel was moved to pray mightily that God would send back into the land the captives of Israel. But those captives did not begin to return until Daniel prayed! The principle is also recorded for us in the Epistle of James. James said, "You have not because you ask not," {Jas 4:2}. It is that simple. God waits until we ask before he moves.

In our United States Government, as you all know, there are certain powers which we could call powers of binding and loosing, which are granted to the President and to him alone. Only the President, for instance, can sign treaties with foreign powers, and thus bind this nation to another nation. There is no other individual in our government who is authorized to affix his signature to a treaty and to cause it to take effect. Only the President can loose the atomic might of this nation. So important is this matter of deciding when to send our great missiles screaming into space that the power to do so has been delegated to one man only, the President of the United States. Further, only the President can pardon certain criminals and loose them from the penalty which the law demands. He alone can do this. The whole nation might, under certain circumstances, desire the President to act in such a way as this, and might exert tremendous moral force upon the man who is in the office to act, but until the President acts there is nothing that can be done.

Jesus is telling us here that God has granted powers of binding and loosing to every believer, and until we act upon them, nothing happens. There are powers of binding and loosing given to us, and in the realm of our personal lives they are almost absolute.

- God has said that we have power to bind every form of evil in our own lives. There is nothing that needs to have dominion over us. "Sin shall have no dominion over you," Paul said, "for you are not under law but under grace," {cf, Rom 6:14}. By grace we have power to bind every evil force, every contrary authority, within us.
- In the tenth chapter of Second Corinthians, Paul indicates that our warfare is not against flesh and blood but is along spiritual lines. We are warring against evil authorities and powers in high places. We have power to bring them under control in our own lives as we reckon ourselves dead unto sin and alive unto God.
- Furthermore, we have power to loose the full flood of the Spirit's resources in our own lives. There is not one of us that has any excuse for not being all that God intends us to be, not one. Someone has well said that we are as victorious as we want to be. No matter what you have been, no matter how weak, how failing, how faltering, you have been exactly as victorious as you have wanted to be, for there is granted to us power in Jesus Christ to bind every contrary force, every evil motive in our life, and to loose the flood of the Spirit's power through us -- and not only in our lives, but in others as well.

This is the meaning of intercessory prayer. Others can be helped tremendously by another person praying for them, to either stand or fall, as the case may be. I have often seen young people in their early Christian experience drifting into a condition of apathy and indifference, unconcerned about spiritual values, gradually drifting into coarseness of life, wrong habits, degenerating moral principles, and then, suddenly, they begin to change, almost overnight. Their attitude shifts 180 degrees out of phase with what it was before. They begin to take an interest in spiritual matters again and to grow spiritually. A new light comes into their face and eyes; there is a new attitude; they are totally different. I have never seen that happen but that sooner or later it has been discovered that someone has become concerned about that young person, and begun to pray. They may

never mention it to anyone else, but there comes a total change in the atmosphere around that person for whom they pray. That is why Paul says, "Pray for me, that the word of God may speed on and triumph as it did among you."

As we look at these words about binding and loosing, we can see that though we do not understand all about them, nevertheless it is apparent that prayer is authority: an authority which operates in mystery. It is the link to that invisible world which is the control center of all human life. We stand on the frontier between two worlds when we pray. Therefore, as James says, "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man has great effect," {Jas 5:16 KJV}.

Now not only is it true that prayer is an authority that works in mystery, but it is also an authority which is expressed in unity. Look at Verse 19:

"Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." {Matt 18:19 RSV}

This is the charter for the prayer meeting. One Christian praying alone is of great effect, but what about where two or more gather together? It is here evident that there is an amazing arithmetic about prayer. In Deuteronomy, Moses told the people of Israel,

"One of you shall chase a thousand, but two of you shall chase ten thousand." {cf, Deut 32:30}

That is a strange ratio, isn't it? If it were straight arithmetic we would say one should chase a thousand, two should chase two thousand, but when two Christians get together there is a geometric increase in the effect they have. Two shall put ten thousand to flight.

From the earliest days, the church has felt the need to gather together in prayer. In Acts 4, we see the church gathered for prayer after they had been persecuted by the Sanhedrin. There is another account in Acts 12 of Peter in prison when the church met and prayed for him, and he was delivered from prison. They could hardly believe it, but it was true. Here is corporate prayer. What is the purpose of prayer like this? Jesus says it is that we might agree together.

"if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." {Matt 18:19b RSV}

Words, you know, are fascinating things, and there are at least eight words in the Greek New Testament that are translated *agree*. One of them means literally "to stand together." It means two people make a common decision. This is the way we usually take this verse. We take it to mean that if I want something, then I find someone else who wants the same thing, and we agree to pray, and God therefore must honor our prayer and must do our will. But that is not what this means. There is another word that is used here which means "to sound together, to harmonize." Two related notes struck on the piano will harmonize. The harmony is already there, it is simply brought out as you strike the right notes. So this verse pictures two Christians coming together; one says what is on his heart, what he believes God wants him to pray for, and where they find they agree, where they harmonize, where they sound together, those are the areas where they can fully expect God to work. There are areas where God says, "It shall be done." There is a glorious definiteness about that, isn't there? It shall be done!

This is why I like to hear "Amen" at prayer meetings. I am old-fashioned enough to enjoy hearing a good "Amen" now and then. After all, it is exactly what the Scriptures suggest. When one person is leading in prayer everyone else is listening, or ought to be, and where they find something to which they feel a responsive chord, they say "Amen," either silently or vocally. What they are saying is, "I agree, this is what God has said to me too." When there are "Amen" sprinkled throughout a prayer meeting, either vocally or silently, it marks the areas of firm agreement where the Spirit of God is at work bringing unity. This is where prayer finds its authority.

Our Board of Elders has long since learned that the mind of the Spirit is determined when the ten men meeting together are brought into a sense of unity. When they feel there is unity, then they feel they have discovered what God wants. This is what Jesus is saying. "Where two or three of you sound the same note, not by comparing notes beforehand, but simply, voluntarily, spontaneously, sounding this out, it shall be done by my Father which is in heaven."

And then the last thing. It is evident here in Verse 20 that prayer is also an authority which originates in personality:

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
{Matt 18:20 RSV}

Don't miss the force of that little introductory word, *for*: "For, where two or three are gathered together in my name." Here is the explanation of the mystery in Verse 18, and the source of the unity in Verse 19. I confess that I do not fully understand how it is that a single man or woman or boy or girl, praying on the basis of the binding and loosing powers granted to him by God can move such mighty forces that prayer frequently engages. But it is only, of course, because it is not merely a man praying, but Christ is in him and he is praying. It is the fact that indwelling each Christian is One who has said, "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," {cf, Matt 28:18}. Therefore when a Christian prays, it is not just one man praying, it is Christ praying through him. "For God worketh in us," Paul says "both to will and to do of his good pleasure," {cf, Phil 2:13 KJV}.

Now you can see how clearly this reveals that Christians are creatures of two worlds. In our humanity, like everyone else of the human race, we belong to earth. We live in a world of space and time, we touch the events around about us, we react to them as others do, we read the same newspapers, we hear the same television reports, we are subject to the same pressures as the world about us, we are creatures of earth. But in the new life in Jesus Christ, in the heavenlies in which we live in Christ, we are creatures of heaven, we are in touch with the invisible world, the world which controls the outer world. We are standing, as I said, on the frontier between those two worlds, and as someone has well put it, "Prayer, therefore, is God the Son praying to God the Father in the power of God the Spirit, and the prayer room is the believer's heart." That is the whole story of prayer.

Now this indwelling personality is not only the explanation of the mystery of Verse 18 but it is the source of the unity of Verse 19. In writing to the Ephesians, Paul said that Jesus Christ is

far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, both in this age and in the age which is to come, and God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things, for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. {cf, Eph 1:21-23 RSV}

In other words, the expression of the power of Jesus Christ is never fully seen in an individual Christian, but only in the church as a whole. The simplest form of the church is here described, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name." You and I, as individual Christians, cannot fully reflect Jesus Christ. It is only when two or three, or two or three hundred, or two or three thousand are gathered together in his name that in a full and complete sense the power which is committed to Jesus Christ, who he is above every name which is named, both in this age and in the age to come, is fully manifested in this life. This means we can never fully know Jesus Christ unless we know him in relation to someone else.

In Paul's great prayer in Ephesians 3, he prays that we may know what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and come to know with all saints the love which is in Jesus Christ {cf, Eph 3:17-19}. "With all saints." We will never know it by ourselves. We can take our Bible and study it by ourselves, we can analyze it and saturate our minds with it and memorize it, but till we begin to share it with other Christians we never grasp what Jesus Christ fully is.

Furthermore, we can never learn how mighty and glorious he is unless we begin to make demands upon his power and his glory and thus learn that we can never touch bottom. That is the thing that gives meaning to this

meeting today. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name," Jesus says, "I am in the midst of them." The power of the church does not lie in the numbers that it can gather together. What a mistaken idea it is, that if we can get enough people together to pray, we shall have enough power to correct the things that are wrong in the world and set them right again. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Nor is the power of the church the status which it occupies in a community. How we labor under that misconception! We think if we can get so many men who are in positions of authority or leadership or stature in a community, the leaders of civic life, the Mayor, the bankers and those in business, the titans, the tycoons, into our church then we will have enough status that we can wield great power in the minds and hearts of men. How foolish we are. The power of the church does not rest in its numbers, its status, its wealth, its money, its position. The power of the Church of Jesus Christ is stated right here. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

Out of him alone flows this marvelous power to bind and to loose, and this tremendous unity by which the mind of the Spirit becomes known and God moves through Christian lives to alter the course and destiny of the world around us.

Let us glory in that! If we wish to glory in anything, as the early church did, let us glory in the fact that Jesus Christ lives and moves in our midst, that we belong to him, that his life is expressed through us. It is through him that prayer makes its greatest permanent impact. It is only through his presence that prayer has meaning and value.

Prayer

Father, what a mistake we make when we try to make things complex. How wonderful it is to come back to the simplicity which is in Jesus Christ. How foolish we are to seek substitutes for that simplicity, that simple relationship of a mighty, overpowering, victorious Lord in the midst of his Church. Lord, teach us to glory in this, teach us to reckon upon it, teach us to pray on this basis and this alone, and, having recognized that these things are true, regardless of what the circumstances around us may be, grant us the faith to step out upon them and act upon them. In Christ's name, Amen.

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