

"A Call To Prayer"**J.C. Ryle:****"MEN OUGHT ALWAYS TO PRAY." Luke 18:1 "I WILL THAT MEN PRAY EVERYWHERE." 1 TIMOTHY 2:1****I have a question to offer you. It is contained in three words, DO YOU PRAY?****The question is one that none but you can answer. Whether you attend public worship or not, your minister knows. Whether you have family prayers or not your relations know. But whether you pray in private or not, is a matter between yourself and God.****I beseech you in all affections to attend to the subject I bring before you. Do not say that my question is too close. If your heart is right in the sight of God, there is nothing in it to make you afraid. Do not turn off my question by replying that you say your prayers. It is one thing to say your prayers and another to pray. Do not tell me that my question is necessary. Listen to me for a few minutes, and I will show you good reason for asking it.****I. I ask whether you pray, because prayer is absolutely needful to a person's salvation.****I say, absolutely needful, and I say so advisedly. I am not speaking now of infants or idiots. I am not setting the state of the heathen. I know where little is given, there little will be required. I speak especially of those who call themselves Christians, in a land like our own. And of such I say, no man or woman can expect to be saved who does not pray.****I hold to salvation by grace as strongly as anyone. I would gladly offer a free and full pardon to the greatest sinner that ever lived. I would not hesitate to stand by their dying bed, and say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ even now, and you shall be saved." But that a person can have salvation without asking for it, I cannot see in the Bible. That a person will receive pardon of their sins, who will not so much as lift up their heart inwardly, and say, "Lord Jesus, give it to me," this I cannot find. I can find that nobody will be saved by their prayers, but I cannot find that without prayer anybody will be saved.****It is not absolutely needful to salvation that a person should read the Bible. A person may have no learning, or be blind, and yet have Christ in their heart. It is not absolutely needful that a person should hear public preaching of the gospel. They may live where the gospel is not preached, or they may be bedridden, or deaf. But the same thing cannot be said about prayer. It is absolutely needful to salvation that a person should pray.****There is no royal road either to health or learning. Prime ministers and kings, poor men and peasants, all alike attend to the needs of their own bodies and their own minds. No person can eat, drink, or sleep, by proxy. No person can get the alphabet learned for them by another. All these are things which everybody must do for themselves, or they will not be done at all.****Just as it is with the mind and body, so it is with the soul. There are certain things absolutely needful to the soul's health and well-being. Each must attend to these things for themselves. Each must repent for them self. Each must apply to Christ for them self. And for them self each must speak to God and pray. You must do it for yourself, for by nobody else it can be done. To be prayerless is to be without God, without Christ, without grace, without hope, and without heaven. It is to be in the road to hell. Now can you wonder that I ask the question, DO YOU PRAY?****II. I ask again whether you pray, because a habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian.****All the children of God on earth are alike in this respect. From the moment there is any life and reality about their religion, they pray. Just as the first sign of the life of an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is praying.****This is one of the common marks of all the elect of God, "They cry unto him day and night." Luke 18:1. The Holy Spirit who makes them new creatures, works in them a feeling of adoption, and makes the cry, "Abba, Father." Romans 8:15. The Lord Jesus, when he quickens them, gives them a voice and a tongue, and says to them, "Be dumb no more." God has no dumb children. It is as much a part of their new nature to pray, as it is of a child to cry. They see their need of mercy and grace. They feel their emptiness and weakness. They cannot do other wise than they do. They must pray.****I have looked careful over the lives of God's saints in the Bible. I cannot find one whose history much is told us, from Genesis to Revelation, who was not a person of prayer. I find it mentioned as a characteristic of the godly,**

that "they call on the Father," that "they call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." I find it recorded as a characteristic of the wicked, that "they call not upon the Lord." 1 Peter 1:17; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Psalm 14:4.

I have read the lives of many eminent Christians who have been on earth since the Bible days. Some of them, I see, were rich, and some poor. Some were learned, and some were unlearned. Some of them were Episcopalians, and some were Christians of other names. Some were Calvinists, and some were Arminians. Some have loved to use liturgy, and some to use none. But one thing, I see, they all had in common. They have all been people of prayer.

I have studied reports of missionary societies in our own times. I see with joy that lost men and women are receiving the gospel in various parts of the globe. There are conversions in Africa, in New Zealand, in India, in China. The people converted are naturally unlike one another in every respect. But one striking thing I observe at all the missionary stations: the converted people always pray.

I do not deny that a person may pray without heart and without sincerity. I do not for a moment pretend to say that the mere fact of a persons' praying proves everything about their soul. As in every other part of religion, so also in this, there may be deception and hypocrisy.

But this I do say, that not praying is a clear proof that a person is not yet a true Christian. They cannot really feel their sins. They cannot love God. They cannot feel themselves a debtor to Christ. They cannot long after holiness. They cannot desire heaven. They have yet to be born again. They have yet to be made a new creature. They may boast confidently of election, grace, faith, hope and knowledge, and deceive ignorant people. But you may rest assured it is all vain talk if they do not pray.

And I say furthermore, that of all the evidences of the real work of the Spirit, a habit of hearty private prayer is one of the most satisfactory that can be named. A person may preach from false motives. A person may write books and make fine speeches and seem diligent in good works, and yet be a Judas Iscariot. But a person seldom goes into their closet and pours out their soul before God in secret, unless they are in earnest. The Lord himself has set his stamp on prayer as the best proof of conversion. When he sent Ananias to Saul in Damascus, he gave him no other evidence of his change of heart than this, "Behold he prayeth." Acts 9:11.

I know that much may go on in a person's mind before they are brought to pray. They may have many convictions, desires, wishes, feelings, intentions, resolutions, hopes, and fears. But all these things are very uncertain evidences. They are to be found in ungodly people, and often come to nothing. In many a case they are not more lasting than the morning cloud, and dew that passes away. A real hearty prayer, moving from a broken and contrite spirit, is worth all these things put together.

I know that the Holy Spirit, who calls sinners from their evil ways, does in many instances lead them by very slow degrees to acquaintance with Christ. But the eye of man can only judge by what it sees. I can not call anyone justified until they believe. I dare not say that anyone believes until they pray. I cannot understand a dumb faith. The first act of faith will be to speak to God. Faith is to the soul what life is to the body. Prayer is to faith what breath is to the body. How a person can live and not breathe is past my comprehension, and how a person can believe and not pray is past my comprehension too.

Never be surprised if you hear ministers of the gospel dwelling much on the importance of prayer. This is the point they want to bring to you. They want to know that you pray. Your views of doctrine may be correct. Your love of Protestantism may be warm and unmistakable. But still this may be nothing more than head knowledge and party spirit. They want to know whether you are actually acquainted with the throne of grace, and whether you can speak to God as well as speak about God.

III. I ask whether you pray, because there is no duty in religion so neglected as private prayer. We live in days of abounding religious profession. There are more places of public worship than there ever was before. There are more persons attending them than there ever was before. And yet in spite of all this public religion, I believe there is a vast neglect of private prayer. It is one of those private transcripts between God and our souls which no eye sees, and therefore one which people are tempted to pass over and leave undone.

I believe that hundreds of thousands never utter a word of prayer at all. They eat. They drink. They sleep. They rise. They go forth to their work. They return to their homes. They breathe God's air. They travel on God's earth. They enjoy God's mercies. They have dying bodies. They have judgment and eternity before them. But they never speak to God. They live like the animals that perish. They behave like creatures without souls. They have not one word to say to Him in whose hand are their life and breath, and all things, and from whose mouth they

must one day receive their everlasting sentence. How dreadful this seems; but if the secrets of people, were daily known, how common.

I believe there are hundreds of thousands whose prayers are nothing but mere form, a set of words repeated by rote, without a thought about their meaning. Some say over a few hasty sentences picked up in the nursery when they were children. Some content themselves with repeating the Creed, forgetting that there is not a request in it. Some add the Lord's Prayer, but without the slightest desire that its solemn petitions may be granted.

Many, even those who use good forms, mutter their prayers over after they have got to bed, or while they wash or dress in the morning. People may think what they please, but they may depend upon it that in the sight of God this is not praying. Words said without heart are as utterly useless to our souls as the drum beating of savages before their idols. Where there is no heart, there may be lip-work and tongue-work, but there is no prayer. Saul, I have no doubt, said many a long prayer before the Lord met him on the way to Damascus. But it was not till his heart was broken that the Lord said. "He prayeth."

Does this surprise you? Listen to me, and I will show you that I am not speaking as I do without reason. Do you think that my assertions are extravagant and unwarrantable? Give me your attention, and I will soon show you that I am only telling you the truth.

Have you forgotten that it is not natural to any one to pray? "The carnal mind is enmity against God." The desire of a person's heart is to get far away from God, and have nothing to do with him. Their feelings towards him is not but fear. Why then should a person pray when they have no real sense of sin, no real feeling of spiritual needs, no thorough belief in unseen things, no desire after holiness and heaven? Of all these things the vast majority of people know and feel nothing. The multitudes walk in the broad way. I cannot forget this. Therefore I say boldly, I believe that few pray.

Have you forgotten that it is not fashionable to pray? It is one of those things that many would be rather ashamed to admit. There are hundreds who would rather storm a breach, or lead a forlorn hope then confess publicly that they make a habit of prayer. There are thousands who, if obliged to sleep in the same room with a stranger, would lie down in bed without a prayer. To dress well, to go to theaters, to be thought clever and agreeable, all this is fashionable, but not to pray. I cannot forget this. I cannot think a habit is common which so many seem ashamed to admit. Thus I believe that few pray.

Have you forgotten the lives that many live? Can we really believe that people are praying against sin night and day, when we see them plunging into it? Can we suppose they pray against the world, when they are entirely absorbed and taken up with its pursuits? Can we think they really ask God for grace to serve him, when they do not show the slightest interest to serve him at all? Oh, no, it is plain as daylight that the great majority of people either ask nothing of God or do not mean what they say when they do ask, which is just the same thing. Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin, or sin will choke prayer. I cannot forget this. I look at people's lives. I believe that few pray.

Have you forgotten the deaths that many die? How many, when they draw near death, seem entirely strangers to God. Not only are they sadly ignorant of his gospel, but sadly lacking in the power of speaking to him. There is a terrible awkwardness and shyness in their endeavors to approach him. They seem to be taking up a fresh thing. They appear as if they want an introduction to God, and as if they have never talked with him before. I remember having heard of person who was anxious to have a minister to visit them in their last illness. They desired that he would pray for them. He asked her what he should pray for. They did not know, and could not tell. They were utterly unable to name any one thing which they wished to ask God for their soul. All they seemed to want was the form of a minister's prayers. I can quite understand this. Death-beds are great revealers of secrets. I cannot forget what I have seen of sick and dying people. This also leads me to believe that few people pray.

I cannot see your heart. I do not know your private history in spiritual things. But from what I see in the Bible and in the world I am certain I cannot ask you a more necessary question than that before you- DO YOU PRAY?