

J. KYLE PAISLEY MEMORIAL FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Lord's Day Morning Sermon Notes

26th March 2006

Read: Matthew 18: 15-20

Text: v.v.19 & 20

The Church Prayer Meeting – A Means of Grace

Christ is the Head of the body of His believing people and has ordained certain means of grace by which they will be spiritually edified, the chief of which is His word, but another vital means of grace is prayer. Last week I considered with you the words of Jude v.20 where prayer is certainly shown to be a means of grace in the words – “*Building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost.*” Praying “**by**” the Spirit’s enablement is what is meant, thus we considered three simple but vital thoughts from these words: the Holy Spirit and the existence of prayer; the expression of prayer; and the essence of prayer. It is only by the Spirit that prayer exists in the heart; that it can be expressed in faith & with fervency; and that as to its essence it will be according to the will of God when it is generated by the Spirit of God. Praying by the Spirit the Church will be edified.

Now with respect to prayer being a means of grace to the believer, it is essential that we consider the matter of the church prayer meeting. When we employ the term “the means of grace” we must always remember that primarily it is used with reference to the public & visible life and experience of Christ’s Church. For example, the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper & Baptism are two of the means of grace, but they must never be observed privately. Thus, when we think about the word as a means of grace, while the believer is to spend private time in the word yet it is primarily the public exposition & preaching of the word that has been ordained by God for the edifying of the body of Christ. I would suggest that the same is true with respect to prayer. The believer must spend time in prayer alone with God, but as a member of the body of Christ there is to be diligent attendance at the public prayer meetings of the Church as a chief means of grace to the soul.

Therefore it is my purpose to give some consideration today to the subject of The Church Prayer Meeting – A Means of Grace as we find it set before us in this text, Matt 18: 19 & 20. In the context Christ is dealing with the matter of Church discipline, and in doing so refers to prayer as v.19 indicates for the simple reason that in matters of church discipline great wisdom is needed and must be sought in prayer. However, the reference to prayer in v.19 cannot be confined to the area of Church discipline in that Christ extends it to all the needs of God’s work in the words “*as touching anything that they shall ask.*” In other words in v.v. 19 & 20 Christ puts His imprimatur on the need for the Church to come together for set times of prayer. Here then is Christ the Head of the Body establishing that there should be Church prayer meetings; and that fact of corporate gatherings for prayer obviously as a means of grace to God’s people runs the whole way through the New Testament.

When we read the N.T. Scriptures carefully many points concerning the church prayer meeting may be deduced. For example, the N.T. prayer meeting carries over from the OT church; Acts 3: 1 – “*the hour of prayer.*” The Jewish church had particular hours for prayer. Here are Peter & John, two NT apostles, observing this hour of prayer. Thus, there was a carry over of the OT practice of gathering for prayer, forming the basis of the NT church prayer meeting. Moreover, the NT Church prayer meeting was distinct from other church meetings held on the Lord’s Day. Prayer meetings were held on various days of the week, Acts 1: 14 – they continued in prayer & supplication for ten days, involving other days of the week as well as the Lord’s Day. Hence, NT church prayer meetings were definite times of gathering together by the saints holding a distinct place in the over-all spiritual life of the Church. It was not relegated to some second-rate, inferior, position. Rather, it was given an importance peculiarly its own. The NT church prayer meeting was instrumental in securing the blessing of God Here is one of the fundamental principles of the N.T. regarding the spiritual life of the Church: God has ordained that through the ministry of prayer His sovereign will shall be fulfilled for & through His Church. God has decreed & promised certain blessings for His Church, but He has also decreed that they will be obtained in answer to prayer. He wills that His people come together and seek earnestly for the very things which He has promised & purposed to give them. How clearly this comes out in the book of Acts. See ch 1: 4, 5 with 2: 1; & 4: 24-31.

To put it concisely therefore, we may truly say that the prayer meeting is the very heart, nerve, & centre of the life of Christ’s Church, so much so that every able member & adherent of this congregation needs to make the prayer meeting a priority. Note with me some important points which pertain to the church prayer meeting.

I. NOTICE FIRST THAT THERE IS TO BE AN ASSEMBLING FOR PRAYER

As noted, v.20 is descriptive of a prayer meeting. Note in the terms of v.20 some vital points regarding this assembling for the prayer meeting.

1. Notice the features of this assembling for prayer. Read Christ’s words carefully and it will be observed that the assembling of believers for prayer is marked by certain features.

(a) Plurality -- Christ refers to “two or three” gathering -- a prayer meeting cannot exist without a plurality of people. Christ says “two or three” not “one or two” for with only one it would not be a church prayer meeting. Thus, let every believer determine to be part of that company who come together to pray for Christ’s cause.

(b) Unity -- two or three *gathered together*. Latter words one in the original text; express the thought of unity. Gathering together conscious of being one because of that marvellous unity that there is already through union with Christ, Gal 3: 28; and through the work of the Spirit, 1 Cor 12: 13. In the knowledge of that unity that already exists we come together. We are to rejoice in it; to dwell on it; to be filled with wonder that a plurality of people with such diverse personalities, and backgrounds are one by virtue of being joined to Christ by the Spirit. See Acts 3.1 –

what a statement of this unity of the saints in the place of prayer – “*Peter & John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer.*” Two totally different characters going to pray together because of the unity they had with Christ & thus with each other.

2. **Notice the focus of the assembling for prayer** -- “*gathered together in My name.*” The focus is on Christ for the *name* is equivalent to the person. Hence, the Lord’s people come together by virtue of His appointment, their relationship to Him, and their profession of faith in Him. Specifically there is a focusing on:

(a) **His Mediation** -- to gather in Christ’s name is to focus on His mediatorial role by which we have access to the throne, Eph 2: 18; on acceptance at the throne through His merits as Mediator, Heb 10:19-22; on His advocacy at the throne as He pleads our cause & assures us of victory, Heb 4: 15, 16.

(b) **His Ministry** – He speaks here as the Head of the Church. Thus, to gather in His name is to focus in prayer on the fact of His being the source & supply of all the spiritual life that we need and that He ministers to us; the means of grace that He supplies, Col 2: 19. We gather for prayer to obtain from Christ what He has procured for us by His redemptive work on our behalf. As our covenant Head He has obtained all spiritual blessings for us; and He freely bestows them on a seeking & praying company of believers. It is His ministry to give us what He has bought for us.

II. NOTE SECONDLY SOME POINTS CONCERNING THE ACTUAL PRAYING ITSELF

Believers gather for prayer, but what actually should characterise the praying that takes place? Note –

1. **There is the agreement in the prayer offered.** Note in v.19 the word “agree.” It literally means *to sound together*. Word describes the sound of musical instruments playing harmoniously. From the original Greek word there is derived a noun translated *musick* in Luke 15: 25; expressing the idea of harmony. Therefore, a church prayer meeting is characterised by harmony & agreement – a coming together with common desires in keeping with the will of God. There must be utter dependence on the help of the Spirit & the Word of God to give guidance & direction, Eph 5: 18 & 6: 18. Such praying will bring down much blessing & edification.

2. **There is therefore audibility in the prayer offered.** In a church prayer meeting there must be audible praying, denoted again by the participants being agreed. How could there be agreement if there were silent praying only? Agreement sounded by the “amen.” Matt 6: 13 – Christ taught His disciples to issue an *amen* at the end of prayer, 1 Chr 16: 36; Neh 5: 13; 8: 6. After both preaching & prayer the “amen” was sounded by God’s people.

3. **There is also the asking itself.** V.19 – “ask.” Original word is expressive of the position & attitude of a suppliant, one who is in a lesser position than the one to whom the petition is made. It is the asking of a child from a parent, a subject from a king, a beggar from one passing by; and of course, of men from God. Hence, the word denotes a real, earnest, seeking after God. Luke 11: 9, “*Ask, and it shall be given unto you.*”

III. NOTICE FINALLY, THE GREAT ASSURANCE GIVEN TO THOSE WHO ASSEMBLE FOR PRAYER

To those who gather together with a true focus on Christ, the assurance given to them by the Saviour Himself is – “*there am I in the midst of them.*” This is an assurance that pertains to the spiritual life & well-being of the Church. It is an assurance that has various features:

1. **It is an assurance of spiritual precedence.** The words may be read, “*I am there in the midst.*” Where & when believers assemble in Christ’s name He declares “I am there” – not *I will be there*. In effect Christ is saying that when it is purposed to meet in His name He is there first. He is there before them for how could they gather together unto Him if He were not there from the very first. So, there is a spiritual precedence – Christ precedes His people; which means that He initiates their gatherings & draws them together. What an assurance this is. Christ precedes His people; He is first at their gatherings for He delights to have them brought together. Knowing this – let us delight to be where Christ will be found; let us not disobey His stirring & prompting. See Matt 26: 32; 28: 7, 10, 16. Christ purposed that His disciples would meet with Him in Galilee. He drew them there, and they found Him waiting for them. Isaiah 30: 18, “*And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you.*”

2. **It is an assurance of a spiritual presence.** Christ promises to be in the midst of those who gather in His name. This is a reference to His spiritual presence. Proved in that Christ’s words “where two or three are gathered” infer a multiplicity of meetings gathered simultaneously; yet He is in the midst of them all. How is He there? He is present by His Spirit. The Spirit for one thing dwells in each believer for each Christian is the temple of the Spirit. Then, every congregation is the temple of the Spirit too, 1 Cor 6: 19; 3: 16. It is by His Spirit that Christ therefore, is spiritually present, John 16: 7; also Acts 9: 31. We may look forward to Christ’s spiritual presence in our gatherings for prayer. Let us fear to grieve Him or quench Him.

3. **It is an assurance of a spiritual pre-eminence.** He promises to be *in the midst* thus in a central & pre-eminent position, given His rightful place of being Head & Lord of all by virtue of His victorious work of the cross. John 20: 19, 20 – appeared in the midst & showed them the marks of His sufferings, asserting His rightful place in the midst because of the accomplishment of redemption. Hence, Christ’s spiritual presence is guaranteed & secured by the victory of Calvary. Anyone who has any true, saving understanding of Christ & the Gospel will want the spiritual presence of Christ in any church gathering.

4. **It is an assurance of a spiritual purpose.** To have Christ in the midst of our prayer meetings is to be blessed. Why else would Christ be in the midst except to bless His people? Comes into the midst to strengthen, encourage, instruct, guide, assist etc. Did all of this for the disciples when they gathered. We may expect the same. Come to the prayer meeting anticipating the blessing of the Lord.