Praying for the Departed.

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PRAYING FOR THE DEPARTED.

THE slaughter of so many tens of thousands in the terrible war now raging, and the consequent sorrow and anxiety of bereaved ones, have led to a renewal of the teaching and practice of praying for the dead as a source of comfort to some. It seems, therefore, well to say a few words on the subject, even though it may to some extent be a repetition of what was written some years ago. Though this doctrine is essentially Romish, it is held by many in the Anglican Church, even the Primate of which says that "the extravagances of Tetzel need not now, nearly four centuries afterwards, thwart or hinder the reverent, the

absolutely trustful prayer of a wounded spirit" for a departed one. His Grace seems to ignore the fact that Tetzel's "extravagances" or pernicious practices, which roused the spirit of Luther, grew out of the doctrine of praying for the dead. The practice was also advocated recently in an assembly of leading Nonconformists.

This is not a teaching to be treated lightly; it is too solemn for that; but it cannot be too often affirmed that it has not a scrap of support in Scripture. A reference to the only two passages of Scripture ever adduced for it shows the folly of building such a doctrine on so poor a foundation. The chief is 2 Tim. i. 18. It has to be assumed that Onesiphorus was dead (of which there is no evidence) and that the apostle prays for him as a departed

one. It is assumed further that the mercy prayed for is the mercy of salvation. But Onesiphorus was already a saved one, and he had given good evidence of his faith in his diligent care for the imprisoned servant of Christ at Rome, as well as previously at Ephesus. That for which the apostle prays is that he may be recompensed of the Lord in the coming day of reward, and he uses the word mercy as one who well knows that all rewards will be expressions of God's mercy, while bestowed in righteousness, for it is in pure grace that God will reward what His grace has wrought; and they who receive the reward, so far from feeling that they have any claim, will own, "We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do" (Luke xvii. 10).

We would all thankfully seek to minister any comfort to bereaved ones, and there is one consideration that is perhaps not often dwelt upon. The Word of God assures us that "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," showing at the same time that that call is an evidence of faith (Rom. x. 13). We little know how many who have learned the truths of the gospel in early days may in their last moments call upon Him who is rich in mercy, and will glorify Him for that mercy throughout eternity. A young man sent home wounded told how during a short lull in a violent cannonade a voice was heard calling those around to join in prayer. Immediately all in the trench fell upon their knees in the mud and joined in crying to God, and during that brief

time this one and several others trusted Christ as their Saviour. Had they been killed their friends would not have known this, yet it would have been as true. This incident may well encourage prayer for those who are in danger of death at any moment, that they may be prepared for the solemn event, and it is a legitimate source of comfort to anxious hearts. But the idea that there is any change from darkness to light after death is delusive.

When the Lord Jesus once lifted the veil and gave a view of the two great spheres of the unseen world before the resurrection, He endorsed those solemn words uttered by Abraham telling of a great gulf (*or* chasm) fixed between the saved and the lost (Luke xvi.). Every word of His has its full meaning: the chasm is *great* and *impassable,* so

that none may pass from one to the other; and, moreover, it is "*fixed*" by a righteous God, so that none can remove it. Therefore let none be deluded with the idea that, if they go hence without having passed the line that divides the saved and the unsaved, they will have any chance hereafter through the prayers of their friends; "Behold NOW is the day of salvation;" therefore "while the Holy Ghost saith TO-DAY, harden not your hearts;" for "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?"

But the reasoning of some who wish to encourage the practice of praying for the dead is more subtle. They recognize that there can be no actual change of condition after death, and only speak of prayer for those who have departed 'in the faith,' whatever they

may mean by that. They assert that no one can be fit to go direct from this world into the presence of God, and therefore each one needs to undergo a process of purification in order to be 'fitted for the final entrance into perfect happiness,' in which process he may be helped by the prayers of those still on earth. Such a statement betrays lamentable ignorance of the gospel in any, though it is most culpable in those who profess to be teachers of God's Word. Those who do not really know the gospel are in danger of being carried away by any delusions, and therefore it becomes us all so to dwell upon its precious teaching that our hearts may be "established with grace" and we may be guarded against the "divers and strange doctrines" that abound. Let

us then hear what Scripture teaches as to a sinner's being fitted for the presence of God.

When the Lord was dying on the Cross, there were two robbers crucified with Him—"on either side one." These robbers at first joined in reviling Him. But presently one of the two, taught by the Spirit of God, owned his own sinfulness, the justness of the sentence under which he suffered, and the perfect righteousness of the Holy Sufferer by his side. Then, turning to Him, he uttered the well-known prayer, "Lord, remember me, when Thou comest in Thy kingdom." Let us mark the Lord's answer to this man. Did He say, "Thy sins are forgiven, and when by some means thou art purified, thou shalt have a place in My kingdom"? How different was the

simple yet grand reply, "Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with Me in paradise"! The Lord knew that, before that robber expired, His own great sacrifice would be completed, by which He would perfect that repentant and believing suppliant, as well as all others who are separated to God by His will (Heb. x. 10, 14).

It may be said that this was a very unique and exceptional case. That it was unique is unquestioned; but that it was not exceptional as to the working of God's grace all Scripture bears witness.

The first Epistle to the Corinthians furnishes very striking testimony on this point. In chapter vi. the Apostle reminds the believers of what they once were, and of the great change that had been wrought. After naming those

who "shall not inherit the kingdom of God," he adds, "and such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." To be sanctified is to be separated from sin and the world to God, and to be justified is to be declared free from guilt in His heavenly court. That this is all that any sinner needs to fit him for heaven is conclusively proved by that word in Romans viii. which puts absolutely nothing between justification and glorification, "whom He justified, them He also glorified." The blood which washes away our sins does it so completely that it makes us fit for the presence of God.

This is further shown in the beautiful words of Coloss. i. 9–14. The apostle

Paul tells us that one effect of being filled with the knowledge of God's will is that we shall be "giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light," and then shows how God has done this: He "hath delivered us from the power [*or* authority] of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son; in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (Coloss. i. 9–14). The word rendered "made us meet" is very comprehensive; God has *fully qualified* us for the inheritance, giving us all we need to enable us to enter upon and enjoy it. This includes at least three things: (1) a title to it, (2) a fitness for it, and (3) a capacity to enjoy it. The Holy Spirit shows us

our title in the precious blood of Christ and our fitness in Christ Himself; He also imparts by regeneration, or new birth, a capacity for the enjoyment of God's presence and communion with Him. All this had been bestowed upon these Colossian Christians by the gospel which had come to them and was bringing forth fruit (*v.* 6); as the apostle further tells them, they were once alienated from God and enemies in their mind by wicked works, but they had been reconciled to God through the death of Christ, who would present them holy and unblameable and unreproveable in His sight, on the one condition that they continued in the faith of the gospel (*vv.* 21–23) and were not beguiled with the enticing words of man's philosophy and vain deceit.

It is thus clear from Holy Scripture that every one who receives Christ as presented to us in the gospel, and relies upon His atoning death for salvation, has the "forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified" (Acts xxvi. 18); he has freedom to draw near to God now (Heb. x.), and a fitness for the holy presence of God whenever called to depart. The apostle Paul puts nothing between being absent from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. v. 8, R.V.), nothing between departing and being with Christ (Phil. i. 23).

The only Scripture quoted to support the idea of a process of preparation after death is Phil. i. 6, as if the "good work" were that of salvation begun now to be carried on during all the time that elapses between death

and "the day of Jesus Christ"; whereas the context shows clearly that the good work here spoken of was their "fellowship in the gospel," and that "the day of Jesus Christ" is named as that in which it would be acknowledged. We can only further ask, Who that has any sense of what it is to be "at home with the Lord" could think it needful to pray that those who are there may have "refreshment, peace and light"? How could they lack these in His presence?

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