

## *Secret Prayer*

In my experience, secret prayer is the hardest grace for the believer to cultivate, and yet I know that it is the best barometer of the soul's condition. Preaching, writing or disputing is easy work compared to secret prayer. If ever I have written anything which placards my hypocrisy, what now follows is it. What is more, as I admit it, the previous chapter: 'Pride' rings in my ear. Nevertheless, I still go ahead and publish. Why? Because Berridge continues to issue challenge after challenge on this matter of private fellowship with God – at least to me. Reader, how about you?

On 3rd May 1773, Berridge wrote to John Thornton:

You judge exceedingly right to stand still and avoid disputings. They only gender strife, and stir up pride. A sweet behaviour, joined with secret prayer, will do more in this matter than a thousand eager disputations.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to Richard Woodgate, 21st April 1775, Berridge was blunt:

Elderly Christians are apt to grow lazy and lousy,<sup>2</sup> wise and foolish, and thus we bring many stripes on our back. More secret prayer and watchfulness would prevent a deal of physic.<sup>3</sup>

Writing to Samuel Lucas, a Congregational minister, on the 23rd October 1779, Berridge stated:

Much secret prayer will solemnize your heart, and make your [pastoral] visits savoury, as well as your sermons.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pibworth: *Letters* p192.

<sup>2</sup> 'Lousy' – sick or unwell?

<sup>3</sup> Pibworth: *Letters* p242.

<sup>4</sup> Pibworth: *Letters* p295.

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In a letter to John Thornton, 1st October 1784, Berridge wrote:

Controversy usually goes on briskly, but gospel work goes on heavily, at least amongst us. All decays begin in the closet [secret prayer]. No heart survives without much secret converse with God, and nothing will make amends for the want [lack] of it.

Berridge spoke of the benefit he received from secret prayer:

I can read God's word, or hear a sermon at times, and feel no life, but I never rise from secret prayer without some quickening. Even when I set about it with heaviness or reluctance, the Lord is pleased in mercy to meet me in it, and I find more sweet communion in secret than in social or congregational prayer.

It is far easier to preach and/or hear sermons than it is to spend time with God alone in private prayer. Indeed, doing the former without the latter is worse than useless:

Much preaching and hearing is among the Methodists, and plenty of ordinances [Berridge would have been thinking especially of the Lord's supper] is a great blessing, but if they do not bring us much upon our knees, they suckle the head without nourishing the heart. We shall never obtain the old Puritan spirit of holiness, till we obtain their spirit of prayer.<sup>5</sup>

What a warning against being a mere preacher or a sermon-taster!

Writing to John Thornton, 17th November 1784, Berridge declared:

What a mercy [it is that] you may daily seek and find Jesus on your knees.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pibworth: *Letters* p334.

<sup>6</sup> Pibworth: *Letters* p335. For much more from this precious letter, see the chapter: 'Christ Is All'.

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In another letter to John Thornton, 21st February 1788, Berridge expressed himself freely:

I begin to be weary of London; gossiping visitors weigh me down. Everton suits me best, where I can be alone, with the word of God for my companion, and leisure enough for musing and prayer. Never am I well but when at home with Jesus. May he draw me nearer, and keep me closer with him.<sup>7</sup>

Enough said? 'If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them' (John 13:17).

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<sup>7</sup> Pibworth: *Letters* p378.