

The Labour of Prayer: Lessons from Alexander Whyte

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Date: 17 March 2009

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like to begin by thanking the Synod for their kind invitation to present this lecture tonight. And I am, of course, very pleased to be here, and for reasons which you'll know, particularly pleased to be in this building and in this pulpit.

And I hope the Lord will bless our meeting together, that we may be enriched by it and better equipped to serve himself. Now, my theme, as Dr. Campbell mentioned, is the labor of prayer. And that's drawing lessons, especially from the life of a man called Alexander White. Some of you may be familiar with him, others probably not, and I'll say something about him just a little later on. But our theme is the labor of prayer. And I want to emphasize that that is the theme in its narrowness and particular focus. It is just the labor of prayer, not prayer generally. And you may leave saying, well, he didn't say this and he didn't say that about prayer, and that will be very true, because prayer itself is, of course, a vast subject, and you can approach it from many angles.

[1 : 16] And I just want to consider one aspect of it, and that is the aspect of labor connected with it. Something that's easily overlooked, perhaps a lesson we have never really properly learned.

But it's a vital one for your life of prayer and mine, and for the well-being of the church, the labor of prayer. And I suppose one reason it's often overlooked is because we're usually under the impression that prayer should somehow be easy, because it should somehow be natural.

And I suppose we can understand how prayer should be natural. There's a sense in which it is. We are born again, created in the image of God, and it's as natural in that sense to pray as it is for us as physical beings to breathe.

And sometimes prayer has been called the breath of the Christian. But it seems to follow from that in some people's minds that prayer should always be easy. And the more spiritual a person is, the easier that person finds it to pray.

And I wonder just how many people may be under that impression tonight, that the more spiritual a person is, the easier they find it to pray.

[2 : 36] In fact, perhaps you think that if prayer is somehow difficult, then it must be forced, it must in fact be false, and it is probably pharisaic.

And because some people find it difficult to pray, they believe that their prayers can't be of any use, because they were difficult, and there's a tendency pretty much, more or less, to give up on a regular, disciplined prayer life, at least in the way that you hoped one day to have it.

And instead of having that, something you once took as a given in your Christian life, now you pray in fits and in starts. And only, as it were, when the wind blows, because you think that only when the wind blows, does your prayer really have any validity at all.

Now, we'd have to say to that that the bottom line is this, that unless there is such a thing as a regular, methodical, disciplined, meaningful prayer life, built into your daily routine, there will be something severely lacking in your own Christian life, and lacking too, obviously, in your witness. It is doubtful, in a sense, if we really pray at all, as the Bible wants us to pray, and as God himself wants us to pray. Now, that may sound as though I'm saying too much, but believe me, I'm not.

[4 : 10] And once we look at it a little more closely, I hope we'll understand exactly what that means. I can't really emphasize how wrong it is to think that prayer should be easy.

How wrong it is to think that if we labor in our prayers, then there's something wrong with them. Let me say again, that if there's no labor in our prayer, then we are not really praying as the Bible wants us to do.

You want to pray with the boldness of Abraham, for example, when he interceded for Sodom. You want to pray with the earnestness of Hannah, when she asked for a child.

You'd like to pray in all these ways. You'd like to pray with the passion of Elijah, when he prayed for God's judgment on the one hand, and you'd like to pray with the passion of Elijah, when he asked for God's mercy too.

You'd like to pray with all the warmth which Paul had, when he interceded for others, brothers and sisters. You want all these things. But the fact of the matter is that neither you nor I will ever get that passion, the earnestness, the warmth, none of these things, unless we learn to work.

[5 : 22] Unless we labor in our prayers. It's through labor that you get there. And without labor, you never get there. And if you expect to have earnestness, passion, warmth, breadth, depth, and all these things without sheer hard work and toil, it will never be yours.

And it will never be mine. That's why the whole idea of laboring in prayer, traving in it, being fruitful in it, through sheer pain and hard work and discipline, is a supremely important thing when it comes to thinking about prayer at all.

And I think we can say that until we really learn this lesson, or perhaps relearn it, because perhaps you once knew it and have forgotten it, but until we learn it or relearn it, there is an element of the Christian life that will be beyond us, and will never rise to it.

There will be an element of power that we'll never possess, which God meant us to possess and is calling us to possess. We may have enough, as it were, to save ourselves, but not enough to really influence others.

We might enter into the kingdom ourselves, but we will never make the kingdom grow by the strength of our own prayers and the witness which follows from it. Our Lord said on one occasion to the disciples, when they asked, why were we impotent in casting out the devil out of this man?

[6 : 50] You gave us the power long ago to do that, and we did it, but we didn't do it now. And the Lord said, this kind cannot come out except by prayer and fasting. And you with your arguments about who is the greatest, you with your obsessions, as it were, on these trivial things, and your failure to live up to where I call you to, has now left you spiritually impotent.

This kind of evil can only be met by prayer and by fasting. The plain lesson for them, and the lesson for me and for you is this, that there's something we don't attain to unless we have a disciplined life of prayer.

Simple as that. But our forefathers knew it. And I suppose they, like every other generation, learned it. And we must learn it again.

Because surely if there is something lacking in our Christian lives, it is sustained, earnest, disciplined, private, secret prayer.

And that's not my judgment of all of you or myself. It is simply a confession that people will make, that they are not earnestly disciplined, secretly, in prayer with God.

[8 : 05] Why and how we resolve that, we'll see, God willing, in a moment. So we need to work on it. Now, the minute I say that, I realize that some people object to the whole idea of working at your prayer life.

or working in your prayer. But the Bible speaks frequently of working in every single part of our Christian life. Growing in grace involves what?

Giving all diligence, Peter says. Making your calling and election sure involves giving all diligence. Why shouldn't prayer, too, involve giving all diligence?

Why shouldn't it be something that we have to work at? Work out your own salvation and work out the life of prayer, too. Work in the secret place.

Work before God. Work with him. Just as you exercise bodily for the sake of your physical health, so you must exercise spiritually for the sake of your spiritual health.

[9 : 15] And sometimes people look at themselves and they say, I'm not fit. And I'm not well. And I need to do something in order to bring my body back to where it should be. So spiritually, it is right for the Lord's people sometimes to take a health check and to say, I am not fit.

And I am not well. And I need to exercise myself to godliness. And the place where that begins is in the training room, in the gymnasium. It is in the prayer room, in secret, just yourself and God.

No one else for this, but yourself and God alone. Now, I would like to look with you at what it means to labor and prayer in the company of Alexander White, taking some lessons from his writings and from his life.

Now, some of you may not know who Alexander White is. So let me just give a brief biography to begin with. Alexander White was born in 1836 in a place called Kirimure in Fortfershire. He was born an illegitimate child. It's worth remembering that too, simply because of how God mightily used this man. And he began life very poor.

[10 : 39] And his mother sacrificed a lot, as a lot of mothers did in those days, to bring up her child, to teach her child, to train him in the ways of God, and to educate him as best she could.

And he was a shoemaker's apprentice for some time. And I was mentioning to Dr. Campbell and Reverend MacDonald there that he won a bursary in God's providence in quite a strange way. A bursary was left for prospective university students, for anybody whose surname was White with a Y in the name. Believe it or not, bursaries are left for some strange reasons sometimes. But there was a bursary for someone called White with a Y in his name. And so he got that bursary. And he was able to go to King's College in Aberdeen. This was just prior to the 1859 revival. And Alexander White was touched by that. He began to preach. And people noticed when he began to preach that there was a particular reverence and power in his prayers as well as in his preaching right from the beginning.

[11 : 44] It was as a student there that he discovered Thomas Goodwin, who was always his favorite Puritan. He read them all the time. Goodwin was the head of Magdalene College in Oxford and a great Puritan writer.

And White fell in love with his writings and was powerfully influenced by the spirituality of them from that day. And he kept them close to him right until the point of death.

He went to the Free Church College, New College in Edinburgh. And then he began his ministry. He was for three years an assistant in Free St. John's in Glasgow. And then he was called in 1870, still as a young man, to Free St. George's Church in Edinburgh.

Now that was the most prominent Free Church pulpit in Scotland. I think we could safely say that. And its minister was the most prominent minister in Scotland at the time too, Robert Smith Candlish.

And White became his assistant, but only for three years, because Candlish died in 1873. The congregation immediately asked White to become their minister. And he had no idea when he went there that he was beginning a 46-year ministry in that church, which was powerfully used of God.

[13 : 00] He lived on until 1921. He had retired in 1918, 1916 from the ministry and 1918 from the principalship of the college.

So he had a long life. And interestingly, those two ministers covered nearly 90 years in the one pulpit. And what a highly favored congregation it was. And he's renowned for many things. Some of you may have come across his description of Bunyan's characters, which is supremely worth reading. There is also his exposition of the shorter catechism, which is very well worth reading too.

He also has studies of various biblical characters. Again, they are all well worth reading. But what took him to my attention was, well, first of all, he was an assistant to Candlish, someone I was particularly interested in.

But in God's providence, I came across this particular book at one time called Teach Us to Pray. And it was just a transcription of a series of sermons that Alexander White had preached in the late 1890s.

[14 : 06] and for two or three years he preached on the text Lord Teach Us to Pray. And he highlighted various aspects of prayer. Now, to myself, personally, the book was important then.

And because it was, it still is now. I wouldn't say it was the best book on prayer or the most useful ever written. There are thousands of books that are useful and good on prayer. But sometimes, you know, the Lord takes a thing and uses it for yourself at a particular time.

And one thing that struck me coming to Alexander White was the emphasis he laid on the sheer grind of prayer and the labor of it but the importance of laboring in it in order to attain to something in your Christian life and especially for ministers to attain to something in their spiritual life.

Now, largely in the free church this man has been forgotten simply because in the Union of 1900 he went into the Union. He wrestled over whether he should stay in what is now of course still the free church of Scotland or whether he should join the Union.

Temperamentally in many ways we could identify with him easily and he with us but for other considerations he went into that Union and that is perhaps why he has largely been forgotten.

[15 : 22] And I'm not an uncritical admirer of White. Let me say that before I move on from him. Not an uncritical admirer. He seemed for one thing to be blind to the real dangers of German rationalism and the higher critical movement.

Another thing later in his life his quest for an ever deepening spirituality somehow led him perhaps into relationships that we would consider a bit doubtful. And he seemed to forget and was one of the first to forget that you must never put the quest for experience somehow beyond the word of God or raise it above the word of God.

It must always be rooted in it. In that respect there was a kind of charismatic tendency creeping in and it's easily done. Whatever thirst or quest we have for a deeper life of prayer and a real living vibrant knowledge of God it must always be thoroughly grounded in God's word.

And in his very latter years there was something of an aberration there. Is that a reason not to study him? Not at all. Many a person doesn't live up to where they were before.

Solomon himself is he not an example of that? Did he not write supremely glorious maxims of wisdom which he deviated from later in his life?

[16 : 40] And just because a man doesn't live up to what he knows to be true doesn't mean that we shouldn't study the truth that he wrote. And still his books are powerful and useful and in that respect with discrimination and discernment I would encourage you to read them.

Now this man was certainly the best known preacher in his day in the late 19th and early 20th century. That's what he was and it's worth remembering that he attained to that by the grace of God.

Now this book was important for me and I must admit that it came to me at the beginning of my ministry. One thing Alexander White taught me then and I hope he's still teaching me now is that prayer was part of my work as a minister.

Now it's part of yours too as a Christian. I'll come to that in a second. But can I linger on this for a moment for the sake of my brethren too as well as myself. He reminded me that it was an important part a vital part of my work as a minister.

not a preparation for my work but a part of that work itself. And he laid great stress on what the Apostle said when they were choosing the first deacons.

[18 : 02] The Apostle said it isn't reasonable for us to administer tables to see to it that the widows are properly looked after. Choose out seven men from among yourselves who take the oversight of this business.

as for us we will give ourselves continually as the teachers of the church to prayer and to the word of God both as ends in themselves.

In other words White would say it's not a minister's duty to study preach teach and catechize and somehow use prayer as a means to that. But prayer must be elevated into being really part of that work itself so that nothing is achieved really through the preaching and the teaching and the studying unless it is married all the time to the work of prayer which bears its own fruit and brings its own reward.

A powerful lesson I hope for every minister of the gospel that prayer isn't a means to the work but it is part of the work itself.

An encouragement to weave it in to every aspect of it. Someone said once that it's not always the easiest place for a minister to pray in his own study because it is the place of work but that should be viewed differently.

[19 : 24] If it is the place of work let it also be the place of prayer. If this is the place where the congregational lists appear let it be the place where you pray through them. If it is the place where you discover that somebody's sick let it be the place where you bring that person before the Lord because the place of your work must by definition be the place of your prayer.

So an important lesson for the ministry but of course I've realized since that prayer is your work too. Your work. Not just something that helps to make you a better Christian but is actually part of your calling part of your great contribution to the success of the kingdom of God on this earth.

No we don't see that. We are often wrapped up in the poverty of what we asked for. We're wrapped up with the failure of our prayer and we don't understand its significance the part that it's meant to play in your life and in the life of the church itself.

And we need to really understand all of that just a little bit better. What exactly is prayer meant to be for us? Well if it's your work then I would say to you to work at it.

And the first thing that Alexander White would say to you in that connection is this. Whatever else you do find a place for it and find a time for it.

[20 : 54] Find a place for it and find a time for it. As Alexander White often used to say picking up the Lord's words get into your womb and shut your door.

Get into your room and shut your door. Now again you see there's an immediate objection. Someone can say to you look I don't need a room.

I don't need to shut my door. I pray everywhere and I pray all the time. Or at least if I don't pray everywhere and pray all the time I pray anywhere and I pray anytime.

Alexander White would say pray somewhere and sometime. That's what he would say to you and with all my heart I would urge the same thing upon you.

There's no point in setting spontaneous prayer against disciplined religious methodical prayer and lifting up spontaneous prayer as the high thing the real thing as though you're constantly moving in some kind of dream world and you have no need to set aside a room and to set aside a time.

[22 : 08] Well let me put it this way to you. Unless your prayer is methodical and disciplined it is not really spontaneous either.

Because what gives rise to a powerful spontaneous prayer is the undergirding of the religious regular methodical one. It's out of that and the fellowship forged in that crucible in a place and in a time that your spontaneous prayers mean something.

By spontaneous prayers I mean Lord help me or Lord bless that man or Lord give me grace in this situation. Emergency prayers to do with the circumstance to do with the time.

It can occur when you're out on a walk and you meet somebody or you see a situation and your prayer rises up to God. But what gives that prayer its power, what gives it its authority, what makes it particularly welcome to the ear of God is that you bother that day to really enter in meaningfully to the secret place.

That's what gives that kind of prayer life its power. Or else if that's not there, the spontaneous life of prayer is just delusional. It is somehow thinking that because we have little phrases here and there, we have a prayer life that really means something.

[23 : 28] No. The room, the place, the time means something important because that is where we isolate ourselves, that is where we exclude, we close out a world and we close ourselves in with our Father who is in secret or as some translate it in the secret place.

And it's vital that we learn the difference between these two things. When Jehoshaphat was in trouble on the battlefield and he said, Lord, save me, he wasn't meant to find a room and to shut a door, was he?

Of course not. But when the Lord says, when you pray, find a room and shut the door, he is drawing attention to this dimension of your spiritual life that gives strength, validity, power and unction to every spontaneous prayer you will ever utter.

Is it in your life? I'm sure you thought once it would be and it would be central there. But honestly, ask yourself, never mind telling me or me telling you, but just ask yourself before God, is it there? Is my secret place there? And what does it mean? And what does it avail? Now a place is important, very, very important, and we should labor to find a place and a time.

[24 : 50] Alexander White said that we travel fastest to our destination when we are in secret. We travel fastest to our destination when we are in secret.

What he meant by that is this, it's our secret sins that hasten us on to hell, and it is our secret prayers that hasten us on to heaven. You make the quickest strides to wherever you are going when you are on your own.

Now there's powerful truth in that, and I'm sure most of you have understood it, and me too. You make the greatest strides to your destination when you are indeed on your own.

So beware of substituting a spontaneous series of prayers for this kind of prayer. Beware too, especially men and ministers, of substituting public prayer for private prayer.

White would never do that. He said public prayer is important, but he says there's something there that carries you on, on its own. There's a duty involved, there's an expectation, but he said your real life is on your own with God.

[26 : 02] Now a place, he would say sanctify a place. Whatever you do, put a place apart. Look, if you have work, then you've got a place of work. You know that there's a place that you identify with your work.

Well, if your work is prayer, identify your prayer with a place. It doesn't mean you confine your prayer to that place, but identify a certain place with your prayer.

It's your place of work. He would say, be on your own, a place where you can be apart, and shut your door. He says when you shut your door, he says, that's a very vivid way of saying I am on my own.

There are times in my own study, as I'm sure most ministers do, I have to lock the door. There are times children can come in, but there are times children cannot come in. And there are times the door is locked, and it's my way of saying, leave me alone.

I must be left alone. There's a pressing business in here that's got to be done, and only an absolutely dire emergency can alter that situation. My door's locked.

[27 : 08] And White would say that must be the way it is with our prayers. We shut our door, he says, when we wish to be alone, when we have some special work to do that must be done, some piece of work that has been put off and postponed.

We say to our household, I must have some time to myself today. Tell anyone who asks for me that I am so occupied that my time isn't even my own. Tell them to leave their message or to write to me. Tell them that I hope to be free and at their service any time tomorrow. But for now I am on my own. Just as you do every day in your household and business life, do it in your religious life.

Fix on times and set places apart. The Bible doesn't say how often or how long. God leaves all that to each man to find out for himself.

But he says, when you have business on hand with heaven, when the concerns of another life and another world are pressing you hard, set about the things of God in a resolved business like way and shut your door.

[28 : 13] Shut yourself in to God's door with five children. But yet I know of that woman who wrapped a shawl around her head at a certain point in the day and her children knew that her mother, their mother was in a secret place.

That's the only place she could find. But she made it. She just wrapped the shawl around and she was on her own with God. Even she made the effort to be there.

What about the Lord himself? Have you ever wondered about his time with God? Of course there was an element in which it was especially through of him that he moved in the world of prayer all the time.

Of course there was. But did that mean that he did not as a man set apart a special time? He did. How much more should we? But how easy was it in the house? Was his house big?

No. Was the family poor? Yes. How many people were in that small house in Nazareth? At least nine. Why? Because he had four brothers and at least two sisters.

[29 : 15] And he had a mother. And he had a man who was called his father. And it wasn't easy in that house to set yourself apart. Maybe he went outside. Maybe he found a secret place under the stars.

Maybe he found it out on the hills. Your mothers and your fathers and your grandmothers and grandfathers had their hillocks. They had the clefts of the rocks. And you know these places witness to ourselves.

Do they not? These places will rise up one day against ourselves in judgment and said, your fathers came here. And your mothers came here. And they prayed.

And they stayed an hour. But you had bedrooms. Bedrooms that were your own. You weren't even sharing them with anybody else. Isn't it strange that the easier things become to do, the less well we do them?

Isn't it strange that that's the way it should be? When these people were hard pushed to find a secret place, they found it. It's not hard for us to find a place, but we just don't use it.

[30 : 14] That is the problem. Or at least it's one of the problems. But the fact is that we need this place. And when you find it, wherever it is, maybe it's still outside, maybe it is your bedroom or wherever, you make that place your own.

Don't be a slave to it, but make it a slave to you. Commandeer it. Make it yours. For a time, make it your space. Make it the place where you endeavor.

From now on, as God keeps you providentially where you are, this place will be the place where I take to do with God as I haven't done for five, ten, or twenty years. And that's the beauty of Christianity.

It's full of new beginnings. It's full of new starts. I don't want you here today saying, well, I've been following for twenty five years, and I fear that for twenty of them I haven't really done this. Right, get on with it then. Tonight's a new start, and supposing you've only got five years left in this world, you can't believe what you can ascend to in five years if you really begin to make a work of your prayer, and to make prayer your work.

[31 : 17] It will make a huge difference to yourself. Huge difference to your family, to your congregation, everything, because God is waiting to meet you there. Waiting to meet you there, no doubt about that.

A willing effort will find out very willing God, eager to reward that effort, and to honor it, because he who sees in secret shall reward you, and he'll reward you openly. victory. So, make sure you sanctify your place of work. Find a place and set it apart. And then again, White would say, for any favor, whatever you do, make sure you sanctify a time, a decent time for God.

Now, time's your most precious commodity, and mine, and it's something we easily let slip through our fingers. Easily. The Bible tells us to redeem it, and we're not very good at that. And for different reasons, the hour of prayer is sometimes the hardest to redeem. But the Bible tells us to redeem it. Set aside some time to pray.

[32 : 25] How much? Well, maybe we could begin by asking how often? How often? Well, the Bible doesn't give us an express command. But it does give us guidelines.

The psalmist speaks of praying three times a day. More than once he refers to that. He refers to morning and evening, praying before God. There's one psalm that speaks of praying seven times a day.

Daniel certainly prayed three times a day, when he put himself in a deliberate posture, in a deliberate place, and he resolved to meet with his God.

God. Now, even if we're given no express command, a guideline is a guideline, only if you take it as a real guideline. You can't say, oh, these are just guidelines, and then just proceed to ignore the guidelines.

The guidelines are there. Surely there must be at least once a day, by any interpretation and understanding of the Bible, at least once a day, when you come to a place and you set yourself apart before God.

[33 : 29] But for how long? Well, again, we're not told. Christ said once to the disciples, could you not watch with me for one hour, he said, surprised that they couldn't.

Surprised that they couldn't sustain a time of prayer for one hour. There was a reason they couldn't. It's probably the reason many of ourselves can't. But what he said, could you not watch with me one hour?

White says, whatever time you give, he says, you make sure it's meaningful and that there's plenty of it. If you can't manage an hour, cut it to 30, he says.

Cut it to 15. But, he says, if you use your 15, you'll begin to think it's not enough. If you'll use your 30, you'll begin to think that's not enough.

And when you're finished with that, he says, an hour will seem like nothing. Once you discover what the secret place really has to give. Now, White says this with respect to time in prayer and what we should really give it.

[34 : 35] He puts it like this. We need time to prepare our hearts to see God. It takes us a long and a retired and an uninterrupted time to get our minds and hearts into the true frame of prayer and for the presence of God.

That's what makes the night time so suitable for most of us for sacred reading, devout meditation, and for secret prayer. At night, our time so roan. Our day work is done, our door is now shut. No one will intrude or interfere at this time of night. And as life goes on, we come to discover, now listen to this, listen to what he says. As life goes on, we come to discover that time, pure time, is as indispensable and as important an element in all through prayer as repentance, faith, and reformation itself.

Indeed, he says, without a plentiful allowance of time, no one has ever attained to a real life of prayer at all. That's what he said.

That's what he discovered. He needed time for lots of things in connection with prayer that God willing, we'll see in a moment.

[35 : 51] Now, you may say again, look, okay, I may have the space, but I really don't have the time. Our forefathers had better time than we do.

I honestly don't have time. Well, let me say to you that you change your thinking on that right now. If you think you don't have time, what that means is that you need to plan your life better, or you need to exercise self-denial.

Let me look at both these. First of all, planning, better planning. Look at the rest of your work. You've got a day job. Is it haphazard? Do you turn up when you want? Or do you have to make sure that you get it done and you give the time to it that needs to be done?

It's work. Well, so is this. Your prayer is work too, so it must be planned and methodical. The other thing is this. Again, to go back to bodily health, if you discover that you're not well, that you've been inert and inactive, you discover you have to move, you have to walk.

You may even need to take out a gym membership or whatever or join a walking club or who knows what it is. And you know that you've got to build that into your life and you say to yourself, right, from now on I can't leave exercise to something that I hope I have the time to do.

[37 : 06] What I need to do from now on is I put the gym in there at this time, you see, and I go to it and I put it into my diary and there it is. It stares me in the face. Or the evening walk, well, come nine o'clock, there am I, I'm going on my evening walk.

It's not something I'll do if I have the time. My health is getting so bad that I will put it into my diary as a thing that must be done. Now, do you see the difference?

This is you looking at your physical body and saying, I'm not well and I need to take it in hand and make it a priority. Now, your body dies and disappears, decays, corrodes, but your spirit is a different matter altogether.

And if you're sick, if your children are sick, and if you're not what you should be before God and your children aren't where you dreamt they would be and hoped they would be and once prayed they would be, is it not time to put prayer into your diary as something fixed and immovable?

Is it not time to stop saying, well, if I have time, I'll give it? No. Put it in as a fixed thing that's got to be done to make you well, to make your children holy, to make your congregation better, to keep your minister sustained, your eldership functioning.

[38 : 18] Put it in there and let nothing but a dire emergency move it out of it. Put it in. Plan it. Give it its legitimate place.

But then again, maybe the problem is a lack of self-denial. You haven't got time because, well, because what? And me too.

Because what? White said this, anyone who has time for leisure has time for prayer. Can you quibble with that? Can you possibly quibble with that?

That anyone who has time for leisure has time for prayer. Very definitely so. White referred to the Greek athletes. Said they took decisions, conscious decisions, that they weren't going to be hanging around the streets with the other young men and the young women.

They weren't going to be wasting their time during the day and they weren't going to be drinking in taverns during the night. They weren't going to eat themselves gluttonous, they weren't going to drink themselves drunken.

[39 : 24] They were going to discipline themselves and they were going to live a life different and a life that's apart. That's Greek athletes. Where, White says, was the reward? The reward was in the arena.

The reward was in the crown, in the garland, in the wreaths. White says, you must be the same. Is it not true that our enemy isn't just the sin that so easily besets us, but the weights that drag us down? The weights that drag us down that you've got to get rid of. What is it that occupies tonight the place that an hour of prayer could have in your life? Believe me, there's something else.

There's a newspaper, there's a television program. I'm not saying all these things are wrong. All I'm saying is that they're eating up your prayer life. Perhaps they've obliterated out of your diary altogether.

And it's time in the name of God and for the sake of his kingdom to put it back in. This country isn't a Christian country, is it, anymore? No, it's not. We have missionaries in countries that are far more Christian than our own.

[40 : 29] This isn't a day for half-hearted Christianity. It isn't a day to say we better relax now. And if we relax it will impress the world. This is a day to set yourself apart.

This is the time to go into a secret place, to cut off your weights, and to be more before God than you ever have been. That's what the world needs. That's your calling, and that's mine. And if an athlete can do it for the sake of an earthly crown, surely in the name of the Lord, you can do it for the reward that such a thing brings in your own life, in your family, in your congregation, for your minister, for your elders, for the health of a nation. Believe it, believe it, that your time woven into your life as a meaningful extension of time with God will fundamentally change you, and it will change those around you. And those who practice it will testify to that. How long? Must it be an hour? Well, listen to what White said. Try thirty minutes. Try fifteen, and you'll discover that they're not enough. [41 : 35] Ministers, myself, with you, Bonar at his induction, and I pass, his church now turned into flats, but Bonar at his induction gave a resolution for three hours of prayer and meditation every day.

Similarly, Moody Stewart and McChain, the same generation of ministers. Chalmers Burns said, looking back on his early years of ministry, my greatest mistake is that my times in the secret place were too few and too short.

That was his assessment, how many of us can identify. My greatest mistake in my earliest years in my ministry that my times in my secret place were too few and too short.

I'll give some helps for that in a minute, but let me just remind you that these ministers are not that far out of touch. It's quite possible for you to speak to someone today who was a hearer of Alexander White's.

It is just about possible. The man died in 1921, but that puts him within touching distance. You can pass free St. George's today after such outstanding ministries, and without being judgmental in a bad kind of way, that gospel has disappeared from there.

[42 : 55] Something altogether that has its place now, something altogether different. And it's a different nation, but if his generation needed that kind of ministry, then surely our generation needs the same thing from ourselves.

That's of us ministers and elders, much more consecrated time in prayer. Now you'll discover, and let me say this too, you'll discover that a large part of your labor is getting in there in the first place. There's something about a time and a place when you fence it off that makes it sometimes difficult to get into it. It's hard to actually get there, to get into the place in the first place.

Just like a gym again, you see, you can take out your membership and you can have your resolution and you've got your card and you've got your clothes or whatever, but you've still got to get out and get into it. And you'll find that that's the hard part.

The hard part is on the particular hour that you've set aside, going to the place. You imagine the sweat and the difficulty and the hardship, and despite the resolutions, you don't go.

[44 : 00] There is an equivalent in the spiritual realm. A barrier sometimes comes in once you've set aside the time and you've set aside the place. The hardest hour to redeem, you'll sometimes find, is the hour of prayer.

The hardest place to go to is the place where you know that you are going to call upon God in prayer. Why should that be? Well, for one thing, don't forget that there is someone else looking at you besides God.

God, once the devil sees this pattern established, he wants to break it. You put a fence around a place and you put a fence around a time, but so has the devil. From now on, he marks out that room and he marks out that time.

And he'll see to it that something else comes in your way. He'll see to it that all kinds of reasons present themselves. And he'll make all kinds of things so supremely attractive. At that particular point in time, there's a book that you must read.

There's a magazine that's been lying there on the table almost by design in front of you at that point in time. Something like the remote control. Everything that's easier than going to pray.

[45 : 04] The devil has an interest in distracting and discouraging you. Even your sins wash over you at that point. And you're even frightened to go to pray just because of your own sins.

Now, you know what Alexander White would say? The first thing he would say is that there's no shortcut to this, friends. Make sure you're not lazy. and make sure that laziness doesn't get the better of you.

If there was one sin that White was opposed to, it was laziness. That may surprise us, but he always spoke against it. He said this, I would drum every lazy minister out of his charge, and I would drum every lazy student out of the college.

That's what he said. He said, I can almost take anything except sheer laziness. And he warned against that with respect to prayer.

We have plenty of time, he says, for all our work, and we have plenty of time for prayer. Can we, he says, look at one another? And he's talking here of ministers in particular, but let's take it to ourselves.

[46 : 09] Can we seriously look in one another's faces and say that we don't have the time? No, he says. It's a lack of intention. It's a lack of determination. It's a lack of energy.

It's a lack of method. It's a lack of conscience and a lack of sheer heart. He says, it's a lack of everything and anything but time. How true that is.

It's never really a lack of time at all. Watch that laziness doesn't keep you back. Again, to take the ordinary physical analogy, you've just got to get out and go on your walk.

You've got to get out and go to the gym and that's just that. And if we're lazy, what hope is there anyway for us with respect to entering the kingdom of heaven? You wicked and slothful servant, said the Lord.

Slothful he was. He took his talent and he buried it in the ground and he expected to give it back to the Lord with no interest, nothing at all. You slothful servant.

[47 : 09] And do we suppose that a sheer lack of industry and effort is somehow compatible with our hopes and aspirations for entering the kingdom of heaven? Do we really think so?

That we can be so utterly spiritually slothful and expect to enter there, giving every diligence, see to a time and see to a place of prayer.

But White said this too, don't let discouragement keep you back either. Sure you know what that's like. me, start again, I've tried before and I've failed and have constantly failed and my sins anyway keep me back from praying too much.

You ever felt that? White said let no sense of sin or any sense of failure keep you from coming before God. Prayer is the only way you'll ever amend your life.

You will never amend it without prayer. And that is the truth. Whatever's wrong, don't let that keep you back from God. At the end of the day this is a throne of grace and God wants you to come to it.

[48 : 18] And if you come to it meaningfully like that you'll find him a gracious God. You ask him to deal with your sin and he'll start dealing with your sin because that's the kind of God he is.

Merciful, compassionate, slow to wrath, plentiful in mercy. And be encouraged in that if you do go in in faith you'll find yourself working.

That's the transformation that the secret place brings. You begin to work in your Christian life. You'll begin to save yourself again. You'll begin to grow. You'll begin to do something for your soul.

You'll suddenly begin to be powerful. Your presence will carry a weight. Your witness will carry an authority. You will find that the Lord is with you just as you're with him.

You will find too that you'll begin to save others. As a minister again you won't just begin to save yourself but you'll begin to save those who hear you. As a Christian man or woman your family will rise up and call you blessed because you started to pray before God for a time a day and it made a difference to you and so it made a difference to them.

[49 : 27] We've lost our power brothers and sisters. We've lost our power because we've lost the presence of God cultivated in a place in secret at a certain set time.

So labor to go in and once you're in there ask God to help you and he most certainly will help you. And can I just take up the rest of the time by thinking about the various areas in your prayer in which you must labor.

It was a work to get in and it's a work to begin. The first thing you labor for is a quiet heart which comes from God's presence. And how does that come?

Well the key to that in the secret place is communication, dialogue, not monologue. The key to it lies just there. You expect to meet someone there and you expect to be aware that you're meeting him and do him the honor of allowing him to speak first.

You will find that sometimes when you don't know what to ask for, when you can't even pray. You can only groan at your failure even to groan. The best thing you can do is say, Lord will you not speak to me so that I can speak to you.

[50 : 48] Pick up the book, open it, read a psalm, recite a promise. Ask God to meet with you through that. White said that the spirit travels quickest in his own chariot, which is the word of God.

That's the chariot he likes to travel in. And if you come into this room and you feel he's a million miles away, then ask him to come in his own chariot. Take the word and read it.

White said, don't even be stuck to forms. Stand up, he said. Pace the room. Ask God to come in.

Look up at the stars, he said, and think what is man that you are mindful of him.

And then come back to your posture. Look at a book, remember who gave it to you. Start thanking God for the person who gave you the book or the gift or whatever. He says, do anything, anything to arouse your mind, to bring your heart into the presence of God, to enable God, as it were, reverently speaking, to come before yourself.

Take his word and let it speak. And I will vouch for yourself that that is the best way to bring yourself into a good spirit. Let God speak first. It's a good thing to do anyway. to let God speak before we speak ourselves.

[52 : 04] So labor to find him. Labor for a quiet heart in his own presence. The next thing you've got to labor in is confession. Take time to do that. Now let me urge this on you and on me.

It's one thing to say, oh forgive my sins. I'm not saying we don't mean it. All I'm saying is that that's not enough. A philosopher will tell you that your knowledge of the general can only come through a knowledge of the particular.

And you will never carry a real consciousness of your sin and your need unless you particularize these things before God. You will never really know what you are as a sinner unless you name them before the Lord in your secret place.

At night time when you go in as White says when you're on your own, your time's your own, your room's your own, you've shut the door, you've shut people out and shut yourself in. Think back and say, what did I do today that was not right?

What did I do today that was not good? How did I fail God today? How did I fail my children today? How did I fail my mother today? How did I sin against my father today?

[53 : 15] Think about these things. Name them and bring them before God. Why? Because unless your confession is linked to your sanctification all it becomes is a cheap ticket to heaven.

Is it not? We always link your confession with our justification. We name our sins simply because we want them forgiven. But a true prayer life isn't just about justification, is it?

A true prayer life is about growing. It's about resolving your difficulties. It's about growing into the image of Christ. You confess your sins not just because you want forgiveness for them but because you want to identify them and you want help to put them right.

Lord, show me where I failed my children, where I failed my mother and my father, where I failed the church today, where I failed the congregation. Show me and teach me and give me the grace and the wisdom, the knowledge to put these things right.

Reflection and confession. It's a sore thing to do it, especially when you find the same things again and again. There's no shortcut there. There's no gain without pain in these things.

[54 : 27] Confess our sins. Itemize them. You put a general blanket before God, you'll never walk away with a real consciousness of what you are at all. Not at all.

You'll only know the truth of your sinfulness by identifying particular sins. Name it. Shame it. To your own shame, but to your own healing too. After all, a true Christian doesn't just want forgiveness, he wants restoration.

Restoration. Growth being put right. The same is true with our thanksgiving. Alexander White said, is the secret place not the place to really learn thankfulness?

He would also say this, do with your thanks what you do with your sins. Be particular. Look back and reflect and thank God for the things that you have.

If you're a minister, if there's a letter in your study from someone who was blessed by what you said, take that person and that letter and thank God for it, specifically and deliberately.

[55 : 33] If there is a word of encouragement spoken, thank God specifically and deliberately, methodically, for that particular thing. Whatever kindness you've received, thank God for it.

Thank him for your clothing. Thank him for your house. Thank him for your family. Pray over things particularly. Thank you for this child that is giving me grief at the moment but is your child to me.

You teach me about this child, what this child really needs and how I am to handle this child. It's not even enough to name, identify, ask the Lord to show what must be done.

You see the generalities don't do it. They don't cut it for ourselves or for anyone else. In all things give thanks and give thanks for the hard things that are testing you and ask God to use them in order to be a means of blessing.

Just as your sense of sin comes through itemization so does your sense of thanksgiving. We must itemize and give thanks to God for particular things. These things take time, time, time.

[56 : 40] Give the time. Use the time and give it to God. And then again there's our labor in intercession. Christ said in the garden, for their sakes I sanctify myself.

I set myself apart for their sakes. White has a very powerful sermon on that. Sanctifying yourself for someone else's sake. Again the first application he says is to a minister.

Sanctifying himself in intercession for the sake of somebody else. Setting yourself apart. Is that not what sanctification is? Apart. in your sacred place for somebody else.

For your congregation. He says this with respect to a minister. I'll say it more generally in a moment. He alone deserves to be called a minister of Christ and a true minister of his church who on the day of his ordination looks round on his people and says for their sakes I am now sanctifying myself.

And more and more he says it with every returning Sabbath morning. For their sakes sake I dedicate and devote myself. For their sakes I will keep myself at peace with God.

[57 : 55] For their sakes I will practice habitually the presence of God. For their sakes I seek more and more to please God. For them to please him and to please them. And what an incomparable sanctification that is for a minister and what a shipwreck for any minister to miss it.

Sanctifying himself for the sake of his people. people. But you know it's true of all of us that we need to remember the people that God lays on our heart to pray for.

Now let me say something about that. When it comes to what to pray for who to pray for be sensitive to God's providence. Prayer lists can sometimes be like junk mail in one respect.

You can get them from everywhere and people can give you prayer lists as long as your arm for every missionary cause in every situation in the world. It can't be done friends. Suppose you give 24 hours a day where it can't be done.

Be sensitive first to your providence always the things that God has most definitely laid on your heart. Your family are yours and let them always have a place in your intercession. Your own congregation is your particular family.

[59 : 03] Some of them will be closer to you geographically and perhaps even spiritually. Let them always have a place in your intercession. Your minister is yours. Let him have a place there. Your office payers are yours.

Let them be there. With respect to other things in this vast wide world, take an interest in it but be sensitive to what God just lays as a burden on your heart. And the more you give time and the more you grow, the more you will detect his voice in these things.

And the more you will understand, well this is something I'm giving you. This is something I want you to pray through and I want you to pray for. And once you have that intercessory ministry, see it through.

See it through until you get an answer, until God says, enough, leave it be, I am responding or even moving it to someone else.

Who knows? But see it through until God answers it for you. Labor at it and don't leave it off. Now listen to what Alexander White says about this.

[60 : 02] He's confessing a sin here. And listen to what he says. There's a man in this life, he said, that I had neglected to pray for for a long time past when I should have.

Days and weeks, and I forgot to mention his name, I used to sanctify myself for his sake in the secret place. But, said Daley White, said White, daily self denial is uphill work with me.

I'm glad he said that. It's uphill work with me too. And I'm sure it will be with you. But we've got to have a go at it. Daily self denial is uphill work with me. And I had insensibly slipped out of sanctifying myself for this man.

But in God's providence a letter came into my hands last week. I can't tell you what was in that letter, but the postmark made my heart stand still.

And as I opened the letter and I read it, shall I tell you what I felt? I felt as if I had murdered my friend. I felt as if he had been drowned while all the time I had refused to throw him the rope that was in my hand.

[61 : 12] I felt his blood burning like vitriol on my soul. A voice cried after me that day when I walked on the street and wouldn't even be silent in my sleep saying, Thou art the man, thou art the man.

And I could get no rest until I had resolved and begun again to sanctify myself again to fervent prayer for his sake.

To deny myself, to watch to prayer, and to take that man's name night and day back to my God. And that's what I mean. Time to intercede.

Interceding until you see it through. That takes time. Intelligence, wisdom, imagination. It takes a whole host of things that deserve a study on their own, but labor in your intercession.

The last thing I'll say is this. What reward is there for doing these things? Well, that should really be self-evident. The first reward is our own spiritual growth.

[62 : 21] Our Father who sees us in the secret place will reward us, and he'll reward us openly. And the first thing we'll discover is that prayer becomes a means of grace again. We call it that all the time.

But for that expression to have any meaning, it must really mean that it somehow equips and strengthens us. It makes us grow. It's a channel of blessing. Since when have you been conscious that your own prayers were a means of fortification to yourself?

A means of genuine forging into the image and likeness of the Savior? That's what it's meant to be. Through the secret place, the time and the place fenced off for God, we grow into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Henry Martin said something very interesting. Too much sermon preparation has cut off my prayer time, he said. What a confession that was. Too much sermon preparation has cut off my prayer time and I feel a strangeness between me and my God.

That's a man who knew what it was to be close to God and hence knew what it was to be away from him. What came in between him and God? Sermon preparation. Strange, but true indeed.

[63 : 34] George Muller said that for a good three or four days he had really forgotten to give the proper place to prayer and he said I certainly began to feel irritable.

That's what he became aware of. A spirit of irritability. And he knew what the root of it was. And he went back and he put it right. Alexander White said that prolonged prayer with God is the only source of true humility in the Christian life.

Bend down daily, he said, before God. Stoop before the infinite. Call him his names. Give him his attributes. Infinite, eternal, unchangeable. Marvel at him, he says.

And that is the only source of true humility for your Christian life. And as well as spiritual growth in all these areas and others, you'll discover answers again to your prayers.

Answers to our prayers. Now some of them may certainly take a long time, but we'll have the confidence that these answers will come. I frequently made reference to Muller, who recorded in his diary the conversion of someone for whom he had prayed for 22 years, unceasingly.

[64 : 44] He was also praying for a certain spiritual blessing in a certain spiritual place for 29 years, and when it came, he gave God thanks for 29 years, 29 years, and we're frustrated when three months fails to bring about the precise thing that we ask for.

But you see, he kept at it. He said this, when you begin, he said, labor at it and continue at it until God answers it, until God answers it.

You ask and you receive not because you ask and miss. And if exercise unto godliness is required, then surely prayer is the main vehicle towards that godliness in ourselves and the answers that are open.

Our Father will reward us openly. There will be change, and that's the thing, you see, there will be change. Prove me now, God says. I'll begin to change you, and through you I'll begin to change others.

And I'd like you and myself, if we haven't begun, to begin at once. When you go home tonight, I would almost say, although I wouldn't say, but I would almost say, pick up your diary before you even pick up your Bible.

[66 : 01] Pick up your diary and put it in there. Resolve before God that this is not something you'll do if you have time anymore. You're going to do it as your daily work before God.

Prove me now, and you'll discover that the Lord is real. You know, they said of Alexander White, even when he began as a Christian, and when he began to preach, they said that his prayers were

distinguished because of their reverence.

He was never flippant, and he hated flippancy above all things in prayer. His prayers were relevant and fresh. And people attributed this freshness to praying in private.

Because he never used tired, repetitious phrases in private. And we don't anyway. When we pray in private, we really pray. And that has to break out sometime in the public.

And surely if our prayers are fresh and real in private, they are bound to be fresh in public. And his hearers in Fries and George said that not only was every sermon a volcano, but every prayer was a revelation.

[67 : 10] White himself said that he often felt like leaving the church when Candlish had finished his morning prayer. But others felt like leaving when White had finished his prayer. One person came to him and said, well, you sound as though you just came out of the audience chamber of the king.

And White said, well, that's because I did. I did. I just came out of the audience chamber of the king. But his final message for me and for you is this, and I want you to take this to heart.

I'll read it to you. Let no distaste or aversion for the duty of the secret place take you away from it.

Let no lack of practice in it or no difficulty in it make you despair about it or give up in it.

Let no sin frighten you from the throne of grace. Begin tonight and on no account give it up.

Whatever else you do, he said, or don't do, in God's name I beseech you to pray.

Begin the work and you will never regret it. May that be to me and to you. Let us pray.

[68 : 28] Lord, our God, we are thankful that it is written in the Bible that your disciples asked to be taught to pray. And we are thankful too that you began to teach them.

And we realize that they learned and that they grew. And we have a need to learn and to grow also. Teach us what to ask. Help us to ask with further and with diligence.

Give us the perseverance of the man who wanted three loaves of bread, not for himself but for his friend. Give us that shamelessness that will continue knocking even when other people wonder at us.

Give us that reluctance and refusal to let go of a Lord whom we know is really determined to give.

We can give good gifts to our own children but how much more will you give the Holy Spirit to those who ask you for it.

And we ask that you would teach yourselves to pray that we may grow, that your church may be blessed and that a world may be saved.

[69 : 35] In Christ's name, Amen.