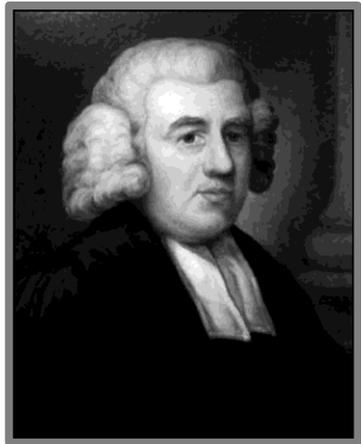


Sermon: Brethren, Pray for Us (revised)

(I Thess. 5:25)

John Newton*

** For some time Linda Leggett has been transcribing a collection of previously unpublished Newton notebooks, now housed in the Buckinghamshire County Archives in the Aylesbury Record Office in England. At the time she and her husband, Dr. Donald Leggett, encountered these, they were part of a collection at the Cowper-Newton Museum, in Olney, Bucks, where Newton had a curacy from 1764 to 1780. This transcription has only minor editing and is included for three reasons. First, interest in Newton appears strong at the moment in relation to the interest in William Wilberforce. Next, it is good to work through manuscripts of Newton not found in his published works, as more insights about him and his ministry are thus gained. Finally, the text is a great reminder to be praying people for those who are pastors. Let us be a people who respond to this exercise of Christian piety.*



Many thanks to Linda Leggett for sharing this transcription with our readers.

The apostle, though eminent in grace and experience, often entreats the prayer of the Lord's people. His dependence was upon the Lord Himself, but he knew that He who has promised to do great things has said and will be enquired of to do them. And therefore success should be expected in proportion as prayer is engaged. Succeeding ministers then have good reason to make the same request. If you pray for us you will strengthen our hands and thereby draw down blessing on yourselves.

This entreaty can only be effectually complied with by those whose hearts are in some measure alive and earnest for the Gospel cause.

To pray for ministers, the people must be able:

- 1) *To love them*, principally and chiefly as His ministers. If they have a just sense of the importance of the gospel message, they will love and pray for the messengers. This kindness they owe to them all.

Stated ministers, if they really value their peoples' prayers, will endeavour to deserve a personal and peculiar affection. Next to the support and comfort they receive immediately from the Lord, they find their chief consolation in the love of their people, and the most interesting proof they can give of this is their prayers.

There are those who will sometimes plead, dispute and almost fight for their minister, and labour to set him above others; but they who strive most earnestly in prayer for them are the best friends.

- 2) *To pity them*. Here there is a difference between us. We know most of your exercises, because we share them in common with you. However, you are not the proper judges of ours. You do not stand in our place. We must tell you what we feel to engage your pity, but we can never tell you all. I need your prayers, and to engage them I am desirous at this time to open my mind a little to you, upon the subject of our trials.

As for myself, if I had only to get through an hour in the pulpit, though I should prize your love and your prayers, I should have no very strong claim to your compassion. My outward trials are neither many nor heavy, considering the usual lot of human life. But preaching is not all, and even in preaching, if the Lord has given us a love to our work and our hearers, we often have very painful feelings, even when we seem to speak with liberty.

Had we this desirable liberty always and nothing painful mixed with it, we should soon forget ourselves. This the Lord knows, and finds ways, which though necessary and often sharp, to make us remember what we are. And though we are supported for public service and some persons may be ready to think we had happy lives, we could (at least I could) often address you in the words of Job: Have pity upon me, O my friends, for the hand of God has touched me. Thus,

- a. *We are tried in private*. I should be happy indeed if I always felt the comfort of those truths which I trust comfort many of you at times when I set them before you here. But if any of you

know what it is to groan under the power of unbelief and indwelling sin, deadness in prayer (and even unwillingness to pray at all!), coldness and confusion in reading the Scripture and the like, be assured that speaking with some earnestness and apparent pleasure in public does by no means secure us from such groanings. One of my greatest trials has been the difference between what I may seem to be in public and what I often feel myself to be when alone, which has made me often ready to compare myself to a player on a stage, who derives much of his spirit and exertion from a view of the audience and is quite a different person behind the scenes.

- b. *We are tried in the pulpit.* By a consciousness of the weakness and unskillfulness of our best attempts, by the evils that beset us in our solemn services, by a conviction of how far we fall short ourselves of what we propose to you and sometimes by a straitness and dryness of spirit when we must speak, though we know not what we can say. If private Christians are not disposed to speak, they may keep silence; but ministers are like the post: when the hour arrives they must set out, whatever disadvantages attend the journey.
- c. *We are, we must be, painfully tried by the cases of our hearers,*
 - i. With respect to the congregation at large. I must have a heart like a stone, if I could look seriously round this congregation without being affected; to see so many who are stumbling in the broad daylight, still living under the power of sin after long enjoying the singular advantages with which the Lord has favoured this town; to see them from week to week, from year to year, still careless and hardening under the means of grace. If I were sure I were clear of responsibility for you, still I should mourn over you. But often I shrink at the thought, lest I should be unfaithful. I feel conscious of not being earnest, importunate and pressing enough, though I seem not to know how to be more so.
 - ii. But though I am a debtor to all and bear a love to every person that hears me, there are a number among you who not only hear but profess the truth; to these I stand in a more immediate relation, and as I am more acquainted with these, I feel more for them. I may say without boasting, the Lord has given me in some measure the heart of a shepherd towards them. I feel,

1. For the distresses of many. As I am much conversant among the people, I know a good deal of their personal and family troubles. My heart sinks at the trials of some who are now before me, and of others whose afflictions detain them at home. Perhaps no one in the parish knows so much of these things as I do, and I could relate cases which I am persuaded would draw tears from many eyes. I know likewise something of the spiritual distresses of those whom I endeavour to comfort, but cannot. I must feel some distress as long as I love the people and as long as I live in Olney, even if I were always happy in my own concerns.
2. For the declensions of many. I will lay no stress upon my own personal concern. It is doubtless trying to flesh and blood to see any who once professed a warm regard look shy and cold; and when one loves them and studies to show it, to be misapprehended or misrepresented. I bless God, that if I have anything of this kind to complain of, the instances are not many. And were it not for the cause, I hope the effect would not discompose me. But surely there are some of you, who have carried it unkindly to the Lord, if not to me. O where is now their zeal, where is their first love? Where is the value they once put upon the ordinances? Where is that gospel conversation they once aimed at? Once they loved to assemble with the Lord's people; now I fear they may be often seen with the ungodly and the profane.
3. For their heart-burnings and grudgings one towards another. Alas, when a little word, inadvertently spoken, shall be a sufficient foundation for a quarrel. When there is a readiness to give and to take offence and a backwardness to reconciliation. These things throw two discouragements in a minister's way: he cannot but consider them as a sign that grace is low and that this is a sure means of keeping it so; that to such persons he is little useful at present and that unless the Lord interposes he has but a poor hope of being more useful to them in the future.

Some or other of these trials are always present to my mind, and of late they have brought another painful thought upon me. I had not been a month in Olney before the Lord gave me such a regard for the people, that it has ever since been the place of my choice. I have ever laboured to decline and avoid what the world calls “advantageous offers” as you have been uniformly on my heart, to live and die with you, if the Lord pleases. But I am not my own master. And if the gospel should come to be greatly neglected and slighted, and a form of godliness take the place of that power which once was known here, will there not be reason to fear lest the Lord should show His displeasure by removing it?

Brethren, pray for us. Pray for me and for yourselves; that the Lord may take away our iniquities and pour a fresh anointing upon ministers and people; that I may be strengthened and owned in the work and you may know and prize and improve the privileges you enjoy.