

“The Prayer Jesus Taught Us”

Matthew 6:5-13 (NRSV)

⁵ And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Prayer is mission

Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of God lie at the heart of the *Missio Dei* and our part in God’s work. Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are focused on creating a community of disciples trained for the kingdom of God – trained for what they would have thought to be impossible, trained for the work God has



“HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME”

I remember reading once a child’s rendition of the Lord’s prayer. As I recall, God’s name was Harold! Now, I doubt many of us make that mistake, but I do suspect that we tend to blow right past “hallowed be your name” with little awareness of what it means. This phrase could just as easily be translated “set apart your holy name.” Perhaps Eugene Peterson gets even closer when he renders the phrase as “reveal who you are” in his paraphrase, *The Message*. For the ancient Hebrews, the name and the person are much closer in thought than for us today. In the Bible, the name of God is virtually indistinguishable from the person of God. When we pray that God’s name be hallowed or holy or sanctified or set apart or revealed, we are praying that God would let all the world see that he is the one true God. We are praying that God will usher in his kingdom in all its fullness— so that even God’s enemies would come to honor God’s name.

given us. Prayer takes center stage in their training. The prayer that Jesus teaches them lies at the center of the sermon, but before giving them what has come to be called the Lord's Prayer, Jesus cautions them about problems common to the prayer life of all people.

Competitive Praying

There have been times when I've felt that I was in some sort of prayer competition. We'd all sit in a circle and then go around the room, each of us taking turns offering up a prayer. Some people seemed so articulate and experienced that I'd be a wreck by the time my turn came. I admit that often I would hardly hear the prayers of others -- I'd be too busy thinking about what I would possibly say when my turn arrived. Clearly, this is not how it is supposed to be! Jesus knows us well. He understands that it can be all too easy for us to begin trying to win some sort of prayer competition, even going so far as to pray publicly so others can see how well we pray!

When Jesus tells his followers that they are to go into a room and pray privately, he doesn't mean that we should never pray with others, only that we need to be careful about our prayers. We aren't on stage.¹ We aren't to heap up a lot of flowery language and empty phrases. We are praying to God the Creator and Redeemer! Our prayers – whether of praise or appeal or confession or thanks – are to be sincere and heartfelt. We don't have to be articulate. We don't have to be experienced. If you aren't comfortable praying in front of others, then don't – but do pray. And if you don't know where to begin, pray the prayer Jesus gave us. God just wants us to pray.

The Lord's Prayer²

Jesus spoke more often about the Kingdom of God than about anything else. Not surprisingly then, the Lord's Prayer is a kingdom prayer. Prayer is theology and theology is prayer. What we pray for reveals our deepest beliefs about God and ourselves.

One way to approach the Lord's Prayer is to think of it as being in two parts.

1. In the first part, we express our desire for the arrival of God's kingdom so that the will of God will be done, so that God's desires for his creation will be realized.

This is not some other-worldly thing – God's will is to be done on earth, as it is in the kingdom of heaven. Think of it as the merger of the two – our world is to be transformed into the full expression of God's love and creative power, a world free from sin and death, misery and tragedy.

2. In the second part of the Lord's Prayer we turn to our own lives, admitting that it is God, not we, who provides today and every day even the basics of life – like bread.

We pray that God will shelter us from the trials and tests that come at us so often in a world still rocked by pain and suffering. We even pray for our rescue, not from some abstract idea of evil, but from the foes of God that threaten all goodness and mercy. All this is to be God's doing. Nonetheless, we recognize our own part in this as well. We confess to God our understanding that God's forgiveness of us is somehow bound up with our own forgiveness of others.³ We are not to be bystanders sitting out God's war against evil. We are not to be escapists watching the world sink ever deeper into Godlessness. We are to be the light to the world, the ones

¹ In the Greek, Matthew captures Jesus' intention well. The word we translate "hypocrites" in v. 5 is a word that refers to stage actors. Are we praying to God or to the grandstands?

² The Lord's Prayer will greatly repay slow praying and thoughtful reflection. Two excellent and brief books on the Lord's Prayer are *The Lord and his Prayer*, by N.T. Wright and *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, by William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas (my two favorite professors from my time at Duke Divinity School!).

³ The various versions of the Lord's Prayer used by Christians speak of forgiveness of debts or trespasses or sins. The underlying Greek word in the prayer is *opheilema*, which referred to obligations and was often used by Jews to refer to sins. As God's covenant partners we have obligations to him, such as loving God and neighbor. When we fail to deliver on those obligations, we have sinned. We incur obligations to others and them to us. We are called to be generous and forgiving when others fail to meet their obligations to us, just as God is generous and forgiving with us when we fail to meet our obligations to him!

through whom God accomplishes the very things for which we pray!

Give us today our daily bread

In the story of the Exodus, God rescues the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and defeats Pharaoh. But when Moses and the people begin their trek across the Sinai wilderness, griping and complaining become rampant. We have no water!! We have no food!! So, God, who loves them and provides for them, ensures that they have all they need to survive in the harsh desert. The food God provides is a white flaky substance found on the ground every morning. The Israelites call it manna, which means “what is it?” in Hebrew (yes, really). This manna won’t keep overnight but must be collected every day.

It is this story that Jesus draws on in the Lord’s Prayer. To pray for our daily bread is to acknowledge that all we have comes from God, even our lives – and to be thankful. We humans can be fiercely independent, resisting the very notion that we are dependent on God. But every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we acknowledge that God provides for us every single day. He always has and he always will.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive our trespasses⁴

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed, living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my very brief flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I’d just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. The Lord’s Prayer puts this truth right in front us – forgive us, as we forgive others.

Eduard Schweizer put it this way: ‘God’s forgiveness is not for decoration but for use.’ Living, truly God-shaped living, requires that forgiveness be breathed out, not just breathed in. A truly grateful heart is also a forgiving heart.

Lead us not into temptation

I’ve been asked whether this phrase is a prayer for God not to tempt us to do wrong. Of course not . . . do we really think that Jesus seeks to make our lives harder, to lead us into the trap of sin and brokenness? No, we do an excellent job of that on our own. This is a prayer for strength to persevere, to avoid temptations when we can and to resist them when we can’t.

Both the NIV and NRSV translators tell us that the prayer for deliverance could be rendered as deliverance from “the evil one” or from “evil.”⁵ If Matthew had in mind the former, the prayer is for deliverance from the machinations of Satan. If Matthew had in mind the latter, then it is a prayer for deliverance from evil circumstances. Though we always say “evil” when we pray the Lord’s Prayer – both translations are worth keeping in view. This is an ever-present reminder that we need God’s protection and deliverance every day.

Every single day – the importance of persistence in prayer

Even if we’ve been taught to pray, even if we earnestly pray daily, most of us will, at one time or another, be tempted to lose heart. We might pray day after day, month after month, that an important relationship would be healed . . . but then it’s not. How long do we go on praying a prayer that seems futile? We remind ourselves that, of course, God answers prayers; a loving father would do no less. Still, it is not always easy to persist. Our

⁴ There is no need to get hung up on debts/trespasses/sins. The Greek word Matthew uses here is straightforward: the faults we commit against others, including God.

⁵ It is important to remember that Jesus would have taught this prayer to his disciples in Aramaic, the day-to-day language used by the Jews in the Judea and Galilee. Thus, Matthew had to render the Aramaic into Greek, the language used for all of the New Testament. The same would be true if Jesus taught them the prayer in Hebrew.

passage from Luke is one of Jesus' parables about prayer. It is a parable about persistence. As is true for all the parables, a little background will help to make it more meaningful. The key to this story is appreciating the roles of the judge and the widow.

In ancient Israel, there were no juries and no prosecutors, only judges. A judge in the Jewish law court was to listen to the evidence offered by the plaintiff (the accuser) and the defendant (the accused). The judge was to apply the law to the case, stay impartial, punish sin as it deserved, and protect the powerless, such as widows and orphans. In the end, the judge was to render a just verdict that vindicated the aggrieved party. If a judge

did all these things, the judge was considered a good and righteous judge.⁶

In Jesus' parable, the judge has done none of this! He doesn't obey God, and he disrespects the people who come into his courtroom. To make it worse, a widow has come to him seeking justice. Widows were among the poorest, most marginalized people in all ancient cultures, including Israel. Nonetheless, rather than protecting the interests of the widow, the judge has ignored her. Yet, through her persistence, her relentless pursuit of the judge, the widow is finally granted justice. She is vindicated, powerless though she may be.

Jesus' point is clear. If persistence pays off with a cruel and unjust judge, how much more will God, our loving father, the good and righteous judge, hear the pleas and prayer of his children. Our prayers are never futile. We ask, we seek, we knock, we wait, we trust, we get emotional, we get frustrated . . . but we continue praying. Our persistence grows out of our confidence that God loves us.

The History of the Lord's Prayer

In the decades immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers began to use some variation of the Lord's Prayer that we have in Matthew and Luke.

About 150 years ago a manuscript was discovered that turned out to be a "teaching manual" for Christians from the second half of the first century! Called the Didache (teaching), this manual instructs believers in various Christian disciplines, including fasting and prayer. The Lord's Prayer is to be said three times a day, probably reflecting Jewish practices regarding daily prayer.

The Didache includes the text of the Lord's Prayer – and it is virtually identical to the prayer we say every Sunday! Following Christian tradition of nearly 2000 years as reflected in the Didache, we add a doxology to the end of the prayer from Matthew. In the Didache, the doxology is "For thine is the power and the glory forever and ever." You will sometimes find a translation of Matthew that incorporates the doxology, but it is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts. But of course, it is very appropriate that we conclude this prayer by offering praise and glory to the Lord Almighty!

⁶ In his letters, Paul often uses the metaphor of the Jewish law court to describe what it means when we speak of God as judge and of our own righteousness before God. "Righteousness" is another way of talking about our status when the court (God is the good judge) finds in our favor because we have trusted in Jesus and his faithfulness to God's covenant on our behalf. In effect, Jesus takes our place in the docket.