

“Three Short Years – How to Pray”

Psalm 34:4–8; Matthew 6:5–15; Luke 18:1–8

The true story

This is the second week in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes, ends with a parable about actually doing as he taught, and right in the center of it all we find some teachings about prayer, including the most well-known prayer of all, the Lord’s Prayer.



Why pray? The reason is simple. We pray because our heart seeks its true home, and its true home is the heart of God.¹ God longs for our presence. After Adam and Eve made their fateful decision to turn away from God, God came to the garden, calling for Adam, seeking him (Genesis 3:9). In much the same way, God invites each of us to come to him, to come home, to return to the way of life for which we were made. Our hearts hear God’s call, but we’ve turned so far away from God that the call is muffled. It is a little like hearing a phone ring, but being unsure where the ring is coming from, much less who is on the other end of the line. We might search all over the house and yet never look in the right place.

We have restless, yearning hearts that seek peace and joy and fulfillment. We spend much of our life looking one place after another for something that will make us happy or joyful or content, often in all the wrong places. But, in truth, our restless hearts will only find their rest in God.

Coming home

Writing thousands of years ago, the psalmists expressed our hearts seeking after God, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . My soul clings to you”(Psalm 63). The heart of the psalmist’s prayer, indeed all prayer, is a loving relationship . . . between God and me . . . between God and you . . . between God and all those who seek their heart’s true home.

Richard Foster uses familiar, yet powerful, imagery to describe this home. “We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity . . . he invites us into the bedroom of his rest . . . where we are known and are known to the fullest. . . . The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.”²

Prayers built upon trust

In the Bible, trust is a good synonym for faith. When we say that we have faith in Jesus Christ, we mean that we trust Jesus – completely and utterly. Now, all of us are experienced at building trusting relationships with others, or at least trying to. We know that building trust is not easy. It takes time. We risk trusting a person in small matters so that we might come to trust them in large matters. We know that trust is fragile. Trust takes a long time to build but it can disintegrate in a moment of betrayal. We know that trust must be cherished and protected. And . . . we know that hypocrisy and empty talk are not the way to build trust.

Prayer is conversation with God; conversation that is to be grounded upon trust. Indeed, prayer builds such trust. As we strive to be sincere and forthright with those we trust, there can be no hypocrisy or deceit in our prayers to God. The psalmists are sometimes incredibly angry with God and they don’t hesitate to voice their anger. Of course they don’t hesitate; they trust God. Let the psalms teach us today.

¹ This beautiful phrase, “the heart’s true home,” is from Richard Foster’s book, *Prayer*.

² from the introduction to Foster’s book, *Prayer*, p. 1-2.

It is in the context of this deep, abiding trust in God that Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. He points them toward God's kingdom and teaches them to rely completely upon God, even for the bread they eat. The disciples are to trust in God's forgiveness, even as they forgive others.

Whether we are praising God or thanking him. Whether we are confessing or asking. Whether we come to God with a peaceful heart or an angry one. In all this, we trust that God loves us and hears us and answers us. The basic ingredients of prayer are the ingredients that build trust between two persons: honesty, sincerity, caring, thanking, appreciating, loving, serving . . . add to this list as you'd like. And in the end, pray with a trusting heart.

It is with such a heart that we are to pray the Lord's Prayer, even as we pray it together and often aloud. It is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Here is an overview.

The Lord's Prayer³

Jesus spoke more often about the Kingdom of God than about anything else. Not surprisingly then, the Lord's Prayer is a kingdom prayer. In his sermon, Jesus trains his disciples for the kingdom; in this prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for its arrival.

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. 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, or marriage, 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.

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. 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 of the world, the ones through whom God accomplishes the very things for which we pray!

Give us today our daily bread

Exodus is quite a story. 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 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.

³ 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.

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

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 of us – forgive us, as we forgive others.

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." 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

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 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.⁵

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. It is crucially important, however, to acknowledge that sometimes the most loving thing God does for us is say, "No." ...thanks be to God!

⁵ 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.