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“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

STUART L. LOVE

“Pray then in this way:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven
our debtors.
And do not bring us to the
time of trial,
but rescue us from the
evil one.*

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt 6.9–15 NRSV)

One time a disciple of Jesus came to him and requested, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11.1). Jesus’ answer is what we call today “The Lord’s Prayer,” a prayer found in its shortest form in Luke, in its longest form at the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and in a small Christian writing probably of the early second century A.D. known as *The Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*.

But why would Jesus’ disciple make such a request? For one thing, Jesus’ followers knew that John had taught his disciples to pray. But, also, perhaps it was because prayer was a *habit* of Jesus’ ministry, a practice certainly noted over time by those who were close to him.

For example, Luke tells us that when Jesus came up from the baptismal waters he was praying (Luke 3.21). At daybreak, or at night, it was Jesus’ habit to frequent deserted places to pray (Luke 5.12). Just before he chose the twelve apostles he spent the entire night in prayer to God (Luke 6.12). Alone, he prayed just before Peter declared that he was the Messiah of God (Luke 9.18). Peter, James and John witnessed Jesus in prayer on the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9.28–36). When the seventy returned from their mission tour, Luke preserves an entire prayer of Jesus in which he gives thanks to the Father (Luke 10.21–22).

Matthew tells us that during Jesus' ministry parents would bring their little children to Jesus so that he would lay his hands on them "and pray" (Matt 19.13). They must have known that prayer was his *habit*. And lest we forget, Jesus' prayer life led him to Gethsemane. It prepared him in that critical time as he threw himself to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Matt 26.36). Prayer for Jesus was not occasional. It was his habit.

What do we learn from Jesus' example? Through the habit of prayer:

1. Jesus experienced and solidified his relationship with God.
2. Jesus heard and embraced the will of God.
3. Jesus was strengthened for divine service.
4. Jesus' status and ministerial purpose was revealed to others.

Jesus' prayer practice forever dispels the notion that those who think don't pray, and those who pray don't think.

Let us explore The Lord's Prayer more carefully.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

The Lord's Prayer first given by Jesus to his disciples has remained important to the church. From very early times, *The Didache* advocated that the prayer be prayed three times a day (8.3). Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, encouraged Christians to pray the prayer at sunrise and sunset. Augustine believed that no day should pass in which Christians did not say this prayer. Luther wrote, "To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill." Gregory of Nyssa encouraged not only that the prayer be prayed but that it also serve as a "guide to a blessed life." Through the ages Christians have made The Lord's Prayer the habit of their lives.

While D'Esta and I mentored and taught students in Florence during the 2007–2008 school year, Ken Durham preached a series of sermons on The Lord's Prayer for our congregation. We heard about the series in Florence and we delighted upon our return to witness that our congregation now prayed Matthew's version of the prayer every Lord's Day as a fitting conclusion to our family petitions to God. Having done this for about two years I thought it would be good to address this topic one more time. Truly, it fits a sermon series entitled *Things that Matter*.

So, let us follow, oh so briefly, Matthew's version of the prayer (Matt 6.9–15). When all is said and done, I want to encourage us to continue praying this prayer in our worship services. Beyond that I want to encourage us to pray the prayer daily as a part of our personal spiritual habit. Have you ever thought of praying it either before or after someone is baptized? Or, have you ever fasted for spiritual reasons? Was The Lord's Prayer included in your spiritual journey? Or, when the Lord's Supper is eaten, should we not in quietude pray this prayer?

Have you ever considered how your life might be changed for the better if you prayed this beautiful little prayer when you rise in the morning, when you break for lunch, and when you kneel before your bed at night, perhaps with your children? Finally, should not this prayer guide us as we consider all the great themes that govern our petitions to God? In other words, The Lord's Prayer is essentially important to the growth of our blessed life together with God in Christ.

Pray then in this way:

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

The first words of the prayer are an address to God. Notice the little word "our." It signifies that The Lord's Prayer is a communal prayer. It is for us—the community of believers who follow Christ and pray to God.

This is not to say that others cannot pray the prayer. Don't forget that the Sermon on the Mount is addressed to the disciples, but it is also overheard by the crowds (Matt 5.1).

The next word is "Father." Addressing God as Father in Jewish prayers in Jesus' day apparently was rarely done. Nevertheless, Jesus probably knew from the time that he was a little boy that God as Father was fundamental to Israel's relationship to the Lord. Let me cite just two examples from Israel's faith: "Is not (the Lord) your father, who created you, who made you and established you" (Deut 32.6), and "You, O Lord, are our father" (Isa 63.16). Probably the word Jesus used was the Aramaic term "Abba." That's because Aramaic was Jesus' everyday language. When he talked with his family at dinner he would address Joseph as "Abba," an endearing but reverential address of children to their fathers. "Abba" is preserved in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible" (Mark 14.36). "Abba" is used as a form of address twice by Paul. The first example is found in the apostle's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul exclaims concerning our life without condemnation in the Spirit, "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8.15–16). Similarly, he writes to the churches of Galatia, "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, 'Abba, Father!'" (Gal 4.6).

However, for some, perhaps many, to pray to God as "father" poses a problem because the negative image of their earthly fathers blocks them from understanding God as father positively. And that is a serious matter. So when we think of God as Father we must imagine fatherhood at its best. And then we need to multiply that positive image by infinity. Nevertheless, we address God as "Our Father" because Jesus teaches us that we are children of God.

The address closes with the words "in heaven." Everything ultimately points to God's majesty. When the entire address is put together, "Our Father in heaven," we are reminded that our God is not a cosmic principle. He is a living person who seeks relationship with his creation—with us—a relationship characterized by love, mercy and goodness. But in so doing, his holiness is affirmed.

THE FIRST THREE PETITIONS

After the address there are seven petitions. Of these seven, the first three pertain to God.

*Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

We hallow God's name not only by what we say or don't say, but by what we do that is righteous, loving and merciful. Israel's law stated, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God" (Exod 20.7; Deut 5.11; Lev 19.12; Ezek 36.23). John Chrysostom proclaimed, "God possesses . . . in himself the fullness of all glory . . . nevertheless, he commands . . . that we ask that he also be glorified by our life."¹ God is holy. His name is not to be defamed by how we live. As Luther stated, "God's name certainly is holy . . . but ask . . . that we may keep it holy."²

When we pray, "Your kingdom come," we ask the Lord that his rule and reign prevail over all of his creation, that is, "on earth as it is in heaven." Growing up I was taught that God's kingdom was the church. After all, Jesus told Peter that "on this rock I will build my church . . . and I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven . . ." (Matt 16.18–19). So, I heard teachers and preachers insist that with the establishment of the church there was no longer any need to pray this petition or even the entire prayer. It was a prayer only for the period of Jesus' ministry.

1. See Ulrich Luz's comments on The Lord's Prayer, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7 (A Continental Commentary)*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

2. *Ibid.*

I believe that perspective is shortsighted. Yes, the church, the people of God, Jesus' alternative community, is to be a mighty river of righteousness through which the rule and reign of God flows and gathers people for eternal life. But too often that righteousness has been barely a trickle—not a mighty, roaring stream. Beyond that, God's reign is greater than the church. We know in our journeys of faith, borrowing Paul's words, "we see in a mirror, dimly," that someday "we will see face to face" (1 Cor 13.12).

Let me illustrate with my own life. Yes, I am a child of God, a son of the kingdom. Yes, I am growing in poverty of spirit, meekness, purity of heart, mercy and love. But I also know that without the unfailing mercy and love of God, I fall miserably short of Jesus' command, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5.48). *O, Lord, may your kingdom come.*

I love D'Esta with all of my heart—the rule and reign of God is in our marriage, God's kingdom is present. But I also know how often I've fallen short of the kingdom's standards in our marriage. *O, Lord, may your kingdom come* in our marriage bond.

I love our sons, Mark and Jon, our precious daughter -in-law Nancy, and our grandson Zach and his dear bride, Haley, and I love our other grandsons, Josh, Nick and Noah, and Andryez (Polish for "Andrew"). In many ways I've been a good father and papa, but I know how often I've fallen short in channeling the kingdom's blessings to them. *O, Lord, may your kingdom come.*

As an elder, I love this church but I also know how often I have failed to bring pastoral care to hurting lives, or ministered to the needs of our servant leaders and our precious ministers—Roslyn, Dee, Linda, Corrine and Thomas. *O, Lord, may your kingdom come.*

My heart thrills when I witness how our congregation opens its heart to the poor—the Labor Exchange, the people of Haiti, the victims of Katrina. My heart thrills when I witness how various ones of us respond in multitudinous ways to the needs of our sisters and brothers and the greater Pepperdine community. I thank God for so many compassionate hearts. But I also know that at our very best we touch only the hem of the garment. *O, Lord, may your kingdom come.*

We witnessed the coming of God's kingdom when Brad and Stephanie Cupp brought Yo Shen home from China to grow up with Jacob, Nicholas and Jude. We witnessed the coming of God's kingdom when Randy and Kari Coppinger became parents of Bethany, the happiest little girl in the world, to grow up with Seth.

We witness the coming of the kingdom when Mike and Nancy Jordan serve those who experience the tragedy of divorce. All around us we see evidence of the presence of God's rule and reign. But we also know that both within and outside our church doors there is the need for God's complete transformation of the world. *O, Lord, may your kingdom come.* In heaven there is no poverty, health issues, or war. In heaven, there are no swords, only plowshares. We pray for the coming of God's kingdom. We pray that God's will be done *on earth*, as it is *in heaven*.

THE FINAL FOUR PETITIONS

Following the "you" petitions—"your name," "your kingdom" and "your will," there are four "we" petitions.

*Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our debts
as we also have forgiven
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.*

When we pour out our needs to God, what really matters?

There is the need for *daily bread*. At the heart of this petition is our trust in God to supply the necessities of life. Jesus teaches us to not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. The petition for bread reminds us of the time when Israel ate the bread from heaven in the wilderness. Israel was assured by God that she would have enough bread for today, and the promise of sufficient bread for tomorrow as well. God's people were to gather only enough for a day at a time—no more, no less. But Israel failed the test by trying to hoard manna for more than a day (Exod 19.9–21).

Jesus' petition may imply an evening and morning prayer in which God will supply the next day's bread, and he will supply it repeatedly. Give us today our bread for tomorrow. Like a day laborer who does not yet know whether he will find work on the next day for his family's survival, so we realize that our prayer for bread is not a question of riches. That is hard for Americans, especially for those who are wealthy and those who are unemployed.

The petition for *forgiveness* is rooted in our own practices of extending forgiveness. Sin is a moral debt. Matthew explains what he means in 18.33—"Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I have had mercy on you." Matthew quotes Hosea 6.6 two times: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matt 9.13; 12.7). We must face a reality: God will punish those who do not forgive—we must forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts (Matt 18.35). Why is this so important? Because repeated forgiveness holds God's people together. Even when communal reproof is required, the ultimate purpose is to grant forgiveness. The goal of reproof is restoration. "Shall I forgive my sister or brother seven times? No, Peter, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matt 18.22).

The final petitions are the most difficult to interpret. Do they ask God for strength to survive the harsh present times of life? Or, do they urge our Lord to complete God's purposes so that we as his disciples are not tempted to think God is faithless, inactive and powerless in the chaotic present?

But does not Matthew provide us help in our understanding? For example, when Jesus was "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness he was tempted by the Devil" (Matt 4.1). Tested to the fullest, Jesus remained faithful to his father and to the significance of his baptism. When the devil offered Jesus all of the world's kingdoms if he would fall down and worship him, Jesus answered, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Matthew then tells us that "the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him" (Matt 4.11). Jesus was rescued by God.

Or is not Jesus' anguish in Gethsemane instructive? To the disciples who went with him to pray Jesus admonished, "Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial or temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt 26.41). Sadly, Jesus returned from his prayer and found them sleeping.

We need fortification against pressures to forsake our faith. Opposition is a part of the journey of the kingdom. It will come! Luke tells us that after Jesus' temptation, the devil departed from him until an opportune time. It is a fearful thing for Satan to enter any of our lives, as he did Judas (Luke 22.3). As a whole, the disciples, Jesus affirmed, stood by him in his trials (Luke 22.28). But Satan, Jesus told Simon, demanded to sift all of (the disciples) like wheat. Jesus assured them, "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22.32–33).

Paul told the Corinthians, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (1 Cor 10.13). God is faithful. He will not let us be tested beyond our strength. But as Paul affirms, God "will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10.13). God is faithful to deliver us. Our God is not both "yes" and "no." He is faithful. And his "yes" is able to strengthen us and guard us from the evil one (2 Thess 3.3; see Heb 10.23).

CONCLUSION

And so our meditation on The Lord's Prayer closes. Let me encourage us to pray this beautiful and meaningful prayer over and over, day after day. By doing so, may we experience and solidify our relationship with God, hear and embrace the will of God, and be strengthened for divine service.

Let us not only pray this prayer, but also learn to live according to its precepts. O, Lord, our God, teach us to pray!

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