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## Let's Pray the Prayer

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saw your faith, and gave me exactly what I needed: forgiveness of sins, first.

Forgiveness for the bitterness in my heart; forgiveness for the fear that ruled my decision-making; forgiveness for the belief that God, having worked a miracle or two in my life up to this point, would probably not be inclined to work another on my behalf; forgiveness for the inclination to throw in the towel out of sheer exhaustion and a selfish desire for immediate relief.

And then, the have-some-more Messiah offered me a second helping. A two-for-one special. "As long as we're at it," he said to me, "why don't we throw in some walking, as well? Why don't you get up off that mat and take a stroll? Why don't you walk right into that church and do the work I've called you to do? Go on. Get on up. Go home."

So here I am, making myself at home, right here, with all of you. You have been the "yes" of God for me. You have made God's "yes" a reality for me. I am quite sure that the have-some-more Messiah feels at home here, too.

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It seems to me that our next job together is to crowd this house with people who need to hear God's "yes." There are all kinds of people out there shaking their heads "no"—religious people, people you work for and with, people you love, people you can hardly stand but have to be around anyway. "Don't do that," they say. "You can't do that. You shouldn't even try." Their "no's" are persistent and insistent.

But God's "yes" is more so. "For in Jesus every one of God's promises is a yes." That's what scripture says; that's the have-some-more Messiah we have come to love and depend on for our daily bread and our second helpings. We've already heard it, but most people haven't. They're still thinking God is mostly about "thou shalt not's" and "don't do that's."

You are invited this morning, as we sing a hymn of invitation, to let God's "yes" be the final word in your life. Let God say "yes" to you in baptism. Let God say "yes" to you by connecting you to this family of believers as a member of this church. Let God say "yes" to you by forgiving your sins, by getting you up off the floor, by giving you the brand-new start everybody wants more than anything else in the world.



## Let's Pray the Prayer

CHARME ROBARTS

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Nothing about following Jesus is simple. The first disciples found this out first-hand. If we review a few of the events preceding their request in Luke 11, "Lord teach us to pray," we see their difficulties parallel ours, and in fact the troubles Jesus faced seem familiar as well.

In chapter 4 Satan tries to get Jesus to walk away from living as fully human. He suggests that Jesus ought to take the easy route, to give up on the discomfort of fasting and all the difficulties of living in a human body. Further, Satan suggests that Jesus force people to follow him by ruling over all the kingdoms—that he force them instead of invite them. "All these kingdoms will be yours if you bow down to me." And he tries to get Jesus to put on a dazzling display of divine power by jumping off the top of the temple—"the angels will catch you," Satan says. The idea is don't mess around with this plan of being human.

The good news for us is that Jesus did stay the course of being one of us and so he gets what it is like to be here dealing with ourselves as flesh and bone, with our desires for power and easy escape. He knows



what it is like to be tempted to take the easy route of coercion instead of love and patience. We know all of that too. We will definitely need help to face this.

After the temptation, Jesus goes to his hometown synagogue. He reads from the scroll, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” The Year of Jubilee!

At first, the people like hearing that reading. Who doesn’t like talk of freeing *our* oppressed, freeing *our* prisoners, recovery of sight for *our* blind? But then Jesus started telling stories about release for foreigners and immigrants and maybe enemies of the state. At that, well the hometown boys try to throw him off a cliff, but he walks right through their little crowd and goes on his way.

Sometimes discipleship in our hometowns is tough because people don’t want us to challenge the status quo, to ask them to question their thinking. Sometimes our clarifying word from scripture is received as antagonism. Sometimes when we push against the way things are always done, people think we are radical, or liberal, or just annoying. They get tired of hearing from us; they misunderstand us. Sometimes talk about engaging culture instead of fighting it gets us pushed pretty close to the edge of the cliff. And then the temptation to just give up or shut up or run away gets really strong. We will definitely need help for hometown discipleship.

Luke keeps writing. Next Jesus meets a demon-possessed man, and people are amazed when Jesus quickly disposes of the demon. Jesus is now the newest paparazzi target. Sometimes following Jesus actually brings some glory. People are impressed with you. They have unrealistic admiration for you; they call on you for lots of things. Pretty soon you can hear the Evil One whispering in your ear, “why not dazzle them some more? Keep on saying yes to everything people want you to do. Say yes to more than is possible.” When you find yourself climbing up to the top of the steeple plotting an amazing display of power, then you know you are going to need help to get through the experience of being well thought of. There are all kind of threats to discipleship.

Chapter 4 continues with Jesus’ tireless compassion. He heals friends and strangers. Demons try to get in on the act, shouting loudly, “You are the Son of God.” But Jesus won’t take their help. He doesn’t want their endorsement. Surely the demons hoped to bring some chaos into the situation with all their shouting and distractions. Doesn’t all that chaos sound like our lives?

We are distracted by the noisy stuff of busyness, controversy, and materialism. We have so many demands on our lives. It is very chaotic, kind of like screaming demons. We know we need help for this crazy life we live.

The story continues. In chapter 5 Jesus scares Simon Peter to death over a large catch of fish. Peter realizes he’s come face to face with divine power and he doesn’t know what to do. We are familiar with this. We see Jesus for who he is, we take a look at ourselves and it seems impossible that he would want us in the boat with him. We feel pretty amazed that he doesn’t say to Peter or to us, “Just get out of the boat since you have so little faith.” But he doesn’t. He simply says, “Don’t be afraid.” I say, “Okay, but I’m going to need some help with this.”

Luke continues about Jesus preaching great ideas like loving our enemies and being forgiven and receiving back more than we can ever give. These sermons and stories amaze me and I love them, and yet, I have such a hard time practicing them. I feel like I’m never going to get anywhere in discipleship. I’m going to need help to get through this life with Jesus.

I am relieved when in chapter 11 the disciples say, “Lord, teach us to pray.” I’m raising my hand and saying, “Me too!” My life with Jesus is just like theirs. I too live in the world of the unpredictable. One moment people applaud, the next moment they want to throw me off a cliff. People are a fine mix of good and bad, and I am one of them. Sometimes things are clear; sometimes everything is vague. Life is sometimes hard and sometimes easy. Life is mundane and sublime. Neither life nor discipleship can be reduced to a formula.



And the prayer Jesus gave his disciples is not a formula which if repeated regularly sort of covers the bases. That isn't to deny the power of this short prayer in its simple form. I pray this prayer often. Sometimes I pray it several times in succession before rising to try to set the course of my day.

Luke's version of the prayer reads:

Father, hallowed by your name,  
Your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread.  
Forgive our sins for we also forgive everyone who  
sins against us.  
And lead us not into temptation (Luke 11.2-4).

I am struck by the brevity of this prayer. Most of us don't pray for an hour or two at a time. So, I'm pretty excited when Jesus himself says, "You need some help praying? Here, pray this one. It is just a few lines." And its language is very straightforward. There is no secret code or abracadabra. It is brief and it has the stamp of approval from the very Son of God who said, "You can pray like this."

The prayer is also a treatise on dependence on God. To some it sounds odd to speak of dependence as a good thing. But we know we just can't do this alone. There is too much chaos, there are too many temptations and we do not have the power to fix or think clearly about these things.

Notice, too, that the pronouns are plural in the prayer. The conversation is not just with my Father, but *ours*. Give *us our* bread, forgive *us our* sins, and lead *us* not to temptation.

People often ask me to pray for them and I try to do that, but when people say keep me in your prayers, I realize that I am not completely up to the task. But when I pray this prayer with its plural pronouns, then I am confident that I am keeping others in my prayers. When I pray for the kingdom to come I'm praying it for you and me, and when I'm praying for daily bread, I'm praying it for you and me, and when I'm praying for forgiveness, I'm praying it for you and me. And you are doing the same when you pray this prayer. This prayer is a great gift to us. It expresses our connectedness.

The final observation is to restate what we know by faith, and that is, we pray because we believe someone is listening. These are not vain incantations or repetitions. Yes, Jesus warned against this, but he wasn't saying something is vain because it is said over and over. Words are vain if they are done for show—and we must be careful about judging that in others. But repeating this prayer over and over is not *in vain*—we pray because Someone is listening.

Now let's look at the various lines of the prayer. They are like wide doors we can walk through. Inside these doors are all kinds of possibilities for help in getting through this life.

The sign over the first door says, "Father." Remembering that the pronouns are plural, the sign actually means "our Father." The knowledge that we are not some loose band of individuals out there, disconnected from the source of strength and life, is defining. Knowing that we all belong to the same Father gets us through life because it comforts us with the sense of belonging and of identity. We are identified as children of the Father and by implication as engaged in the family business. No matter how turbulent the waters get in daily discipleship, we are not cut loose; we belong to the Father.

This relational language reminds us that we fit in one place and not another. We belong with the Father and so we find it hard to be happy, really happy, with life outside the relationship, and so "our Father" calls us back when we stray. I may stray away, but I come straggling back to our Father. And if I see you struggling, I know that your pain is mine, because of "our Father." Invoking the name of our Father is powerful because it reminds us of who we are.

"Hallowed be your name." Walking through this door is like entering the Hall of Great Expectation. These words can be heard as a plea for God to honor his own name. God's children aren't always doing a



good job of that and so we call on God to do what we can't and won't do. This also is a request for power to participate in honoring God's name. It won't be our natural response; we must ask God to help us.

Imagine a world where God's name is honored! The possibilities are marvelous and endless. Thankfully we've seen enough of it to want more. God's name is honored when disciples like you and me stick together in spite of the difficulty of doing so. His name is honored when someone does the hard work of admitting wrong and apologizing. God's name is honored when, as is the case in my city, a small band of women following Jesus decide to form an organization to help women get out of the sex industry. In that organization the Fatherhood of God is proclaimed, women are told they are cherished daughters and that there is another life for them. They are mentored, coached, given job training and parenting help. They receive free legal and medical services and help with rent while they get started on their new life with new friends. They are loved. Many of them become disciples and go on to help other women. God's name is honored and hallowed in all this.

When we pray this prayer, we open our eyes in great expectation and watch for what God will do. When God's name is honored we are the beneficiaries.

"Your kingdom come." It is hard to separate honoring God's name and the coming of the kingdom. Some believe that since the kingdom has already come in part through the birth of the church, that this prayer isn't needed. But that is quite a limited view. The kingdom or the reign of God should come more and more in my life, and in yours, and in the lives of everyone on earth.

So everyday for all kinds of reasons our prayers are for the kingdom to come, for it to come into the dark lives of the lonely and the depressed, into the conflicted arena of our churches, into the hearts and minds of the rulers of the nations. To pray for the kingdom to come is a vital prayer.

But we also look forward to the final fulfillment of the kingdom of God when Christ returns and makes all things new. This is a precious prayer in the face of suffering and poverty that seems to have no end. When we pray for the coming of the kingdom we pray for its reality both now and later. And we wait in hope, knowing our prayers are not in vain, because we have already seen signs of it. To pray this prayer is to ask for God to do his work and to ask for the grace and will to participate. Praying this prayer, I am praying it for you and you are praying it for me.

"Give us our daily bread." Don't forget where your bread comes from. Ask for it every day, though you have it in your refrigerators and pantries. Ask for it every day and not just for yourself, but also for the working poor, the homeless, and the refugees.

The complexities of poverty in our own country and in the world are overwhelming. These are not made better by our failure to ask for daily bread for all. I do not know what power these prayers evoke, but I do know that the prayers of the saints go up to God who gives bread.

"Forgive our sins as we also forgive those who sin against us." Walking through this door isn't like strolling in the park. There are steep steps to climb. Admitting our own need for forgiveness and forgiving others of their sins is sometimes quite difficult. The wounds may be so deep and the atrocities so violent that it seems nearly impossible to forgive. And it may take time. So the value of praying this part of the prayer is at the very least a way of disciplining ourselves to forgive as often and as readily as we can. Perhaps the discipline of habitually forgiving the small things prepares us and strengthens us for forgiving the larger ones.

God sets the pace for us in this. His mercy and forgiveness toward us are boundless, so we pray these words remembering what has been done for us, and hoping in the power of this kind of speech to move us to embody forgiveness.

I am relieved that Jesus added this line to the prayer, and I take heart that though I am a sinner this petition is available to me all the time, just as it is for you. So when you pray for yourself about your sins, you are also praying for me and for your children and for the people you love so much and who also have sin in their lives. And we can know that God is not surprised nor put off by our need to ask forgiveness.



"Lead us not to temptation." Perhaps this is a poetic way of saying, "God if you don't lead me I will surely cut my own path and run straight into evil." We are saying we cannot go through the day thinking we will survive by our own spiritual muscle. We need help; we need direction, and redirection. We need restraint and we need deliverance from the consequence of evil. The prayer then is a call for rescue from the love of sin. My experience has been that this is not a one-time prayer, any more than my need for bread is a one-time thing.

It seems important to me that all the lines of the prayer are intricately related. And it is all about our dependence. We are too weak to make it on our own, and the good news is, God's own son says, "Here, I will help you, pray this prayer."

We come to church to hear again who we are and to whom we belong. We belong to a God who sent his son to say, "Speak to God, he is listening." We have not been thrust on this journey of life by a God who pushes back and says, "I hope you make it." No, our God says, "Speak—I'm listening."



## Such As These

BETH BOWERS

*Beth Bowers is a graduate student in New Testament at Rochester College in Michigan. She presented this sermon in a homiletics class on November 14, 2006.*

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10.13–16, NIV).

It's quite a concept: the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is near. The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. This is what the kingdom of God is like. What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? The kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! You are not far from the kingdom of God.

What is the kingdom of God? Is it the far off eschatological reign of God, or was it Jesus' ministry on earth? Or, is it God's presence within the church now? Whatever the full answer may be, what we do see is that the kingdom of God is essential in the world imagined in Mark's Gospel, and it seems to be inextricably linked to the identity of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental question in Mark's narrative centers around the identity of Jesus: Who am I? And in this whirlwind of narrative, miracles, and teaching Mark begs the question from us in return: Who are we? It is unfair, you know—we get the inside scoop with these questions. We know the beginning, we know the end, and Mark gives us great directions for the journey. We have the benefit of knowing from the very beginning that he is "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1.1). We know that "He has risen. He is not here" (16.6). We know, too, that "whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant" (10.43). And I think that is where Mark wants to take us in this journey today.

Now, as is usual in Mark's narrative, the disciples just didn't get it. Their confusion about the elusive kingdom of God was greater than ours. And Jesus takes time (and time and time again) to show them, tell

1. Frederick Aquino notes that the concept of kingdom is "inextricably linked in the person of Jesus" in his essay, "Mark and Becoming Fully Human," in *Preaching Mark's Unsettling Messiah*, eds. David Fleer and David Bland (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 59-71.