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The Lord's Prayer

Gregory A. Smith

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Text (NIV)

Matthew 6

⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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 "This, then, is how you should pray:
"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 today our daily bread.
¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'

¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Luke 11

¹ One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

² He said to them, "When you pray, say:
"Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation."

⁵ Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶ because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'
⁷ "Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.'
⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

⁹ "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

¹¹ "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Context

- Variations between Matthew 6 and Luke 11

"Though the evidence for two traditions is strong, equally significant is the fact that there are two entirely different historical settings of the prayer. Unless one is prepared to say that one or the other is made up, the reasonable explanation is that Jesus taught this sort of prayer often during his

itinerant ministry and that Matthew records one occasion and Luke another” (Carson, introduction to commentary on Matt. 6:9-13).

- Two different settings
 - Matthew 6 is embedded within the Sermon on the Mount, and more specifically, in a section of Jesus’ lesson dealing with spiritual disciplines that one should practice privately rather than for others’ commendation (giving, prayer, fasting).
 - Luke 11 contains a series of teachings regarding prayer, prompted by the disciples’ observation of Jesus praying (v. 1).
- Basis for flexibility

“There is a key lesson that we can learn from the differences in these two versions, one that can help us as we seek to pray Jesus’ way. This lesson is *flexibility*. Whether these are two prayers of Jesus or two adaptations of one prayer, the witness that they provide when taken together invites us to be flexible in our use of this prayer” (Dodd, p. 47).
- A prayer worthy of imitation
 - Jesus said, “This, then, is how you should pray.” He didn’t say, “This is what you should pray.” We shouldn’t attribute unusual powers to the specific words of this prayer. Jesus himself decried mindless, repetitive prayers (Matt. 6:7).
 - Nevertheless, the truth behind these words is extremely powerful. There is benefit to be found in reciting the prayer verbatim as well as in praying extemporaneously along the themes expressed in the prayer—as long as either act is done from a sincere heart (Dodd, pp. 48-50).

Structure of Matthew’s Version

- “[T]he first three [petitions] are cast in terms of God’s glory (‘your . . . your . . . your’); the others in terms of our good (‘us . . . us . . . us’)” (Carson, introduction to commentary on Matt. 6:9-13).
- This distinction divides the prayer into two main parts preceded by a clause of address.
 - Address: “Our Father in heaven” (9b)
 - Petitions for God’s glory: name, kingdom, will (9c-10)
 - Petitions for human good: bread, forgiveness, deliverance (11-13)
- The doxology often recited at the end of the prayer (“For thine is the kingdom . . .”) is not a part of the biblical text. Some trace it to the *Didache* 8.2, a document that dates to the early second century (Dodd, pp. 46, 50-51). Carson concludes that “the MS evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of omission,” acknowledging, nevertheless, that “[t]he doxology itself . . . is theologically profound and contextually suitable” (s.v.).

Interpretation of Matthew’s Version

Verse 9

Father

- There is some disagreement among scholars as to whether God’s identity as Father was essentially a Jewish concept affirmed by Jesus, or whether it is a new emphasis of the Christian era.
 - Some emphasize the continuity of Jesus’ teaching and practice with those of the Old Testament and Jewish religion: “Jesus addressed God as ‘Father’ in his prayers and taught his disciples to do the same This was the custom of pious Jewish Palestinians” (Dodd, p. 37).
 - However, as Stein has noted, “This portrayal [of God as a Father] . . . is surprisingly rare in the Old Testament. There God is specifically called the Father of the nation of Israel . . . or the Father of certain individuals . . . only fifteen times.” He goes on to say, “The teaching of the Fatherhood of God takes a decided turn with Jesus, for ‘Father’ was his favorite term for addressing God. It appears on his lips some sixty-five times in the Synoptic Gospels and over one hundred times in John” (p. 247).
 - Carson observes that “[t]he overwhelming tendency in Jewish circles was to multiply titles ascribing sovereignty, lordship, glory, grace, and the like to God Against such a background, Jesus’ habit of addressing God as his own Father (Mark 14:36) and teaching his disciples to do the same could only appear familiar and presumptuous to opponents, personal and gracious to followers” (Carson, s.v.).

- Regardless of the relative newness of the revelation of God as Father, the fact that Jesus uses this term of address expresses an important aspect of our relationship with God. Through prayer we attest to a familial intimacy with God and claim his care for us in a manner analogous to that of a faithful human father.

Our Father

- The use of plural pronouns (not just here, but throughout the prayer) stresses that there is a corporate dimension to prayer and the Christian life at large.

in heaven

- This emphasizes the transcendent nature of the God to whom we pray.

hallowed

- “Hallowed” comes from the Greek *hagiazō* (to sanctify, make holy).

your name

- God’s name is that which represents Him.
- He is zealous that his name convey a true sense of who He is. He is therefore protective of his name. This is perhaps analogous to the way that a corporation registers certain names, images, and slogans to represent it, then fiercely guards against the misuse of those symbols.

hallowed be your name

- The Decalogue includes the injunction, “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (Exod. 20:7). To misuse God’s name is certainly diametrically opposed to hallowing it.
- How might we hallow God’s name? Conversely, how can one misuse it?
 - Surely the use of God’s name and other verbiage conveying spiritual reality (heaven, hell, etc.) should not be used lightly or in a manner that contradicts biblical teaching.
 - But there is more. Hallowing God’s name is not just a matter of how we talk about God and spiritual things. We can equate God’s name with his reputation. Our whole pattern of life—actions and words—should unequivocally attribute greatness, holiness, and mercy to God.
 - “[W]hen we pray ‘hallowed be your name’ we are praying for ourselves and for all believers that we may live up to our ‘family name’ and honor God with our lives. . . . God’s reputation is more intertwined with our own than we would sometimes like to admit” (Dodd, p. 57).
- Praying this clause reminds us that we have not been called to enlarge or protect our own reputation, but to magnify and defend God’s.

Verse 10

your kingdom come

- The prayer’s reference to the coming of God’s kingdom indicates that He is at work in history with the ultimate purpose of reversing the effects of sin and reestablishing dominion over all things.
- Through this portion of the prayer we identify God as King, thus acknowledging his lordship and our identity as subjects in his kingdom. By implication, we admit that we are not autonomous, but dependent on his favor and indebted to do his will.
- Just what is the kingdom? It is both eschatological and personal.
 - Prophetically, it refers to the future state of the earth in which Jesus Christ will assume the throne of David and rule over all of humanity. Glimpses of this kingdom appear in the writings of Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles. We look forward to Jesus’ imminent appearing, which will ultimately give way to his reign.
 - The kingdom was inaugurated to some extent by Jesus in his first coming. There is an already/not yet paradox at work here. Though he came announcing that the kingdom had

come near, he was rejected by his people, and the political aspect of the kingdom was postponed until later in God's prophetic timeline.

- Nevertheless, we begin to see the present reality of the kingdom as we surrender to Jesus' lordship—initially at conversion and thereafter through progressive growth in holiness as well as through our witness to others. Thus Jesus commanded us to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33).
- Hanegraaff states that praying for God's kingdom to come involves three dimensions: submission of our hearts to his authority; the reclaiming of the world for God's glory through our testimony; and the anticipation of his ultimate reign on earth (pp. 43-45).

your will be done

- This clause continues the theme of the previous two, which express aspiration for God to be glorified in and around us.
- It is no reluctant resignation to divine sovereignty, but a statement of enthusiastic desire that God's purposes be fulfilled—beginning in our hearts.
- Furthermore, it sets the tone for the remainder of the prayer, in which we will make various petitions, all the while admitting that their outcome is subject to the will of God.
- Acknowledging God as sovereign is the basis for bold prayers of faith (He can do anything), but such prayers should be tempered by a willingness to accept his answers as rooted in his wisdom, power, and mercy (Hanegraaff, p. 47). Thus praying with an “if” clause is not antithetical to biblical faith (Dodd, pp. 76-79).

on earth as it is in heaven

- Grammatically, this clause modifies “your will be done.” In spirit, though, it describes the hallowing of God's name and the coming of God's kingdom as well.
- To a large extent we can only imagine what things must be like in heaven—in God's very presence. Surely they must be very different than the circumstances of earthly life. No sin pollutes his presence. His purposes are unopposed. Justice is always served. There is no sorrow, no sickness, and no pain. He is the object of perfect worship.
- Here we express our aspiration for heaven to touch earth, for God to consummate his work of redemption. In so doing we recognize that our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

Verse 11

Give us today our daily bread

- At this point the prayer shifts its focus from God's glory to human needs.
- Through this portion of the prayer we acknowledge our dependence on God for satisfaction of basic needs.
 - “Bread” represents those things that are truly necessary to our survival.
 - Later in this chapter those essentials are identified as food, drink, and clothing (vv. 25ff); elsewhere Paul says, “And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:8).
- Use of *today* and *daily* may seem redundant. It is difficult for us in America to understand the thrust of this part of the prayer. The idea is that sustenance is a daily affair, and that we depend on God to meet our needs one day at a time. We are not to worry about tomorrow, but to trust God today (Matt. 6:34).
- If we have not known hunger, we should be grateful to God. As fortunate as our circumstances may seem, this clause of the prayer is absolutely relevant.
 - We cannot take God's future blessings for granted. How much of a disaster (natural, medical, financial, etc.) would it take for us to lose all of our security? We are utterly dependent on our Father in heaven.
“The idea of God ‘giving’ the food in no way diminishes responsibility to work . . . but presupposes . . . that all good things, even our ability to work and earn our food, come

from God's hand It is a lesson easily forgotten when wealth multiplies and absolute self-sufficiency is portrayed as a virtue" (Carson, s.v.).

- For many people around the world the request for daily provision is absolutely consistent with reality. The corporate nature of the request ("Give us") suggests that we should be concerned for needs other than our respective households.

Verse 12

Forgive us our debts

- "Debt" (*opheilema*) admits several meanings, including those of financial obligation, moral duty, and sinful offense (Hauck).
 - Luke's version of the prayer uses "sins" (*hamartia*) (11:4a) where Matthew's uses "debts" (v. 12a).
 - Vv. 14-15 refer to the debts of v. 12 as "sins" (*paraptoma*). In the Septuagint and New Testament, *paraptoma* is typically used to convey the idea of a fault, whether against God or a fellow human being (Michaelis, p. 848).
 - Matt. 6:14-15—sins against fellow man
 - Matt. 6:15—sins against God
 - Mark 11:25—sins against God
 - Rom. 5:15, 17—Adam's transgression
 - Rom. 5:20—sin (generically)
 - Rom. 11:11-12—Israel's rejection of the gospel
 - Gal. 6:1—moral failure
 - Therefore, we should view the Matthew's debt language as referring to "'sins,' here conceived as something owed God (whether sins of commission or of omission)" (Carson, s.v.).
- Our need for forgiveness is analogous to our need for nutrition: It is essential and frequent. The underlying assumption is that God's children are not free from sin as long as they remain on the earth.

Forgive us . . . as we also have forgiven our debtors

- This portion of the prayer is analogous to Mark 11:25: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."
- This clause does not imply that we earn God's forgiveness by extending forgiveness to those who offend us. Rather, it teaches that an attitude of genuine repentance on our part necessarily includes a willingness to forgive others. If we have a proper view of the magnitude of our own sins against God, and consequently of his mercy in offering to forgive us, we cannot help but find it natural to forgive those who have sinned against us (Carson, s.v.).
- Verses 14-15 explain that God's forgiveness of our sins is conditioned upon our forgiveness of fellow men. The bottom line is that an attitude of vengeful bitterness—as opposed to a forgiving spirit—will keep us from enjoying the blessings of continuing fellowship with God.
- To deny a fellow human being forgiveness while asking God to forgive us is ridiculous; it is an assertion that God has less reason to be offended by our sin than we do to be offended by another person's fault toward us. This point is illustrated quite clearly in a parable recorded in Matt. 18:23-35. God will deal severely with those who, having received forgiveness, fail to extend it to others.
- It comes as no surprise, then, that Paul wrote, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." God's merciful action toward us (both past and ongoing) goes hand in hand with our merciful action toward those who offend us.

Verse 13

lead us not into temptation

- The term *peirasmos* ("temptation") is ambiguous.
 - According to Carson (s.v.), it can refer to a moral test (James 1:2; cf. 1Cor 10:13); an inducement to evil (James 1:13-14); or, by extension, a yielding to temptation (Mark 14:38; Gal 6:1).

- Seesemann concurs, noting that in secular literature it is used of “medical experiments.” This background forms the basis for its application to the idea of God testing man, man being tempted to sin, and men tempting God through unbelief (p. 822).
- According to Carson, the interpretation of this clause, if approached inflexibly, is problematic: It could be viewed as (1) asking God not to do what he cannot do (i.e., induce evil) or (2) preserving us from trials—something we are to expect in the Christian life (Carson, s.v.).
- Carson resolves this tension as follows: “It is possible that the causative form of the Lord's Prayer is, similarly, not meant to be unmediated but has a permissive nuance: ‘Let us not be brought into temptation [i.e., by the devil].’ This interpretation is greatly strengthened if the word ‘temptation’ can be taken to mean ‘trial or temptation that results in fall’ It also may be that we are forcing this sixth petition into too rigid a mold. . . . a prayer requesting to be spared testings may not be incongruous when placed beside exhortations to consider such testings, when they come, as pure joy” (s.v.).
- Jesus’ instructed the disciples in Gethsemane, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Matt. 26:41; Mark 14:38). Bearing similarities to the Lord’s Prayer, this language implies that *peirasmos*, unaccompanied by vigilance and prayer, can lead to spiritual and/or moral failure. Thus we may view the clause under consideration as a petition for divine preservation from circumstances that would lead us to sin.

but deliver us from the evil one

- This clause is in direct contrast (“but”) to the previous one, giving us some sense of how it should be interpreted.
- *Rhyomai* (“deliver”) can convey either protection or deliverance (Kasch, p. 988). According to Carson, “which way the verb is taken largely depends on how the preceding clause is understood” (s.v.).
- *Tou ponerou* (“the evil one”) can be translated either “the evil thing” or “the evil one.” According to Dodd, context allows for three interpretations: “the devil, the evil person or the evil thing” (p. 108). Carson holds from grammar and context that the phrase most likely refers to the devil (s.v.).
- Both Dodd and Hanegraaff associate this clause with Paul’s teaching about the armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18). Prayer is one of the instruments that God has provided for our warfare with the devil, who is identified as “the evil one” in Eph. 6:16.

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