

“The Model Prayer”
Matthew 6:7-15
August 23, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

One of the big dangers with the Lord’s Prayer is over-familiarity. We recite it frequently in church and in other Christian settings, and the very frequency can dull us to its meaning. Years ago, I remember seeing one of the early Star Trek episodes in which the crew of The Enterprise came upon a small group of people on some remote planet who had a ritual they recited multiple times a day. The words were more gibberish than anything, and their ritual at first made no sense. But upon further analysis, they discovered that the words to this ritual were a corrupted version of the Pledge of Allegiance commonly recited by Americans. This small colony was all that was left of America after some cataclysmic event destroyed all but this small group who had managed to flee the earth for another planet. They kept reciting the words of the Pledge of Allegiance long after those words had lost all meaning. It is possible to do that with the Lord’s Prayer. I went to a high school in which the Lord’s Prayer was recited at the beginning of every single class period. It sounded something like those disclaimers at the end of the commercials for lawyers in which the announcer says as fast as he can, “No representation is being made that the legal services....”

This kind of meaningless repetition is exactly what Jesus tells us not to do in our praying. Jesus is not against repetition. He himself prayed multiple times for the same thing in the Garden of Gethsemane. What he is against is *meaningless* repetition, thinking that God is the kind of God who can be persuaded to act on our behalf if we simply use enough words. Jesus gives us this prayer in order to teach us how to pray. Let’s look at it today like we are seeing it for the first time, and allow Jesus, the expert on prayer, to instruct us on this important topic. The prayer can be divided into the three areas.

I. The Address

Jesus directs us to address God in prayer as “Our Father in heaven.” If you were blind and someone walked up to you and said “Hello,” what is the first thing you are going to say in response? If you don’t recognize the voice, you are going to ask, “Who is this?” It’s impossible to have a satisfying personal conversation if you don’t know who you’re talking to. Since prayer is an expression of a relationship with God, Jesus starts by reminding us who it is we are talking to when we pray. The two errors in prayer he has mentioned both err in this area. The Pharisees think they are praying to a God whose approval or disapproval of them doesn’t matter, because they are most

concerned with impressing people in their prayers. The Gentiles think that God is the kind of god who is impressed with lots of words. Jesus says that God is neither of those. Rather, he is our Father in heaven.

To address God as “Father” is a privilege of surprising and staggering proportions. It is easy to forget that this is not the way God was addressed in the Old Testament. It would be presumptuous for us to address God as our heavenly Father except for the fact that Jesus tells us to do so. When we approach God in prayer, we need first of all to remember that he is willing to hear and to help. That’s the way fathers are, isn’t it? I was riding my bicycle this week when my phone rang. It’s a bit of a hassle to answer it, because I keep it in a Ziploc bag to protect it from my sweat. So I have to stop my bike, pull the bag out of the rear pocket of my bike jersey, open up the bag and then answer the phone, all while still breathing heavily. But when the phone rang, I did all those things required to answer it because of one thought that came to my mind. “It might be one of my kids calling.” They have a tug on my heart that makes me willing and even eager to hear from them.

In his classic book, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer gives the following summary of the Father’s love for those who are in Christ by faith. “God has received us as sons, and loves us with the same steadfast affection with which He eternally loves His beloved Only Begotten. There are no distinctions of affections in the divine family. *We are all loved just as fully as Jesus is loved.*” This is the case even though we are sinners, because in just a few lines Jesus is going to remind us of our need to ask for forgiveness when we pray. We are loved by our heavenly Father just as much as Jesus is loved, even though we are still sinners. This is Jesus saying this, not something I have made up. We need to remember this often when we pray. One practical application of this that I have found helpful is to pause at the beginning of prayer and allow the Holy Spirit to bring a fresh realization of the Father’s love.

Let’s go back to the first word of the Lord’s Prayer, the pronoun ‘Our.’ Jesus joins us both to himself and to one another in this word. Jesus doesn’t say to address God as “my Father” but as “*our* Father.” We grow in our grasp of the Father’s love for us in community with others. We can each learn more about the Father’s love through others in the church community. That is God’s design.

This Father to whom we pray is “in heaven.” That doesn’t describe his address so much as it does his authority. To be in heaven means that God is in control. If addressing God as our Father tells us that he is willing to help us, addressing him as the One in heaven tells us that he is able to help us. It also tells us that from his heavenly vantage point God knows things we don’t know. This prepares us to submit to his answers to our prayers when he says “No.” I received such an answer to prayer this week. Our youngest daughter has been trying to start her own business, and she had a space in a big wholesalers

market in New York this week. I prayed for a large, breakthrough order for her. The show has ended, and no such order has come through. Is it because God was not able to do so? No, because he has all authority in heaven. Is it because he doesn't love her enough? No, he loves her with a far greater love than even that of her earthly father. Why then did God say 'No'? Because he is in heaven and he sees further than we do. It is because of his love and wisdom that he has answered as he did.

II. The Petitions for God's Concerns

The rest of the prayer includes six petitions, three for God's concerns and three for our concerns. The first petition for God's concerns is to pray that his name would be hallowed. The word 'hallowed' is not one we commonly use today. What does it mean? It is similar to the word 'holy.' What is meant by the name of God? When the Bible speaks of the name of God, it is speaking of the nature and essence of God. So what are we asking for when we pray this? We are not asking that God would act in a holy manner, because it is impossible for him to do otherwise. Rather, we are asking that his holiness might be recognized. The holiness of God is not just an attribute of God, but also describes the very nature of God. So in this petition we are asking God to help people see the Godness of God. One of the books on my shelves has the interesting title, *When People are Big and God is Small*. The subtitle of the book then reads, "Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man." All three of these problems occur when the name of God is not hallowed, when God is small in our eyes. So we pray in this first petition that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ would be the only God to be recognized as God. We are praying that all other rivals would be put away. The big rival to God being God today is when self-fulfillment is made to be god. This false god of the self even puts the God of the Bible as subservient to it. His purpose is to serve our desires and our will, not the other way around. So we are praying for these upside-down values to be put right, both in our own lives and in the lives of our communities.

The second petition, "Your kingdom come," is to pray for at least three things. First, we are praying for the Church to grow as people are converted to faith in Christ. As I have said before, the Church is an outpost of the coming kingdom, showing what heaven is like by the quality of our life together. We want the Church to grow and prosper because we want to rescue men, women and children from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and hope. Second, we are praying for Jesus' return when his kingdom will be fully established. Third, we are praying for ourselves, asking God to extend his reign over every part of our lives, including our minds, our emotions, our wills and our desires.

The third petition is, **“your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”** How is the will of God done in heaven? It is done instantly, completely, joyfully and whole-heartedly. Since the will of God is good, we want that will to prevail on the earth. We are praying here for a reversal of our natural tendency, which is to desire our will to be done in heaven and on the earth. You will never know peace from God until you come to the place of saying, “Not my will, but your will be done, O God.” Until then, your life will be filled with efforts to control others and with anger when they don’t cooperate with your plan. Your life will also be filled with fear and anxiety.

III. The Petitions for Our Concerns

Before looking at the three petitions for our concerns, it is important to recognize that God’s concerns are listed first. It is important for us to maintain this priority for many reasons. Let me list just two. First of all, we pray for God’s concerns first because that is the nature of reality. God is the center of the universe, and there is no room for any of us in the center. To put ourselves in that role requires that we escape reality, since the only real world is the one with God in the center. To live in a world without God in the center is like trying to live in a world in which you deny the reality of gravity. Such an approach to life will not work, and approaching life without God being God will have catastrophic results.

A second reason God’s concerns need to be first is that doing so will deliver us from anxious, demanding prayers. Sometimes we pray with hearts that are desperate and anxious. We have already concluded that we must have something, and we usually even have it all planned out in our minds about how it should work. We then go to God to get him to make it so. There is no submitting to the Godness of God in such prayers. I already mentioned my prayers for my daughter this week. I found it very helpful as I prayed for her to remember that God loved her, that he knew better how to run her life than did I, that he knows how to bring about his reign in her heart. Remembering that, I was free to ask with peace instead of anxiety.

The fourth petition, **“Give us this day our daily bread,”** speaks I think of all our material needs. It speaks of necessities, not luxuries. It would include the obvious things of food, clothing and shelter. Gainful employment would also be under this category, since that is the normal way God provides these things for us. We might also include the health required to work in this way, the car needed to get us back and forth to work, and many other such necessities. Martin Luther wrote extensively on the Lord’s Prayer, and he pointed out the significance of the word “us.” I am to pray not just for my own needs, but for those of others as well. We could pray for a thriving economy. I have made it a prayer goal to pray regularly for those in our congregation who lose their jobs, asking God to provide them with good-paying, stable jobs. Also

included in this petition is the need to pray for justice for the poor. There are those who exploit others for their own personal gain, and it is often the poorest and weakest who suffer the most from such exploitation. I don't mind wading into a political issue here and telling you that I pray against the possible state lottery and widespread legalization of gambling in our state, precisely because of the devastating effects gambling often has, especially upon the poor.

The fifth petition concerns our relationships with God and with one another. **“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”** We see in this the readiness of God to forgive in that Jesus is the one who tells us to ask for this. He wouldn't tell us to do so if God were to deny such a request. But notice the important second phrase. We ask for his forgiveness to be consistent with our forgiveness of those sinning against us. It is a dangerous thing to pray this prayer, because we are asking God not to forgive us if we have a lack of forgiveness for others. Jesus makes this more explicit in the verses immediately after the prayer, saying that God will forgive us if we forgive others and he won't forgive us if we don't forgive others. Does Jesus mean that we earn his forgiveness by forgiving others? No, that is not his meaning. He is saying that a natural result of being forgiven by God is that we begin to have a heart to forgive others. Where there is a lack of such a forgiving heart, we show that we have not experienced the Father's forgiveness of us. Why is there this connection between God's forgiveness of us and ours of others? I like what John Stott says in answer to this. “Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it proves that we have minimized our own.”

The final petition is not to be led into temptation, but to be delivered from evil. Once we are forgiven, we don't want to fall again into sin. We also recognize our weakness and how prone we are to falling, so that it is by God's power alone that we will be able to stand. So the final petition is one of humility, just like the first one was where we asked God's name to be set apart as holy.

CONCLUSION:

Poet George Herbert once wrote a poem on prayer. It was a relatively short poem, consisting of only one-hundred words, none of which was a verb. It was simply a series of rich images about prayer. Let me mention just two of these images. He called prayer “the soul's blood.” As blood keeps the body alive, so prayer keeps us spiritually alive. And he also called prayer “reversed thunder.” It is reversed because it goes from earth back to heaven, thundering with the kind of volume impossible to be ignored. Is there some choice you need to make in light of this?