



## THE LORD'S PRAYER

Catalog No. 7182

Matthew 6:9-13

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November 4th, 2001

A recent public opinion poll asked whether the events of September 11th had changed people's daily lives. It was a shock to learn that 83% of those who responded said that September 11th had not in fact changed their lives.

Observing the response of our nation and our world to the tragedy of September 11th, one thing seems clear: when tragedy strikes, people still think religion, and particularly prayer, has an important role to play. In times like this people usually respond either by blaming God or turning to him, and prayer is the means by which people turn to God in times of need. This has been played out repeatedly, as we have seen in the media. From the national day of prayer to prayers being offered at sporting events, on the Internet, in our e-mail boxes, to our prayer services here in church, people are taking God and prayer seriously. No one is complaining about prayer in schools these days; in fact, we expect there to be prayer in schools.

But what is Biblical prayer, Christian prayer? Often in our syncretistic culture, religious ideas and beliefs appear to blend together. Spirituality and prayer are used freely to mean whatever we want them to mean at that particular moment. Why do people turn to prayer for hope in the madness of this world that seems bent on self-destruction? It is because God walked in our shoes and died for our shortcomings. But our hope goes further than this. This God who created us in his image and loved us enough to die for us, also longs to live in relationship with us – and prayer is the primary vehicle through which we can enter into that relationship.

As we look at what Biblical, Christian prayer is we will use Jesus' answer to his disciple's question, "How then should we pray?" to help us.

Our task is not easy. At a class in Regent College we were working through that section in the book of Philippians where Paul talks about "praying without ceasing," when a student asked our professor about the nature of prayer and how it worked. His answer was surprising. He said, "You don't expect me to know how prayer works, do you?" He was implying that only God understands the miracle of prayer, but understanding prayer isn't nearly as important as actually entering into it.

Before I can enter into something, I have to fully understand it. I can get so caught up in reading about and studying prayer that I forget to pray. So I'm certainly

not an authority on the subject of prayer. I'm a fellow-journeyer with you, one who is often distracted and confused during prayer. But I too know that I need God. I need him because he loves me radically. I need him because only in him do I have hope.

James Houston in his book *The Transforming Power of Prayer*, says the following:

I used to think that prayer was a spiritual exercise – something that needed to be worked at, like running or vaulting. But I was never any good at sports, and perhaps I would never be any good at prayer either. After years of feeling useless and guilty, I began to realize the truth of a comment made by one of the early Fathers of the church, Clement of Alexandria. He said that "prayer is keeping company with God." This began to give me a new focus on prayer. I began to see prayer more as a friendship than a rigorous discipline. It started to become more of a relationship and less of a performance.<sup>1</sup>

These words comfort me and give me direction. They remind me that building a relationship with God takes time. It is a lifelong journey.

The Lord's Prayer in the gospels of Matthew and Luke is offered as a model of prayer. For our text today we'll take the version from Matthew, the one that most of us have learned and prayed. The context for this model prayer is the Sermon on the Mount. Specifically, this section is the "job description" for discipleship. When Jesus offered up the Lord's Prayer as an example, he intended his primary audience to be his disciples.

What then are the primary characteristics of discipleship that affect our understanding of true Christian prayer? We have two examples in the sermon. The first, a positive one that we should emulate as Christ's disciples; the second, a negative example of what we shouldn't do as we enter into prayer.

Jesus' sermon opens with the beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted, the pure in heart. The context for both discipleship and prayer requires that we begin from a pure heart: a heart that knows its need for God, one that knows that mankind is completely dependent on God's goodness and grace.

The second aspect of the context of prayer is that it is to be directed to God and not to men. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 6:5-6:

**“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”** (Matt 6:5-6, NIV)

Some days after the tragedy of September 11, I sat down to watch a baseball game on television and heard a man pray before the game began. I was all for that, but the man was not praying to God but to the people in the stadium. He was performing for the forty thousand gathered there rather than submitting to the God who could help and save us. To use Jesus’ language, he was “standing on the street corner to be seen by men,” rather than drawing into a personal relationship with our “Father who is unseen and will reward in secret.”

Biblical prayer requires that we have a pure heart and that we seek the ear of our Heavenly Father, not the eyes of those around us. Prayer begins with a pure heart that seeks and is dependant on God.

Let us read the text together:

**Our Father who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy 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 lead us into temptation, but deliver us  
from evil.  
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the  
glory, forever. Amen.** (Matt 6:9-13, NASB)

From this model prayer for Christians we will observe a number of helpful things to meditate on as we let this text shape our prayer life.

## **We Have an Audience**

The opening four words of Jesus’ prayer, “Our Father in heaven,” are very significant. They remind us that we have personal and direct access to God the Father because he is our Father. The Creator himself is available to us! We don’t need an appointment. “Our people” do not have to contact “his people.” We don’t have to send an e-mail, make a phone call or schedule a time in our palm. God the Father, the one who should be too busy for us, is not too busy for us at all. In fact, it is quite the opposite. In Luke 18, Jesus says that we can even nag our Father constantly until he finally gives in. In prayer, through the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us and acting as our intermediary, we have an audience with God himself.

If we were to take a poll here this morning rating our earthly fathers on a scale of 1 to 10, we probably would cover the entire spectrum. Some of us have earthly fa-

thers who model faithfulness, provision, care and protection, just to name some of the characteristics we ascribe to fatherhood. Others have fathers who are less than ideal. But we all have an intuitive understanding of what a father should be. We can rest assured that our Heavenly Father won’t let us down. He loves us so deeply that he sent his Son to endure rejection, to die for us and restore us into relationship with him. He longs to spend time with us. He wants to be involved in every part of our lives. He wants us to treat him like he is as present, active and visible as our earthly fathers.

Another aspect to note in praying “Our Father” is that we have the same access to God, the Heavenly Father, as Jesus. Because of the indwelling presence of the Spirit in us, we too are sons and daughters of the creator God, possessing all the same privileges of Jesus himself. We aren’t instructed to address God any differently than Jesus does. This not only implies that we have access to God, but that we have been given the authority of Jesus himself.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends forth his disciples with the authority to drive out evil spirits and heal every kind of disease and sickness. In the Great Commission, in Matthew 28, Jesus declares, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to you.” He promised be with them always. Now we have confidence in prayer because we have the same status as Jesus before God. We don’t go before God empty-handed, hoping that our prayer will be heard. We can confidently enter into prayer with our Heavenly Father, knowing that he will hear us.

## **We Have Authority**

Next, we come to the three “thy” clauses in the Lord’s prayer: “Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” Notice that the verbs here are imperatives. The significance of this is that an imperative is a form of command. I like to think of these clauses as drill sergeant or “coach-speak.” Drill sergeants don’t ask questions; they give orders. It is amazing that this is the kind of language found in these three lines of the Lord’s Prayer. What Jesus models for us and instructs us with is “coach-speak.” We are given the freedom to demand some things from God.

But exactly what is it that we are to demand of him? We are instructed to use “coach-speak” with God when we enter into these three things: hallowing, or setting apart, his name; bring in, or make visible, his kingdom; and have his will be done on earth. These three clauses all point to exactly the same place: towards heaven breaking through on earth.

Praying that God’s named be hallowed will result in people around us knowing the true character of God and his continual graciousness towards them. In the Biblical world, one’s name is directly related to his character. Have you ever wondered why Abraham, Sarah, Peter and Paul have their names changed in the Bible? One reason is because God wants their names to reflect

their character and role in his plan of salvation. When we pray that God makes sure that his name, that is, his character, be hallowed, we are demanding that God make his character known on earth as it is in heaven. We are praying, "God, reveal yourself to my family, to my friends and colleagues as the loving God that you are. Show the world that you don't desire that people should die senselessly, but that you are grieved by what man has done."

Likewise, when we demand of God, "Thy kingdom come," we are praying that the reality that God is present and active be made clear to the entire world. We demand of God that he be as active and present here and now as he is and will be in heaven. Praying for the kingdom is acknowledging that God is real and at work in the here and now.

The last imperative is to pray that God's will be done. We are to exhort God to bring about the completion of his plan to restore our relationship with him, so that once again we will live in his presence, free from pain and suffering. God's will is to be in relationship with us, to be present as our good, faithful and loving Father.

These three imperative clauses point us in exactly the same direction: to what God is already doing. It's important to note that Jesus' example of prayer doesn't start with what our needs but what God is doing and longs to do. Jesus is concerned with our needs. However, we must not start with ourselves, but with God. And we begin by getting on the same page with God, by praying that heaven will break through and be present and visible on earth. That's what Jesus means when he adds that phrase "on earth as it is in heaven." God's desire and plan has heaven breaking through and being seen on earth.

On our trip to Moldova and Romania this summer we took a six-hour bus ride from the capital of Moldova to the location of our retreat for the second week. During the last two hours of the trip, a group of the Moldovan girls gathered in the front of the bus and started singing. Shawn Reese, one of the other adult leaders on the trip, commented to me afterwards that riding through the Romanian mountains and listening to the girls sing was like being in heaven. He didn't need to understand the words they were singing. He knew that God was real and was at work on that bus.

That's what we are praying for when we pray these three clauses of the Lord's Prayer. We are taking God seriously. We are proclaiming, first and foremost, that we want what God wants, and that is what is best for us and those around us: God wants to draw us back to himself.

## **We Have Hope**

So we have the context of prayer: a pure heart, our audience in prayer, "Our Heavenly Father," and the authority to pray for the heavens to break through on earth.

But Jesus' model of prayer doesn't stop with who God is and what he is up to in the world. His prayer now goes on to speak to what God is doing in our lives. Next, we discover that God is interested not only in the large issues of his kingdom but also the intimate details of our lives. This breaking in of heaven on earth also includes our personal well-being.

Note that in the last three clauses of the Lord's Prayer the pronouns change from "thy" to "ours." Once again we have a series of imperatives that suggest that we can pray this prayer with confidence. We can be confident that God is committed to providing for us our daily bread. This line reminds us of Israel's exodus story. God provided exactly what the people needed by raining manna on them daily. God is no less concerned for us. By his daily providing manna for Israel, and promising us our daily bread, we are required to trust in his provision and not our own.

The second clause in the last half of the prayer reads, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Forgiveness is at the heart of Christianity and is essential to this prayer, because it correctly assesses our situation. Forgiveness is always preceded by sin. The Lord's Prayer reminds us of our need for forgiveness, and gives us the opportunity to go before our good and gracious Heavenly Father and acknowledge his grace and forgiveness.

The Greek word translated forgiveness helps us understand what God has done for us and what we are called to do for those whom we must forgive. It means to let go, to drop or hold no longer. God does not hold onto the sin that is part of our nature. He has let it go, without any further consideration. In the same way we are charged to pray that we might be able to "let go" of the sins of our debtors.

This brings us to the last clause of the Lord's Prayer, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." This is the only clause of the prayer that begins with a negative, "Do not lead us into temptation." This is followed by another imperative that orders God to deliver or save us from evil or sin. The negative and imperative working together reveal something that we already intuitively know about our Heavenly Father: His intention is not to hand us over to temptation but to deliver us from it. God's desire has always been for us to live in relationship with him and to save us. And we need his deliverance because we can't possibly save ourselves.

Notice how these three phrases work together. They draw attention to our need for sustenance, forgiveness and salvation, while at the same time highlighting God's willingness and ability to provide these things for us when no one else can. We are reminded that, left to our own devices, we are helpless. Without God we would have to provide for ourselves all that we need. We would be without the forgiveness that restores us into relationship with him, and without help when we

try to navigate the evil that is ever-present in this world. But we are not alone. We have a personal Heavenly Father who is committed to us and promises to provide for us, forgive us and save us if we trust in him.

Finally, the Lord's Prayer ends with a crescendo of praise. After praying and acknowledging our need for God and his faithfulness to us, the only possible response is to give him glory, honor and praise: "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

I want to close by sharing one simple illustration showing that my life has been shaped and changed by the kind of prayer modeled by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer.

My story has to do with my formative years growing up in Orland. I became a Christian during the end of my eighth grade year and was blessed to have several people invest in my life during my high school years. The event I want to share with you occurred right before I left Orland to enter my freshman year at Santa Clara University.

An elderly woman named Edith Schmidt, a person with whom I had had next to no contact, approached me one Sunday morning. She was a quiet woman who had been part of the church in Orland for years. She took an old church bulletin, from October 1968, out of her Bible and gave it to me. In it was a small note announcing my birth, nineteen years earlier. Edith told me that she had been praying for me weekly ever since I had been born.

I don't know if I was the only person she was praying for or if she prayed daily for everyone who was born into that church. What I do know is that the faithful prayer of one dear saint undoubtedly, unbeknownst to me, has shaped me in ways that I don't understand. Her faithfulness and commitment to praying for me is inspiring, overwhelming and convicting. I share it with you because it illustrates that prayer is an essential part of our Christian experience—because prayer takes our Heavenly Father, his kingdom and his people, seriously.

1. James Houston, *The Transforming Power of Prayer* (Colorado Springs: Navpress).

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