

*The Lord's Prayer As a Pattern For Our Prayer Life*

Luke 11:1-4 and Matthew 6:1-13

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An atheist was walking through the woods. "What majestic trees! What powerful rivers! What beautiful animals!" he said to himself.

As he was walking alongside the river, he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. He turned to look. He saw a 7-foot grizzly bear charge towards him.

He ran as fast as he could up the path. He looked over his shoulder & saw that the bear was closing in on him. He looked over his shoulder again, & the bear was even closer. He tripped & fell on the ground. He rolled over to pick himself up but saw that the bear was right on top of him, reaching for him with his left paw & raising his right paw to strike him.

At that instant the atheist cried out, "Oh my God!" Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. As a bright light shone upon the man, a voice came out of the sky.

"You deny my existence for all these years, teach others I don't exist and even credit creation to cosmic accident. Do you expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I to count you as a believer?"

The atheist looked directly into the light, "It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask you to treat me as a Christian now, but perhaps you could make the BEAR a Christian?"

"Very well," said the voice.

The light went out. The sounds of the forest resumed. And the bear dropped his right paw, brought both paws together, bowed his head & spoke:

"Lord bless this food, which I am about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen."

What is commonly called "The Lord's Prayer" appears twice in the setting is a little different. In Matthew it is part of the Sermon on the Mount. We will look more closely at his instructions in a couple of weeks, but in today's text he says, "Pray then, like this: '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 forgive our debtors; And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil.'"

The gospel of Luke has a different setting. The disciples came to Jesus asking him to teach them to pray as John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray. In this instance he said, "When you pray say, 'Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.'"

In both instances, and throughout Scripture, prayer is a discipline. It is something that disciples do. It is something that we are hard-wired to do. Disciples *pray*. But, as the biblical commentator and pastor William Barclay once noted, the prayer that Jesus taught was never intended to be more than a teaching tool. In the Judaism of Jesus' day,

“formalism” in prayer was abhorrent. “‘Prayer should not be recited as if a (person) were reading a document;’ and to avoid that, a new prayer should be said every day. As soon as prayer becomes either a fixed task or a burden, it ceases to be prayer in any real sense of the term.”

Throughout the prayer we are reminded who we are, Who God is, our relationship to the God as well as with each other.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.**

17<sup>th</sup> century French mathematician and religious philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote: “God made Man in his own image and Man returned the compliment” or, as someone said to me this past week, “God made Man in his own image and Man, being a gentleman, returned the favor.”

On of the things that we humans tend to forget is that we are the *creature* and God is the *Creator*. The Temptation in the Garden was to be “like God.” In the story of the Tower of Babel, humans joined together to, in the words of Led Zeppelin, “build a stairway to heaven” so that they could look God in the eye as an equal.

Jesus’ prayer is a reminder that prayer is *not* a conversation between equals. It is between the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth and a creature. *But*, and this is a big “but,” God is not uncaring like the ancient philosophers supposed. Nor is God some Eternal Watchmaker who set the world in motion and sits idly watching it wind down like the Deists believe.

No, God is personal, caring, and loving. Jesus called God “Abba”—“Father” and the Apostle Paul embraced this when he taught about prayer. In other words, Jesus reminds us that God wants a relationship with us. That is what we are reminded of in the sacrament of baptism. God claims us. We belong to God. Conversely, God does not belong to us.

The first petition is “**Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**” The Kingdom of God is central to the teaching of Jesus. He talks about it over 100 times throughout the synoptic gospels. To Jesus *the Kingdom is urgent business*. It is the thing that gives our life meaning. “Seek first the Kingdom of God” he told his disciples and then everything else will fall into place.

So many of his parables talk about the need to be constantly ready to do the work of the Kingdom; to make an immediate response. For example, remember the parable of the wedding guests. A king sent out invitations to a wedding and several of the guests were unable to attend because they had other business to take care of, all of which was very important business. What they failed to realize, though, is that loyalty to the King takes priority over everything else in life. It’s kind of like when your parents told you to pick up your room they didn’t mean for you to do it later, or when your wife asks you to open a jar, she doesn’t mean tomorrow, or when a husband asks to have a service station attendant check the fluid levels in the car, he doesn’t mean to wait until the “check engine” light to come on.

**The Kingdom of God is also precious.** In a parable Jesus once compared it to a pearl of great value, so valuable that a gem merchant sold all that he had in order to possess it. In another case he said that it was like buried treasure that was once found.

**The Kingdom of God is *alive and growing*.** Jesus said that it was like a mustard seed. It is something that starts small, but takes on a life of its own and grows into a mighty tree. He said that it was like a pinch of leaven that transforms a whole jar of flour.

Tied to the Kingdom of God is the *will* of God. Too often the will of God is sorely misunderstood. Time and time again Jesus went against the grain of common thought by saying that God does not make people broken. Brokenness is evil.

Years ago I was struck by something that the Methodist theologian Leslie Weatherhead wrote in his book aptly titled The Will of God. He noted that we should never attribute to the will of God that which we would call “criminal” if you or I did it. In other words, it is not God’s will that someone be struck by a tragedy. Something good can come out of a bad situation, but that is not the same as God willing the situation. That is God *redeeming* the circumstances.

No, when Jesus prayed for the will of God he was telling his disciples to pray that they would be able to recognize and be a part of what God was doing in the world. In other words, as I ended last week’s sermon,

“God, put me in the path of what you are doing in this world. Show me where you are working. Run over me by your presence and guide my path to the Other Side. Amen.”

**Give us this day our daily bread.** Bread was a metaphor for the essentials in life. The prayer is asking God to help us discern our *needs* from our *desires*. It was Gandhi who once noted that there are enough resources in this world to meet everyone’s need, but not everyone’s greed. Much of the *want* in the world is due to the sin of greed. Greed is our unwillingness to share from, what the Mennonites call, our *increase*—that which is above and beyond their needs.

Our wealth is a tool entrusted to us to do the work of the Kingdom. Like a hammer we can use our resources to either do the work of the Kingdom of God or try to destroy it. The choice is ours to make.

**Forgive us our debts, sins or trespasses as we forgive.**

Let’s not get hung up on debts, sins and trespasses. They are indicative of different theological view points inherent in respective gospels. There are two key components to this petition. First, for Jesus, forgiveness is not optional equipment. That is why he once said that if you are presenting your gift at the altar and remember that you did something against another, go and be reconciled before making your offering.

That is why he prayed from the Cross, “Father, forgive them for they know what they do.” Now there are some things in life that we find very hard to forgive. We need to ask God for the strength to let go of those past hurts and harms, not for the sake of the one who wronged us, but for our sake.

The second part of the petition is our need to forgive others, because, you see, sometimes our unwillingness to forgive can get in the way of our relationship with God and with each other.

In their book Picking Cotton: Memoir of Injustice and Redemption Ronald Cotton and Jennifer Thompson talk about how important forgiveness is for one’s own mental health. Jennifer Thompson mistakenly identified Ronald Cotton as her rapist. He served eleven years in prison before DNA evidence indicated that he was not the rapist and that another man, one already in prison for rape, was Thompson’s actual rapist.

Understandably, Thompson felt horrible because her mistake cost another man—a family man with no prior arrests—eleven years of his life for something that he did not do. When they met, she asked for his forgiveness. He told her that he had already forgiven her because he had to let the past go in order to live into the future. Besides, he said, they were both victims of the same man.

It took years for Jennifer Thompson to forgive herself but Ronald Cotton's graciousness set her free too. Today, they are friends and even make joint appearances, like they did recently on *60 Minutes*.

**Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.** This final petition is a reminder that we need to constantly pray for strength—moral and spiritual strength. In his letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul wrote: *For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

When all is said and done, this petition is a prayer for strength in times of trial and protection from the snare of evil.

In reflecting upon the Lord's Prayer, Martin Luther once wrote, "This is a prayer for rescue in life and rescue in death. Amen."