

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Text: Matthew 6:9-13

In the modern Christian world, many of us view praying as being able to talk to God about everything, from the big issues to the trivial. However, if we were to ask what it is about the contents of our prayers that are the *most* important, I believe the Lord's Prayer contains the most crucial interaction between a man and God.

A Model Prayer

In Matthew 6:9-13, the Lord's Prayer is taught by Jesus as a contrast to bad examples of prayer (public show-off prayers, babbling repetitive prayers). In a parallel passage in Luke 11, Jesus sets it as an exemplary prayer for His disciples to follow. In both passages, it is given, either to correct false notions of prayer, or set a standard for the disciples to follow. The Lord's Prayer is thus, an instructive, if not the foremost example of prayer.

A Community Prayer

The frequent usage of "our" and "us" inside the Lord's Prayer shows that it is intended as a community prayer, rather than the solitary prayer of an individual.

A Notable Absence of Personal Prayer Items

There is an absence of the praying person's feelings, as contrasted with the prayers found in the Psalms. There are no specific supplications or requests made by the praying person for his or her specific situation, such as: "Lord, help me with my upcoming promotion"; "Bless my child in his upcoming exam." This model prayer of Jesus is kept brief and seems to only include a bare minimum of elements. In other words, Jesus is highlighting the most fundamental items He wants us to pray for.

Its Structure

The Lord's Prayer contains a single opening address, followed by six requests. These requests can be divided into two parts. Each part consists of a central message.

The Opening Address

First, the opening address of "Our Father in Heaven" highlights an intimate relationship between a father and child. When I look back at the letters I wrote to my wife during our courtship days, I note that the terms of address were affectionate - it showed the closeness we shared. Addressing God as "Our Father", rather than "Dear God", reminds me of the trust we can have in Him, and His love for us as He patiently receives and responds to each

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prayer. Second, the opening address reveals the status of the Addressee. It is not a prayer addressed to just a father figure but to a reigning God in Heaven. In spite of the difficulty that we might be facing in life, God is more powerful than anyone we can ever know here on earth.

The First Set of Three Requests

The first thing to point out about this set of requests is this: we must realize that God's name is holy, and that His Kingdom has come (It is a central message of Jesus' ministry, mentioned no less than 26 times in the gospels), and that His will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven, EVEN if we don't pray these requests.

- 1) *"May your name be holy"* or *"Hallowed be thy name"* – This statement expresses a great love for God. It conveys a desire to exalt God's name – God's name is not like any other name. In Exodus 3:13-16, Moses asks God in the burning bush what he should tell the Israelites if they are to ask him what God's name is. God's replies: "I AM WHO I AM... Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – appeared to me.'" His name alone is sufficient reason as to why He could be trusted to bring the children of Israel out of Egyptian captivity. He is the same God now and forever.
- 2) *"May your kingdom come"* – This request communicates a desire for God's kingdom rule, rather than focusing on earthly kings or kingdoms (this is expressed by those who have seen through the futility of earthly rulers and their rule, and long for the justice and loving rule of God).
- 3) *"May your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven"* – This request expresses a desire to follow His ways, which are better than the ways of this evil, rebellious world (this is expressed by one who has seen the futility of secular ways of life).

Why do we pray in this manner? Biblical scholar, N.T. Wright, contends that this first part of the Lord's Prayer sets our focus on Almighty God. These yearnings are expressed as a result our own holy dissatisfaction with this life on earth. There is also much emphasis on the Kingdom of God coming upon the earth. While it is progressively reaching complete dominion, Jesus proclaims that one day, all the earth will eventually submit unto His kingship and judgment, as prophesied in Isaiah 45:23 and Romans 14:11, "...every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Christ Jesus is Lord."

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This yearning for the Kingdom of God is not an alien concept. Wright likens us to the Israelites who yearn for the Promised Land, frustrated with the wilderness but longing for the day when God rules over us in a place we can finally call home. The Promised Land will be given to us. Although we have not possessed it yet, we would one day and it would ALL be ours. UNTIL then, we remain spiritually dissatisfied.

The Second Set of Three Requests

The second part of the Lord's Prayer is a prayer of sustenance that encourages us to persevere and be faithful as we wait for God's Kingdom to come.

- 1) *"Give us this day our daily bread"* - What we need is only the day-to-day, basic provisions; not additional luxuries. Because God is taking us to a better place, this is temporal sustenance. In Exodus 16, we read that the Israelites' "daily bread" or manna that came from God lasted only a day, and each day, it had to be received afresh from God – and was meant to last only until they reached the Promised Land.
- 2) *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"* – We are reminded to ask God to cleanse our sins daily. Sin accumulated is like a clogged drain. Unclogging is necessary; otherwise the drain will flood again. Only if our sins are forgiven by God then can the Kingdom of God we desire come. However the pre-condition is that we also forgive others of their sins against us – thereby demonstrating our own awareness of the meaning and value of forgiveness.
- 3) *"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil"* – We should not be distracted by temptations in life. Until Jesus returns, the journey is a long one. The prayer of those who yearn for His Kingdom to come is to be sustained until then.

In summary, as we meditate on the Lord's Prayer with renewed perspective, let us:

- 1) Pray with a holy discontent for this existence, with our eyes fixed on God, and the Promised Land He brings.
- 2) Pray for the basics of sustenance such that we might be faithful and have the stamina to persevere - such that when the journey ends, we may be found true to our Father in Heaven.

- Rev Joel Yong