

Jesus' Prayer for All Time

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

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There are two occasions in the gospels where Jesus teaches what we call the Lord's Prayer. In Luke's account, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and Jesus responds with the Lord's Prayer. Matthew includes the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount as part of a more extended teaching of Jesus about prayer. Let's see what we can learn about how Jesus encouraged us to pray.

Matthew 6:5-15

⁵"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. ⁶But 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. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do 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,

¹⁰your kingdom come,
your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us today our daily bread.

¹²Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'

¹⁴For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

How many times have you said the Lord's Prayer? I think it is wonderful when one of our children leads the Lord's Prayer in worship. You can tell they have learned it and say it with much conviction. Sometimes I'm afraid the words have become so familiar that we miss their significance. We are like someone running by a mine shaft not

realizing what treasure is buried there. I want us to take some time to slow down and consider the words of the Lord's Prayer and what they teach us about how to pray.

In the passage leading up to the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells us how to prepare to pray. We usually give so little thought to preparing ourselves to pray. We launch right into our prayers: "Lord, I need this and this and this." "Lord, get me well." "God, fix my husband." Jesus teaches us to slow down and think about the reason we pray. Why do you pray? Is it to get God to help you with your agenda? Is it to tell God all the things you need? Jesus tells us that the purpose of prayer is to get to know God for himself.

He does this by contrasting the things we do for God that are seen and unseen. Most of what we do for God is seen. People see that we come to church. People see that we put something in the offering plate or not. People see when we come to a Bible Study or Life Group or help out with a mission project. The danger is that the things we do that are seen can be done to enhance our image with others and to acquire a good reputation. "He is such a fine person. He goes to church every Sunday." It is human to want to be noticed for what we do. The AJ is doing a great job of highlighting on the front page what churches throughout our city are doing—especially in mission outreach. I have to confess, sometimes I get jealous. I see things that others are doing and I wonder why they have not done an article on us. Why haven't they noticed all the good that we are doing for the kingdom and given us some recognition? It is easy for me to get caught up in doing things for God to be seen or noticed. Jesus warned to examine our motives: "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." They want recognition from men and they receive it. Jesus said, "Go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father." When you are praying in private, all

alone—it is just you and God. It enables you to experience the purpose of prayer, to get to know God better. It is wonderful to pray in groups. I love to pray with my pastor's prayer partners each Sunday morning in the prayer room. Their prayers uplift me and get me ready to lead worship. I love to pray with our staff as we pray aloud for each other and for you. Those are wonderful times in prayer. Jesus is saying don't let that be your only experience of prayer. Find some time to be alone with God—to get to know him. Just the two of you together.

Another important preparation for prayer is to focus on grace rather than performance. "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." Babbling means frantic requests. If we say enough of the right words, then God will give us what we want. We just have to persistently, frequently, fervently lift up our requests until God does something. It is the way I pray that gets God to do something. It is my performance. Jesus said, "Your father knows what you need before you ask him." He changes the focus. Get to know God as your Father. You relate to him like a father rather than a boss. A boss can be your friend or mentor, but in the end, he is concerned about one thing: your performance. If you are not doing the job, he will fire you. Sometimes we relate to God that way. If we are not doing enough for him, then he will leave us. But a Father's role is different. Certainly good fathers want their children to do well. But if a child fails or goes off the rails, the father does not fire or abandon them. A good father is unconditionally committed to his children. When things are not going well for a child, the good father becomes more engaged with that child. The relationship is based upon grace not performance. The content of our prayers changes when we realize that God's love is not based upon our performance but on his grace.

In the opening passage Jesus is contrasting two models of prayer. One model is focused on technique—heaping up words. The other is focused on relationship—getting to know God. One model is focused on getting what I want from God. The other model is focused on letting go of my agenda for God and listening to God’s agenda for me. Remembering the purpose of prayer helps us to prepare to pray. Prayer is about getting to know God and listening to his heart.

Jesus then presents the Lord’s Prayer as a model prayer. This does not mean that we are only to pray these words. Rather we are to follow this model in the way we pray. There are three things Jesus encourages us to focus on as we pray.

First is adoring God. Fifty percent of the Lord’s prayer is about God and who he is. Begin with praising and adoring God for who He is before you bombard him with your requests. Focus on God and not your needs. Plunge yourself into the presence of the living God until your heart is dazzled by who he is. Listen to the words Jesus uses to adore God. He is “in heaven”—he is infinite and transcends space and time. He is “hallowed” which means he is holy. He has a “kingdom” which means he is the sovereign ruler of heaven and earth. He is father which means he is personal and we can know him intimately. When we begin our prayers with adoring God, we remember he is powerful and yet tender; he is holy and yet forgiving; he is transcendent and yet accessible. Rather than telling God how big our problems are, we tell our problems how big our God is.

Next, Jesus encourages us to take a posture of accepting: “Your will be done.” Before we ask for God to give us anything, we say to God, “You know my needs better than I do. Your will be done. I surrender to your will for my life.” A four year old asks his forty year old father to let him play with something. Because of his wisdom, the father

says, “No you can’t have that. It will electrocute you and you will die.” Then the four year old begins to wail and cry because He thinks he knows what he needs. We are the same way with God. We ask him for something, and he says no. We argue and scream, because we think we know better than God what is good for us. Much of our worry is the result of our acting like four year olds. We know how our lives should go, and we tell God what he ought to do for us. We are in charge, and if things don’t happen according to our plan, we worry.

Jesus invites us to lay down the horrible burden of thinking we know better than God what we need. When I call God my Father that means I am his child. I am the four year old in this relationship when I compare myself to God’s intelligence, wisdom and knowledge. I am forced to accept my limitations and humanity. I can’t see what God sees anymore than a four year old can see what his forty year old daddy sees. The difference between a four year old and a forty year old is not nearly the difference between us and God. Prayer means accepting, releasing things to God. True prayer is giving up power and control to God. I don’t know what is best. I don’t know what I really need. “Thy will be done.” I’m going to ask for what I want, but I’m going to trust that if God says “No” it is because he sees and knows things that I don’t. He has an eternal perspective. This kind of prayer transforms us deeply. As we release things to God, we become happier, less worried, less fearful and less angry.

After adoring and accepting then we can ask. Look at the things Jesus encourages us to ask for. “Thy kingdom come.” We pray for God’s healing of this broken world—broken materially, spiritually and emotionally. When his kingdom comes, the world will be restored to what he intended it to be. Even now God is working to restore his kingdom. This is the prayer behind our Impossible Dreams: “Thy kingdom come.” We

are asking God to show us individually and as a church where he is working to restore his kingdom so that we can join with him. When we pray, “Lord, help me to see the world as your see it;” “Lord, break my heart with the things that break your heart,” we are praying “thy kingdom come.” When we join with God in praying and working against injustice, hunger, violence and abuse we are bringing in the kingdom.

We ask for daily bread. Notice that he did not say weekly bread. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness for forty years on their way to the Promised Land, God provided manna daily for them to eat. They were told each morning to only collect what they could eat for the day. They were not to store it up for the week. In fact what they did not eat in one day turned rancid. They were only to gather what they needed for one day. Why? God wanted them to depend upon him each day. Every day God called them to rely upon him to provide for their needs. This is the basis for Christian generosity. If we have more than we need for the day, we are to share it with those in need rather than hoarding it up for the future. We are to trust God daily to provide for our needs and when we have surplus to share it with others in need. Now, I’m not saying don’t save for retirement or don’t have an emergency savings fund. What I’m saying is that we stockpile way more than we need and as a result we do not depend upon God for our daily bread. The more financially secure we think we are, the less we think we need God.

Next Jesus encourages us to ask God for forgiveness and to make us forgiving persons. Asking forgiveness breaks our pride. If we don’t think we need forgiveness every day we are delusional. At the very least we need forgiveness for our self-centered tendencies every day. We think of ourselves first. We neglect God. We do not hear the cry of the needy. Ask the Holy Spirit to search you heart and see if there is any

wickedness there. Every day he will find something that we need to confess and receive forgiveness. It humbles us and reminds us that we are not spiritually superior to anyone. We are all sinners who stand in need of God's grace. All kinds of spiritual problems stem from the failure to recognize our constant need of forgiveness. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Recalling our own need of forgiveness helps us to become more forgiving to others.

"Deliver us from evil." Help me to depend upon you to resist temptation today, for I have no power within myself to resist it. Everything in this prayer calls us to experience intimacy with God by trusting and releasing everything in our lives to him every day.

Jesus prayed a part of this prayer when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane. He asked God for something—that the cup of suffering of the cross might pass by him. He asked God for another way to provide for the forgiveness of the world than for him to experience an agonizing death upon the cross. Here we see the human dimension of Jesus. When we face suffering, we ask God to spare us. It is OK to ask him, Jesus did! Then we see the divine dimension of Jesus when he prayed, "Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done." "Your will be done on earth as in heaven." The father had the bigger picture. This was the means by which the sins of the whole world could be forgiven and death could be defeated. Jesus surrendered to the Father's will and trusted him when he could not see the whole picture.

The purpose of prayer is to get to know God, release the control of our lives into his hands and learn to depend upon him for everything, every day. Let's pray.