

ESSENTIAL PARTS TO A DISCIPLE'S PRAYER
A SERIES ON THE MEANING OF THE LORD'S PRAYER:

(1) HOLY LOVE

Matthew 6:9-10

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March 1, 2009

PROLOGUE

Biblical literacy is becoming scarce no matter what denomination you are talking about. Consider the case of two attorneys who were friends. One went to a Presbyterian Church and the other attended a Baptist Church. One day the Presbyterian told his friend that he had become a Sunday School teacher. His Baptist friend was astonished, "You, a Sunday School teacher!? I'll bet you ten bucks you don't even know the Lord's Prayer!" "Why everybody knows that," the other answered, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." His friend shook his head. Then he pulled out his wallet and handed him ten dollars, saying, "You win! I had no idea you knew so much about the Bible."

SCRIPTURE

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. {2} Seraphs were in attendance above him...And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."...Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:1-8 NRSV, selected).

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. {6} But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. {7} "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. {8} Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. {9} "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. {10} Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. {11} Give us this day our daily bread. {12} And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. {13} And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. {14} For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; {15} but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:5-15 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Jesus taught his disciples how to talk to God. We usually refer to this as the Lord's Prayer. But this is a misnomer. It is not a prayer that the Lord would pray, if for no other reason than the fact he would never need forgiveness. If you want a true example of a prayer of our Lord then look at John 17. This chapter contains an account of a prayer that *only* our Lord could have prayed. It says, in part, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" (John 17:5 NRSV). No disciple could pray such a prayer. But the prayer we call the "Lord's Prayer" can only be prayed by a disciple. It would be better to call it the "Disciples' Prayer."

But whatever name we use, it is the best known prayer in Christianity, and possibly the best known prayer of any kind in the world. It has brought inspiration, courage and hope to hundreds of millions of people. But its very familiarity is also what produces the greatest challenge to teaching what it means. There are many preconceived and misconceived ideas about this prayer. Over the next few weeks we will be examining this prayer and if we want to learn anything helpful, unlearn what is not, and deepen our walk with God then we need a fresh perspective and an open mind concerning what Jesus wants us to know about how to talk to God.

1. THE ORIGIN OF THE DISCIPLES' PRAYER

The Disciples' Prayer comes from Jesus. We know he taught it to his inner circle of followers before it was taught to others. It was not uncommon for rabbis in Jesus' day to teach their students prayers. Apparently, John the Baptizer did this for his disciples (Lk 11:1).

But the prayer that Jesus taught is quite short, less than sixty words long (in the original Greek) and can be recited in about fifteen seconds. I wonder if his disciples felt like they got short-changed or if they just marveled at its simplicity?

The disciples were already familiar with at least two major sources of prayer: The Book of Psalms in the Bible, and the liturgical prayers used in the weekly synagogue service. The ancient Israelites used the Book of Psalms as their prayer and worship book. The Church would later use it as the foundation for teaching prayer including a deeper understanding of the Lord's Prayer. Over the last two centuries the Psalms have often been neglected in the Church except as formal readings or text for songs. But in recent years there has been a kind of re-discovery of the power of the Psalms. It would be immensely helpful to our spiritual journey if we could share in this re-discovery.

The prayers of the synagogue would have been part of the rhythm of life for the first followers of Jesus. The prayers underlined the expectation that God must be treated with highest honor. One standard Jewish prayer of the day (the Kaddish) proclaimed, "Exalted

and hallowed be his...name..and may his kingdom come speedily and soon.”¹

So the prayer that Jesus taught disciples contains ideas and language from the Psalms and the synagogue. The genius of the Disciples’ Prayer is that it condenses over a thousand years of teaching and practice into a few brief sentences. It was taught in words familiar to the disciples but expressed in such a way as to radically transform their understanding of how to talk to God.

But there is a part of the Lord’s Prayer/Disciples’ Prayer that did not come from the Psalms or the synagogue or even Jesus. I am referring to the ascription of praise at the end of the prayer: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory.” This is not found in the oldest copies of Matthew’s Gospel. The oldest commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer never mention it. It does not occur in any form in the parallel account in Luke’s Gospel (Lk 11:1-4). It was added by the Church in the late 1st or early 2nd century for when the prayer was used in corporate worship. A few scribes from the Middle Ages were so used to saying the prayer with this ending that they mistakenly included it in their hand written copies of the Gospel of Matthew.

There is nothing wrong with using this praiseful ending provided we remember its source. It seems consistent with Scripture and even parallels the words of King David as he and his people prepared for building the House of God (1 Chron 29:11). I like the Roman Catholic tradition concerning the use of the Lord’s Prayer or “Our Father” as they often call it. The ending is included in corporate worship but generally left out in personal prayer.

2. THE NATURE OF THE DISCIPLES’ PRAYER

In order to understand the nature of this prayer we need to look at both Matthew and Luke’s versions. We have already read Matthew’s account. The account in Luke goes like this:

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." {2} He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. {3} Give us each day our daily bread. {4} And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial" (Luke 11:1-4 NRSV).

You will note at once the wording and setting are different from Matthew’s account. I have seen many ingenious attempts at reconciling the two accounts. But the problem with this is that there is no problem. They are two different accounts - and that is Okay.

¹Keener, Craig S. ; *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : New Testament*. Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1993, S. Mt 6:9.

Matthew indicates how this can be so when he describes how Jesus taught: “[Jesus] opened his mouth, and taught them” (5:2 KJV). This sounds redundant to us but it is from a figure of speech meaning that what follows is not only important but it is also a summary of what has been taught on more than one occasion. Jesus did not teach his followers the Disciples’ Prayer only once or even twice but several times until the key words and concepts were clear in their minds.

The result is a model for prayer. Matthew provides an example. Luke provides the basic form. Ironically, we tend to use Matthew’s version as if it were the definitive form and we ignore Luke’s version altogether. What are we to do? Are we bound to say this prayer as it is written or is it a guide for putting our own words into prayer? I do not think we are forced to choose. We can use the prayer as it stands or as a guide for prayer. But remember, just saying words is not the same as praying. Two billion people can say the Lord’s Prayer. Very few ever learn to pray it.

3. THE ESSENCE OF A DISCIPLE’S PRAYER

The Disciples’ Prayer shows a vital priority; first God then ourselves. The first part of the prayer is cast in terms of God's glory; the second part in terms of our good. Our purpose in life is to glorify God and then enjoy a reliance upon God to meet our needs within the context of the community of faith (“our...us”). When we put God first then all other concerns fall into their proper place.

This prayer is meant for disciples of Jesus Christ. It is not a child’s prayer, though it is often treated as such. Now it may be worthwhile to teach children this prayer but it is difficult for them to understand what it means.

A mother had been teaching her three-year daughter the Lord's prayer. For several evenings at bedtime, she would repeat after her mother the lines from the prayer. Finally, she decided to go solo. The mother listened with pride as she carefully said each word, right up to the end : "Lead us not into temptation," she prayed, "but deliver us some E-mail. Amen."

This prayer is meant for people committed to the person of Jesus Christ and to the mission of Christ in the world. We are to pray not only for the completion of God’s plan, “Your kingdom come,” but for our involvement in that plan, “Your will be done.” The Disciples’ Prayer has more in common with the University of Michigan’s fight song than it does with “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” It has more in common with the Michigan State fight song than it does with “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” Until we grasp this we will miss out on the purpose of the prayer. This prayer is motivation for a team effort not a memento for personal piety.

Can you imagine a potential player telling a football coach, “I don’t want to come to practice

and I definitely do not want to show up for any of the games. I just want to read the playbook aloud now and again.”? Yet that is the same as someone saying the Lord’s Prayer and not wanting to be involved in what the Lord is doing in the world.

Jesus also warned against two common mistakes that people make when it comes to prayer: (1) praying in order to impress other people and (2) praying without thinking about what you are saying. These were problems in his day and remain a problem in ours, especially praying without thinking.

Let’s say you work at a place where a typical greeting is, “Good morning, Tom. How are you doing?” But what if one morning you heard instead, “Good morning Tom How. [pause] Are you doing?”? The same words are used but it is clear from how they are said that the person who said them was not thinking about what they were saying.

We do the same with the Lord’s/Disciples’ Prayer. We typically finish by saying, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory-forever. Amen.” But I have news for you, the kingdom and the power are also supposed to last forever. There is a comma after glory. By pausing after glory you are indicating that you know that all three (kingdom, power and glory) are to last forever. “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. If we pray without thinking we pray without meaning.

In contrast to self-centered prayer and thoughtless prayer, Jesus said we are to pray in secret. I remember a time, shortly after I became a Christian, when somebody read to me, “When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret” (Matt 6:6 KJV). I took it literally. My bedroom had a closet so I would go in, shut the door and pray. That got old real fast. Fortunately, I soon learned that this was merely a metaphor for the heart. Only God knows what is in my heart. The essence of prayer is a heartfelt response to God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

4. THE GOD OF THE DISCIPLES’ PRAYER

Jesus said, “Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven.’”

The idea of addressing God as “Father” is not a major theme in the Old Testament. The word is used as an analogy but rarely as a way of speaking directly to God (Deut 32:6; Ps 103:13; Isa 63:16; Mal 2:10). Even so, Jesus went beyond the regular word for “Father.” The term he used to speak of his own intimate relationship with God is - *Abba*, meaning “Dear Father” or even “Daddy.” There is no evidence of anyone before Jesus using this term to address God.

He addressed God this way in prayer (Mark 14:36) and taught his disciples to pray in similar terms (Luke 11:1-2). It is how we know we have been adopted into the family of God and how we know our status before God has changed. Paul writes:

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Gal 4:6-7 NRSV).

By using the term "Abba" Jesus has shown us that God is loving. But he also shows us that God is holy. God is a parent but a heavenly parent and not an earthly one. God is trustworthy and kind but God is also unique and wholly Other than us.

Jesus said, "Pray then like this: 'Hallowed be your name.'"

Holiness is a primary characteristic of God and consequently our primary petition to God is that God's name be kept holy. A little boy claimed to know the name of God. His mother thought that was interesting and so asked, "Okay, what is God's name?" He replied, "Harold." Puzzled, his mother then asked, "Why do you think God's name is Harold?" "Because," said the boy, "It says so in the prayer we say at church. Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name!"

Of course, God's name is not Harold. And it is not Hallowed, either - Although we act like it is when we say the Lord's prayer aloud without thinking about the words. "Name" in the Bible refers to a person's revealed character. The name of God refers to the character of God as he has been made known to us.

To hallow is to keep holy. We are to keep God's name holy. There are several petitions in the Lord's Prayer. But the first one is that we keep God's name holy. First and foremost we are to recognize the holiness of God. God loves us but he also has a claim on us and we owe him our highest devotion.

When I pray I remember the sick, I pray for peace, I pray for loved ones and I pray for myself, especially if I am in trouble (which means I pray often). You may follow a similar pattern, and that is fine. But how often when we pray do we ask God to help us recognize his holiness?

Jesus said, "Pray then like this: 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'"

Christian scholars speak of the Kingdom of God in two different ways: the kingdom or reign of power and the reign of grace. The reign of power refers to the Lord's universal kingship. God is the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of the universe ("The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" Psalm 103:19 NIV). The reign of grace refers to his spiritual kingship. The reign of grace is a spiritual kingship because it is administered not by force or external means but by spiritual means. The reign of power and the reign of grace are one and the same in heaven. But on earth, the reign of grace which has

been initiated by Christ will not be consummated until he returns.

Everyone is under the reign of power whether or not they know it and whether or not they desire it. On the other hand, no one is under the reign of grace unless (at some point) they know it and desire it. Being in this spiritual kingdom is a gift from God to be received by faith. Faith is a personal trust in God which acknowledges the authority of Jesus Christ. The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas:

“Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?” They said, “Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you’ll live as you were meant to live” (Acts 16:31 TM).

In order to receive the benefits of the Kingdom of God we need to acknowledge that Christ is our Master and King. In typical Hebrew parallelism, “Your kingdom come” and “your will be done” mean basically the same thing. To be in the Kingdom of God is to want to carry out the will of God as shown to us by Jesus Christ our Master and King.

CONCLUSION

What have we learned so far about how to talk to God?

- Long, eloquent prayers may impress people in the pews but they do not impress God.
- Simple, heartfelt prayers get God’s attention.
- Put God first and other priorities will fall in line.
- God is loving and desires what is best *for* us.
- God is holy and demands what is best *from* us.