

The Lord's Prayer – Our Model Prayer

5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

7 "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. 9 "In this manner, therefore, pray: 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 forgive our debtors. 13 And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (Matt. 6:9-13)

Martin Luther, the German Reformer would sometimes go to have his hair cut by a barber named Peter Beskendorf. It had to be a nerve-wracking thing to be the man who shaved Luther, having a razor blade on his neck, knowing a slip of the wrist could injure or kill the man who had begun so much of the return to biblical Christianity. One wonders if the enemies of Luther had ever approached Peter Beskendorf and offered him money to put an end to Luther. He never did, of course. He and Luther were friends. And on one occasion when Luther went to have his hair cut, Beskendorf admitted to Luther that he struggled to pray. He asked Luther if he could give him any practical suggestions to pray better.

Luther wrote him a letter called, "How One Should Pray, for Master Peter the Barber". In that short letter, which is available to read online, Luther has a simple and memorable method to pray better. He knew that Peter, like most Germans of his day, had memorised the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles' Creed. Luther told Peter to take each line of the Lord's Prayer, and then begin turning them into larger prayers of confession, adoration and request. The words "hallowed be Your name" could become asking God to forgive one for taking His name lightly, praying for His name to be spread abroad in missions, thanking God for the purity of His name. Luther gives an example of how to do this with every statement in the Lord's Prayer, and then does the same with the Ten Commandments, and the Apostle's Creed.

Luther's method is simple and memorable, because it teaches us to let the Word of God shape our prayers. If we do not do that, our prayers fail. Because we have to admit, that like Peter the barber, we struggle to pray.

Prayer is an unusual act. It isn't a true dialogue, where you speak and someone replies, and you respond to him or her. Dialogues are easy enough, they're just a conversation. But prayer isn't that way; at least not audibly. You can speak loosely of using the Bible to pray, and reading God's Word and responding to it, and reading another verse, but it still falls short of an active conversation.

Prayer is more of a monologue, where one person speaks the entire time. But that's what makes it a difficult thing to do. Not many people are used to giving a monologue, with no response from another person. Public speakers do it, but they are in the position of teaching or giving out what they know. Even that long-winded person who never seems to give you a moment to reply, still has you as an audience, and can gauge your response. But prayer is not like that. Prayer is not teaching. Prayer is not a speech.

Moreover, as we know, in prayer, the Person we are speaking to already knows everything we're going to say, and knows every need we have before we ask. This is not the kind of conversation where you are informing or entertaining the person you're speaking to.

This makes prayer a unique kind of communication, unlike any other kind in the world. It's not a conversation. It's not a speech. It's not explaining or informing. It's so different, and so perplexing, that it is difficult to do, and to maintain for any length of time. That's probably why people either give up on doing it, or do some strange form of it that is no longer what the Bible calls prayer. To be able to pray for any length of time, and to make it a habit requires a unique kind of concentration, a unique understanding of what is going on as you pray and while you pray.

That's why it's encouraging to read that the disciples, on one occasion, asked Jesus, "Teach us to pray". Interesting that they didn't ask Him to teach them to preach, or to heal, or to cast out demons. They asked Him to teach them to pray. They had seen Jesus praying, they had heard Jesus praying, and they knew that here was the Man who understood prayer. They struggled to pray like we struggle to pray, they battled with wandering minds, with distracted thoughts, with procrastination, with preferring busyness than prayer. But then they saw Jesus often withdrawing early in the morning before the bustle and noise of the day began to a quiet place, to pray. They saw, if we may say it, a *successful* prayer life in Jesus, and they asked him, "Teach us to pray."

Now they didn't ask Him, "Teach us a prayer". They weren't interested in memorising a particular prayer. No, they wanted prayer *lives*. And it was in response to that request that Jesus gave them this prayer, which has come to be called the Lord's Prayer. It is not the *Lord's Prayer* in the sense that Jesus Himself prayed it; Jesus didn't pray this prayer, because He had no trespasses to ask forgiveness for. For that reason, it is more correctly called the Disciples' Prayer. But it is the Lord's Prayer in the sense that it is the prayer dictated to us by the Lord.

He gives this prayer in Luke 11. But He also gives this prayer in the famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. Those were two different occasions, where He gives the identical prayer. What that leads us to believe is that Jesus probably taught this prayer on numerous occasions, at different times and places, when He was explaining what prayer is, and how we should do it.

So what we have here is a golden key to unlock this difficult and strange thing called prayer. What makes it so valuable is that this prayer comes from the lips of the Son of God. Jesus, the Beloved of the Father, has the inside track on what kind of words and ideas will please the Father. If you have ever wondered if your prayer made sense, if it was having any effect, if you were asking for the right things, here you have before you God telling you what God wants to hear.

Contained in these fifty-seven words (in the original Greek), or these seven or so statements, is the pattern for Christian prayer. This is the skeletal structure of prayer, upon which we build. Yes, this is a prayer we can say simply as it is, but the fact that Jesus altered a phrase or two in the rendering in Matthew and Luke shows that He was more interested in giving us principles that are essential for prayer. In other words, each of the statements of the prayer represents an idea that we should incorporate into our prayers.

This prayer is matchless. This prayer covers the past, the present, and the future. It covers God's great purposes, and man's great needs. Some have seen in this prayer all of the Christian life. It covers in the first half God's purposes, and in the second half, man's needs.

This prayer promises not only to help us to say and ask the right things, but this prayer promises to teach us to pray. In other words, this prayer, if we understand it, has the potential to give us not just a prayer, but prayer lives, where we have the spiritual strength and concentration and interest and focus.

And of course, this prayer will change things. It won't change things in Heaven, but it will change things on Earth. There's a lot of comparison between Heaven and Earth in this prayer, and if you are ever struggling with the theology of prayer, trying to work out why we should pray if God is sovereign and has already determined the future, then just remember, prayer doesn't change Heaven, but it does impose Heaven's will upon Earth, and so change things on Earth.

So I don't think it is a bad thing at all to memorise this prayer, if you haven't already. Not to repeat it as a mantra, but to remember the various divisions, like the seven colours of the rainbow, or the 26 letters of the alphabet. The Bible is full of examples of believers who memorised things to aid them. For example, certain Hebrew Psalms each began with a different letter of the alphabet helped them to memorise them.

But just before Jesus tells us how to pray, He gives us two instructions regarding how not to pray.

"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. (Matt. 6:5-6)

The first wrong way to pray is to pray is boastful or pretentious prayer. Jesus says, don't copy the religious hypocrites, who want to pray to be seen and praised by men. They choose places where they will be seen, and then they pray loud, public, visible prayer. Jesus said, this is not prayer. Instead, Jesus said, the heart of your prayer life needs to be cultivated in private, where only God can hear and see you.

Now Jesus wasn't forbidding public prayer. Indeed, the Lord's prayer uses plural pronouns, "Our Father" "our trespasses" "our daily bread" implying this is something that can be prayed corporately, and publicly. Paul writing to Timothy commands that in the corporate services of the church, the men pray publicly, lifting up holy hands. There is a time for public prayer, and if prayer that prayer is thoughtful, it can even help shape and disciple God's people in their praying.

What Jesus is forbidding here is using prayer to show off, praying into the ears of men, so that they would think you to be particularly spiritual. Anytime you're praying primarily to be heard by men, you're really not praying, you're just acting with your eyes closed.

But then Jesus turns from how some of the Jewish people perverted prayer to how most of the Gentiles perverted prayer.

"And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. (Matt. 6:7-8)

The second wrong way to pray is babbling or prattling prayer. The words translated *vain repetitions* is a Greek word that uses onomatopoeia – the sound is mimicked in the word (English words like bang or buzz or screech are examples). In the original it uses a prefix "batta" which mimics the sound of babbling, speaking endlessly but without meaning. Jesus says, that's what the unbelieving Gentiles do, they think prayer is about saying as much as you can, as often as you can, in hopes of persuading their god to listen to hear them.

A lot of that happens in Christian circles, particularly in churches which don't use prayer books and written prayers. Instead of praying like Jesus will teach us, people try to keep talking and keep speaking, like a horse-racing commentator, or an auctioneer, fearing that if they stop or don't keep filling the time with words, that their prayer will fail, or that people will suspect that they have run out of prayer fuel. Some people feel that prayer is one sentence, which you keep adding to, with the word 'and', and they fear the moment when they prayer gets a full-stop. The danger of feeling you

have to keep going and keep adding is that you may find you are praying in clichés, praying very little meaningful words. Augustine said “we may pray most when we say least, and we may pray least when we say most.”

We need not boast, nor babble when we pray, because Jesus has given us the model prayer.

We want to begin today with unpacking the opening statement, “Our Father in Heaven”. You may be used to hearing that, but you need to put yourselves in the shoes of the Jewish people who heard Jesus. Even though the Old Testament had taught the Fatherhood of God to Israel, and they understood it, very few Israelites by Jesus' time would have addressed God that way. Something had happened to Judaism, and it had become cold and distant in thinking about relating to God. Yes, they called God their Father when it suited them, but usually in a nationalistic way: Abraham is our Father, and God is our Father.

But Jesus is different to all this. Jesus refers to God not as the broad Father of Israel, but as “my Father”. Every time Jesus is recorded as praying, He addresses God as Father. Only one prayer of His did not address God as Father. That was His prayer on the Cross, when as sin-bearer, He cried out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”

Jesus had a relationship with God the Father where He did not address Him as a distant Creator, but as Father. In fact, at least one time, in Mark 14:36, Mark actually brings the Aramaic words that Jesus used into the Greek – Abba. Abba was the intimate term for children to use with their biological fathers.

So when Jesus now teaches us to pray, “Our Father in heaven”, the very first thing He is teaching us to do is to begin our prayer with words that identify our relationship with God.

Don't just begin, “God” or “Creator of the Universe” or “Lord of all Being”. Those are true titles and not wrong to say. But they do not imply any bond, any relation, any kinship when you say them. But to say “Father” is to make a very bold claim. You are saying that the Person who hears prayer, the One who is powerful enough to hear prayer from anyone, anywhere – meaning He must be omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent – this One is your Father. The prayer is Our Father, *in heaven*. This is the King we are calling Father.

Now that's a wonderful thing to claim. But unfortunately, in countries which call themselves Christian, people don't see it as a wonderful thing. They see it as a necessary thing, or as an obvious thing. That's because people have believed a lie known as the universal fatherhood of God. This teaches that everyone is a child of God. To be human is to be a child of God, and therefore God is everyone's father. And so, nobody is surprised or amazed by the words “our Father who art in heaven.” No, for them this is simply a title we give to God, because He is everyone's father.

But the Bible is very clear that God is not everyone's father. And that's one way to get someone in our country very hot under the collar, is to suggest that God is not his father. Tell him that he is not a Christian as the Bible defines it, and you'll have an angry man on your hands. He'll tell you that his parents were decent people, he was christened, he was married in a church, he's not a bad person, he is not some heathen. He'll tell you that he doesn't have to subscribe to your born again version of Christianity, your extreme sect-like Christianity to be a Christian. He knows what religion he was born into and doesn't need to join a bunch a religious lunatics to be a good person, thank you very much.

But when he says that, he sounds very much like some people who had a conversation with Jesus

once. 37 "I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. 38 "I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father." 39 They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. 40 "But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. 41 "You do the deeds of your father." Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father-- God." 42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. 43 "Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. 44 "You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it. (Jn. 8:37-44)

Jesus is trying to explain to these people what their true nature and true religion and true family is. They start by saying, we were born of Abraham. The modern equivalent would be "I was born in a Christian country, in a Christian family." Jesus replies by saying, if that is your heritage, you would act like Abraham, who loved God, but you're not acting like that. If you really were a Christian, you would act like Christ, we might say.

Then they say, God is our Father. Jesus responds, "If God were your Father, then having His nature in you, you would love what He loves. And He loves Me, the Son. But instead, you hate what God loves. Which means your father is actually the devil, a murderer and a liar, because right now you want to murder Me, and you want to suppress the truth I am giving you."

We might say the same thing: if God is really your father, then as a child, you'd love Jesus Christ, and be zealous about what Jesus is zealous for.

Well, that conversation didn't end with warm embraces all round, because the people Jesus spoke to were so offended, they tried to kill Him on the spot.

It's still offensive news to people. People will react very negatively to the news that you do not enter the family of God by birth. You do not enter the family of God by a decision someone else makes for you.

11 He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (Jn. 1:11-13)

Instead, you can only enter the family of God by two acts of God. One is where God changes your nature from within to become alive to Him and united to His nature – that's called regeneration. The second work is then when God adopts you, placing you in His family, and giving you the rights and the inheritance and the family status of His true Son, Jesus.

Notice the condition for becoming a child of God. As many as received Him – Jesus – as many as believed on His name – they received the right to be regenerated and adopted. These ones are born by God, born from above. You see, born-again Christianity is not some extreme version, some radical, happy-clappy take on Christianity. According to the Bible you are reading, born-again Christianity is Christianity. No one is a Christian who does not first receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour from sin.

Jesus teaches us to pray "Our Father" not because everyone can pray that, but because everyone who receives the Son can pray that. Everyone else can only say those words and profane them. There are three people in the world who can correctly call me 'father'. I've had one or two people who couldn't tell a pope from a Presbyterian call me 'Father', but I didn't rebuke them for their mistake.

You see, the very first aspect of our prayers is to come and speak to God of the relationship we have

with Him because of Him. These words make us think about the relationship we have with God, the grace of God in salvation. To put it another way, "Our Father in heaven" is another way of saying, "pray in Jesus' name". Praying in Jesus' name is not the thing you say at the end of your prayers. Praying in Jesus' name is being a child of God, and speaking to God as Father through the merits and work of Jesus Christ.

Your prayer is uniquely Christian prayer, because it is grounded in the Person of Christ. He gives us access to the Father, He makes it possible for us to be children of God. Prayer begins with the Gospel.

What kind of thing is it to call God Father? For some people, the idea of father is not very comforting at all. They had cruel fathers, or cold fathers, or distant fathers, or absent fathers. We do not have to work through our earthly father to get to the Heavenly Father. It works the other way around. Fatherhood existed before the world existed. Our idea of father is borrowed from God; God did not borrow it from the human realm to describe Himself.

Whatever your earthly father was like, the Heavenly Father is the ideal you long for.

15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." (Rom. 8:15)

It's a world of difference from the prayers of the unsaved, who petition God but don't know Him. God's father hood means you are now in a relationship of acceptance, where God has accepted you in Christ.

It's a relationship of peace, where you know He will care for you, feed you, protect you.

It's a relationship of security, where you know he will not forsake you, but will lovingly chasten and discipline you and keep you.

To take Luther's idea, we speak to God of the privilege of being His child. We might speak to Him of His Son. We might speak to Him of the privileges of being in Christ. We might speak to Him of the Gospel, of the Cross, and of salvation. We might speak to Him of the family privileges of forgiveness, no condemnation, of eternal life, of the Law not binding us, of an inheritance, of being chosen, redeemed, sealed.

Instead of rushing on to ask God to give us things, the first thing we do in prayer is dwell on the relationship. You don't have to pray vain repetitions and speak endlessly. You can simply think of the term "Our Father in heaven" and begin speaking to God of your gratitude and amazement for salvation, for the family relationship you now have with Him. Though you might want to rush on to your urgent needs, trust what Jesus has taught here. Begin with your relationship, and the effect on your heart will be to calm it, focus it, and fill it with gratitude. You may find yourselves enjoying moments of deep prayer, before your mind is reminded of the next phrase, "Hallowed be Your name."