



LORD, TEACH US HOW TO PRAY

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Luke 11:1-13

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I had been here some months before I asked Doug about it. Why is The Lord's Prayer said at the beginning of the worship service here at Brick Church? I am used to it coming later in the service, concluding the Prayers of Intercession. But most Sundays here it comes early, our first prayer together in worship. Doug had a ready answer: "That's because we want our children to learn it. They leave for Sunday School, so we moved it to the beginning of the service. That way, they can overhear it and over time learn it and join us in prayer." So in case you did not know that, now you do. Indeed, The Lord's Prayer is the common prayer Christians all over the world know 'by heart.' Wherever you go to church anywhere in the world, this prayer is said. Even if you do not understand the language, you will recognize this prayer by its cadences, lifted up with one voice among the people.

Jesus gave us this prayer when one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray." It makes me feel better to know that even Jesus' first disciples wanted advice about prayer. And no less than the Apostle Paul once admitted: "we do not know how to pray as we ought," (Romans 8:26). Last week, a friend of mine who is a Presbyterian minister and editor of many scholarly books, was leading a chapel service in our denominational headquarters. He said, out loud from the pulpit, that he often finds prayer "awkward, irrational and confusing."ⁱ Some of us do not understand prayer—what it 'is' or 'does.' Some of us may feel we do not know 'how' to pray rightly or faithfully. Many of us find it hard to make time for prayer. And when we do, we can find it difficult to keep our focus. Well, it turns out we are in good company. In a famous sermon in 1626, poet and clergyman John Donne described his own challenge of retaining concentration during prayer:

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“I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in, and invite God and his angels thither; and when they are there, I ignore God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door; I talk on...sometimes I find that I forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterday’s pleasures, a fear of tomorrow’s dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a chimera in my brain troubles me in my prayer.”ⁱⁱ

Dominican priest Herbert McCabe thinks we get distracted in prayer because we are not really praying for what we most need or want. We offer up what we think sounds ‘nice’ or ‘religious’ or ‘pleasing to God.’ But not what is truly worrying or pressing in on us. McCabe quipped, “When you are praying for what you really want, you will not be distracted. People on sinking ships do not complain they can’t concentrate during their prayer.”ⁱⁱⁱ

My editor friend has spent the past several years working on the revision of our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship. He read hundreds and hundreds of prayers and from that experience, he said he learned the importance of using imperative verbs when addressing God. This is exactly what Jesus does in the model prayer he gave to his disciples. One New Testament scholar’s translation of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke adds an exclamation mark to every sentence: “Father, may your name be holy! May your kingdom come! Give us every day the bread we need! Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who owes us! Do not lead us into testing!”^{iv}

Praying this boldly, we state what we need. Yet, by our imperatives we also acknowledge our inability to produce for ourselves what we most deeply need. The TV cartoon character, Bart Simpson, once offered this blessing at the supper table: “God, we worked hard putting all this food on the table by ourselves. So thanks for nothing.”^v But the imperatives spoken in The Lord’s Prayer make it clear that we



are not so self-sufficient as we like to think. We need God to give us have what can most make our lives healthy and whole.

So, the Lord's Prayer teaches us that we should not be shy about telling God what we want. Yet, praying for our own needs cannot be the sum total of our request. If it is, then our prayers are not big enough. Not imaginative enough. Not hopeful or generous enough either. Jesus gives this prayer not to the individual disciple who asked about it. He gives it to all of them. To all of us. The Lord's Prayer is not in the first-person singular; it is plural. And it is the "our" and "us" of it we should practice most of all—praying the imperatives on behalf of others.

In fact, in the early church, the worship service included what were called "the prayers of the faithful." Catechumens, those preparing for baptism and membership, would be dismissed at a certain point for instruction. Only those who were baptized remained, taking part in this prayer—which, as one of my doctoral professors put it—were "the prayers of the faithful offered up on behalf of a world that does not know how to pray for itself."^{vi}

A parable follows The Lord's Prayer. It is often titled "Perseverance" or "Persistence in Prayer." That's a good description as far as it goes. In the story, a man receives an unexpected visitor at midnight. Hospitality was of utmost importance in the culture but the man has no bread to offer his guest. So, he goes and knocks loudly upon his neighbor's door, asking for loaves of bread. The neighbor does not want to get up and step over his wife, children, and the family goat, waking everyone up for his neighbor's need. But the man continues to knock persistently...the word can also be translated 'imprudently,' even 'shamelessly.' You see, caught between the choice of merely inconveniencing someone or offering bread to someone who is hungry—the man is willing to be shameless in order to meet the need of the one who is hungry. It makes me wonder...how might we be more 'shameless' in our prayers of intercession here? To pray shamelessly, urgently, for those in need in our community, at the borders of our country, in every place of hurt and hunger in God's world.



A few words now about The Lord's Prayer itself. When we pray "*Hallowed be thy name,*" we are not the ones who do the 'hallowing' or 'honoring' of God's name. Instead, we are asking that God hallow God's name in all the earth—we pray that God will make God's self known so vividly and powerfully that all the earth will honor God. When we pray, "*Your kingdom come,*" we acknowledge that the way the world is now...is not right. It is not what God intends or wants. The kingdom may be near, but we ourselves are very far off. So, we urgently ask God to close the gap. For God's will to be done here on earth the way it already is in heaven. It is a bold prayer...because if we really mean it, and God should really do it, then in the blink of an eye, everything will change; will be utterly different than the way we so comfortably, or at least complacently, allow things to be.

When we ask for our daily bread, we pray that God will give us enough. Whatever is needed for this day. We are praying that none of us will have too much at the expense of another. We are praying that none will have too little. We are praying literally and spiritually for the bread of justice. Such a prayer makes the rich and the poor equal in need and equal, too, in their dependence upon God. Only bold disciples ask that God give us just what is needed today. Give us enough, God, not too much and not too little, lest we fail to trust in you above all else.

It is very bold, perhaps boldest of all, to pray that God will forgive our *sins* because we ourselves forgive everyone *indebted to us*. We ask God not to collect on us for our sins, knowing we have exceeded our limit...reached an unpayable level of debt...and we commit not to collect on others. Knowing all that I have done and all that I have left undone, how can I pray The Lord's Prayer and still hold a grudge against someone else? This may be the toughest imperative of all. To deliberately choose to forgive someone who doesn't 'deserve' it...to show mercy where none was shown to you. C.S. Lewis put it this way: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."^{vii}

At first glance, the last imperative does not seem bold at all. In fact, it makes all the sense in the world to say to God: "Do not bring us to the time of trial." Who



wants to face hardship? But in truth, to follow Jesus, to live as God commands, puts us at odds with the way things are in the world. Causes us to stand up, to speak out, to love our neighbor, to love our enemies, too. The way of Jesus can lead to harm, accusation, even violence. Yet we are not to return in kind. So, this last imperative of the Lord's Prayer is not a plea that we will escape such hardship; it is the prayer that when the time of testing comes, we will not fall or fail, but will have faith sufficient to endure it. Bold indeed.

Because we pray The Lord's Prayer so often, we can pray without thinking. We are distracted by its sheer familiarity. So listen to this fresh wording of it by Eugene Peterson in his version of the bible, The Message:

Father,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

Some years ago now, The Lord's Prayer took on new meaning and immediate urgency for me and since then I rarely pray it in a distracted or rote manner.

I was leading worship at Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Atlanta. I was very pregnant with Katherine at the time. It was a few months after Atlanta had hosted the Olympics where there had been a bombing incident. I was standing in the chancel area much as I do here on Sunday mornings, giving the announcements at the beginning of the service. A young man entered through the doors of the sanctuary and proceeded to walk up the aisle toward me.

He was dressed in military camouflage attire. He wore a backpack. His fists were clenched and his eyes were wild, darting around the room as he continued forward. He stopped about 10 feet in front of me. At this point, of course, no one cared that the Stewardship Committee was meeting at 1:00 p.m. in the Session Room or that



the youth group was going bowling or that fried chicken was on the menu for lunch after church. I stopped speaking.

No one moved in the pews, except a parent or two who put their arms gently around their children. To my left, I saw Willie Philipps, a member of our church who served in the Fulton County police department, ease out of his pew. He crouched down and drew his gun. Well, it was a worship service and I was, at that moment, the worship leader. So, I said in a voice I hoped would sound more calm than I felt: “Sir, we welcome you to our worship service today. I invite you to take a seat and join us as we worship God.” Fists still tight; eyes still wild as he looked around the sanctuary. “Say the ‘Our Father,’” he said. “Say it!” And so we did. Immediately. With him, we all began to pray: “*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; they will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*” we prayed, continuing with him all the way through to “*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever,*” and when he added “*and ever, Amen*” and we did, too.

Then he turned and walked back down the aisle, leaving as abruptly as he appeared—back out into the world with whatever voices or visions or troubles encumbered him, tested him, made him less than whole.

That morning, we saw how far we are from the kingdom, for the troubles of this world are all around us and sometimes inside of us. I feel sure none of us had ever prayed The Lord’s Prayer so shamelessly in our lives. The imperatives were palpable. Yes, we declared what we wanted for ourselves, to be sure, but we also prayed it with him. To this day, I still pray The Lord’s Prayer with him close at hand, wherever he is now. Once, he was a little boy sitting in church every Sunday, hearing that prayer, learning it by heart. Years later, when everything else in his world became tenuous, it was still there as a mark of his identity. “Lord, teach us to pray,” one of his disciples asked him. Abraham Heschel says that “prayer enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy.”^{viii} And N. T. Wright says that the one Jesus taught us to pray, the Lord’s Prayer, “is the way we sign on for the work of the kingdom.” Every time we pray it together, we are act out “in one little but vital

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local instance,^{ix} the longing for God’s kingdom to come, right now and forever, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Amen.

ⁱ The Reverend David Maxwell in “Baffled by Prayer,” by Mike Ferguson, Presbyterian News Service:

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/baffled-by-prayer/>

ⁱⁱ As quoted by Peter Marty in “Teach Us to Pray: Luke 11:1-13” in *The Christian Century*, July 13, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ From the Peter Marty article noted above.

^{iv} Luke Timothy Johnson, **Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke** (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 176.

^v C. Clifton Black, “Whose Kingdom? Whose Power? Whose Glory?” in *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 36 (2014), 13.

^{vi} I first heard this from my Church History Professor, Catherine Gonsalus Gonzalez. Her husband, Justo L. Gonzalez, references this same feature in his commentary on this passage in **Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Luke** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 145.

^{vii} C. S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness” in **The Weight of Glory and Other Essays** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 135.

^{viii} Quoted in Black’s article, 16.

^{ix} N. T. Wright, “Thy Kingdom Come: Living the Lord’s Prayer” in *The Christian Century*, March 12, 1997, 270.