

10.23.05

Whenever You Pray

Matthew 6:5-15

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Jesus moves from teaching about giving to prayer, but he still is emphasizing the importance of our audience, that we are more concerned with praying to God than praying in places that enable us to be seen by others. A simple definition of prayer is talking to God about what we are doing together. It is a believer's communication with God.

At the heart of this passage is what we call the Lord's Prayer. It is very difficult to deal with these verses in just one sermon, one could spend several months on them so what I will share today is just an overview.

The Lord's Prayer is **brief** – Jesus speaks elsewhere about the futility of vain repetition in our praying. Jesus knew the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 5:2, *“Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.”*

The Lord's Prayer is **simple** – less than 75 words in the familiar English translation and even less in Greek. A child can learn it easily.

The Lord's Prayer is **comprehensive** – it sums up Jesus' teaching and reflects the attitude we are to have toward God and human life.

As I was studying the Bible this week I had kind of a revelation. I was struck all of a sudden by how very closely related the Lord's Prayer is to the Ten Commandments. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is referring back to the teaching of Moses and the Prophets. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, but I say...”

Let me just point out some similarities between these two foundational expressions of our faith. The Ten Commandments can be found in Exodus 20:1-17.

The first four commandments have to do with our relationship with God, in the Lord's Prayer the address and first two requests have to do with our relationship with God.

The first commandment is,

“You shall have *no other Gods before me.*” The Lord's Prayer begins *“Our Father...”*

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that *is in heaven above*, or that is on earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

“Our Father, the one *in the heavens...*”

“You shall *not make wrongful use of the name* of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses *his name.*”

“Our Father, the one in the heavens, *hallowed be thy name...*”

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy...for in six days *the Lord made heaven and earth*, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day.

“thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*”

The next 6 commandments have to do with our relationships with other people.

The next 3 requests in the Lord’s Prayer are relational and deal with people.

“*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*” This is the only commandment with a promise, God is giving you land, if you want to live long and healthy, you must honor your parents.

“*Give us this day our daily bread...*” that our needs for today would be met today so we can live.

The rest of the Ten Commandments deal with relationships gone wrong because of temptation, sin, faith that failed, or evil:

“You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, give false testimony against your neighbor nor covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

The rest of the Lord’s Prayer deals with forgiveness – asking God to forgive us as we are willing to extend forgiveness to others who have hurt or wronged us and closes with a plea that we not be put to the test, that temptation, bad things, or trials not try our faith

There is one commandment with a promise and one petition with a promise – you will be forgiven to the extent that you are forgiving.

Both the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer begin by glorifying God and end by acknowledging the weakness of human beings.

In teaching us how to pray, Jesus is drawing on the core teaching of the Ten Commandments. Because we say and hear this prayer so frequently it is possible we can recite as a matter of routine and lose the depth of its meaning.

Let’s just walk through the prayer

First, God is the focus of our prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer is addressed or spoken to “*Our Father, the one in the heavens*” or “*Our Father always near us.*” The prayer speaks about God’s name, God’s kingdom, and God’s will being done on earth. Praying this prayer we begin by focusing on God and what God wants being accomplished. We don’t pray, “my will be done,” we pray “thy will be done.” This isn’t easy if we’re serious about it. In his book, *Rediscovering New*

Testament Prayer, John Koenig writes about the Lord’s Prayer:

“Every day, in countless languages, in public and in private, in virtually every country of the world, this prayer ascends to God. It could be argued that no single minute passes when it is not being uttered. Paradoxically, one could also argue that very few of us who pray this prayer have a clear notion of what we are asking for, especially when we reach the second petition: ‘**Let your kingdom come.**’ Yet in many ways this is the central focus of the only prayer Jesus taught us, just as it was the central focus of his entire ministry.”

In praying for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done on earth, we are praying that we will work with God to accomplish what the Lord wants. Imagine God’s will like a river, flowing with a fairly strong current. When we are in the center of God’s will, our life moving in God’s intended path, it is like paddling a canoe down the center of the river, carried by the current. There is a degree of freedom and space in the center of the river, we have room to move, however the further we venture from the center of God’s will, the closer we get to the edge, the more perilous it is because that is where the rocks, downed trees, and hidden obstacles are that can cause us to get wrecked and hurt. It is more difficult to paddle upstream against the current of God’s will. It is also exhausting. I can imagine Jesus sitting in the front of our canoe paddling, every now and then turning around and asking, “*Are you sure this is the way you want to go?*” We insist we know what we’re doing, even though our arms ache, our shoulders are burning, and we know we’re going in a direction we should not. Jesus will not force us to change direction, he will stay with us, and he doesn’t get tired. He will be with us until we are willing to turn around, and to seek the center of God’s will rather than our own way. We pray and strive for God’s will, not our will, to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When we pray, “*Give us this day our daily bread,*” we are asking **that our needs for today would be met today.** This includes food and whatever else we truly need to live. The emphasis is on provision today for what we need today. This also hearkens back to another passage from Exodus 16:1-36 about God’s provision of food in the wilderness. The Israelites were complaining against the Lord, and the Lord provided bread for them to eat so they would not die of hunger. God through Moses instructed the people to only take what they needed for that day and not to worry about gathering more, but some folks didn’t listen, “*some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul.*” The only day they were supposed to take more was the day before the Sabbath because they were supposed to rest on the Sabbath day, and yet on the seventh day there were still folks who went out looking to gather manna, which ticked off

Moses. According to Exodus 16:36, “the Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land.”

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, in praying “give us this day our daily bread,” Jesus is teaching us to learn to trust God for our daily needs. Over a century ago, George Muller, of Bristol, England, didn’t advertise or ask for particular needs to support a vast ministry including houses for orphans but allowed it to come from the prompting of God. He did this as a testimony that God provides faithfully for those who trust in him. He reasoned: “Now if I a poor man, simply by prayer and faith, obtained without asking any individual, the means for establishing and carrying on an orphan house: there would be something which with the Lord’s blessing, might be instrumental in strengthening the faith of the children of God, besides being a testimony to the consciences of the unconverted, of the reality of the things of God.” If we see needs met because we have asked God alone, our faith in God’s presence and care will be greatly increased.”¹

The next part of the Lord’s Prayer is that **our sins be forgiven, and not held against us**. We ask God not to punish us for things we do wrong. **We are asking God to deal with us on the basis of mercy or pity** (see Psalm 103:10-14; James 5:11). If we truly *know* God’s mercy and pity for us, we will not be hardhearted toward others. We forgive as God forgives us and we’re praying for help to forgive. We must have mercy, if we want to receive mercy (James 2:13).

The final petition in the Lord’s Prayer is that we not be permitted to come under trial or to have bad things happen to us. Don’t put us to the test. It is kind of odd in a sense that in the most familiar form of the Lord’s Prayer we say, “*Lead us not into temptation,*” even though the Bible says that God doesn’t tempt anyone to sin or to evil. James 1:12-16 says in part, “*No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.*” **The requests of the Lord’s Prayer begin with the glorification of God and end with an acknowledgement of the weakness of human beings.** It is not that we will never have trials, but we believe God will be with us even in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23, 34, 37; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Fred Craddock, an excellent teacher of preaching, talked about the practical role of servanthood in dealing with the challenges and trials we all face everyday. He said, “To give my life for Christ appears glorious. We think giving our all to the Lord is like a taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table – ‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.’

¹ Willard, Spirit of the Disciplines, 174.

But the reality for most of us is that God sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 bill for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory, it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul." We pray not to be led into major trials and tests because we find the routine ones we face tough enough.

As we conclude, we take note that all the petitions and references in the Lord's Prayer are collective – **our** Father, **our** daily bread, **our** sins, lead **us** not into temptation, There is a collective and community nature to being a Christian that is inescapable yet unfortunately often ignored. God is not just mine or yours. God does not belong to any one nation. "This prayer embraces the whole world, from the coming of the kingdom to daily bread. Large things and small things, spiritual things and material things, inward things and outward things – nothing is beyond the scope of this prayer...It is lifted up to God in every conceivable setting. It rises from the altars of great cathedrals and from obscure shanties in unknown places. It is spoken by both children and kings. It is prayed at weddings and deathbeds alike. The rich and poor, the intelligent and the illiterate, the simple and the wise – all pray this prayer" (Richard Foster, Prayer, 184-185).

Richard Foster writes in his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, "*The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mess of motives – altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture.*"

A Prayer that teaches us to Pray:

Dear Father, always near us,
may your name be treasured and loved,
may your rule be completed in – us
may your will be done here on earth
in just the way it is done in heaven.

Give us today the things we need today,
and forgive us our sins and impositions on you
as we are forgiving all who in any way offend us.
Please don't put us through trials,
but deliver us from everything bad.
Because you are the one in charge,
and you have all the power,
and the glory too is yours – forever –
which is just the way we want it!²

² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper: San Francisco, 1998) p. 269