

Jesus' Model Prayer

Matthew 6.9-13, Luke 11.1-4

Subject: "Lord, teach us to pray": Praying Jesus' way

Theme: Jesus' model prayer shows us how to focus

- on God
- on God's family

Introduction

Illustration. Travelling alone in Western Australia in 2001, Darren Alcock drove to the Stirling Range to walk up Bluff Knoll, the highest peak in the range. Although 15,000 people every year take this three-hour walk, this was the off season.

At first it was a little misty, but it started to drizzle about 25 minutes after he reached the top, and in the thickening fog Darren lost the path.

He called his father, 9,000 miles away in Great Yarmouth, on his mobile phone. His father called the police, who then rang Darren, but his battery went dead almost at once. However, his father had told them where he was, so the Gnowangerup district SES rescue team went out to find him. By then it was about 7 in the evening, and it was dark, cold and raining heavily. Darren found a narrow overhanging rock to lie under, but the ground was wet and muddy. He tried to use his torch as a signal, and shouted for help, but heard nothing back. Eventually, about an hour later, the rescuers found him. As he later commented, "Without my mobile, I would have been up there all night, and could have caught pneumonia, or fallen in the poor visibility." [source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/mobile/article>]

Like Darren, our first impulse when we are in peril is often to call our Father—the one we trust to help us. But we should not only pray when we need help in an emergency—prayer is central to the Christian life. As Martin Luther said, "As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray."

Looking closely at the Lord's prayer can help us not only to deepen our prayer life but at the same time, as we shall see, to orient our lives more completely to God's will.

Learning to Pray

Luke's gospel has the disciples asking Jesus: "**Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples**" (Luke 11:1). Jesus gave them the prayer we now call "The Lord's Prayer," which we (like the disciples) can use as a model of how to pray. Praying is not just a matter of repeating the words of this "model prayer", but of using it as a pattern around which we shape both our prayers and our lives, focusing above all on giving God the honour due to him and on praying for the needs of all his people, including ourselves.

James Burtness discusses the disciples' request: 'Lord, teach us to pray'.

So spoke the disciples to Jesus. In making this request, they confessed that they were not able to pray on their own, that they had to learn to pray. The phrase 'learning to pray' sounds strange to us. If the heart does not overflow and begin to pray by itself, we say, it will never 'learn' to pray. But it is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself.

For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicings—all of which the heart can do by itself—with prayer. And we confuse earth and heaven, man and God. Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one's heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with him, whether the heart is full or empty. No man can do that by himself. For that he needs Jesus Christ.

The great American preacher Haddon Robinson reflects:

When our children were small, we played a game. I'd take some coins in my fist. They'd sit on my lap and work to get my fingers open. According to the international rules of finger opening, once the finger was open, it couldn't be closed again. They would work at it, until they got the pennies in my hand. They would jump down and run away, filled with glee and delight. Just kids. Just a game.

Sometimes when we come to God, we come for the pennies in his hand.

"Lord, I need a passing grade. Help me to study."

"Lord, I need a job."

"Lord, my mother is ill."

We reach for the pennies. When God grants the request, we push the hand away.

More important than the pennies in God's hand is the hand of God himself. That's what prayer is about. When you go to God in prayer, the name that should come easily to your lips is *Father*.

So the Lord's Prayer begins with us recognising that God is our Father, whom we honour and whom we trust to care about us and to delight in responding to our requests.

But we should not take for granted this great privilege of calling God our Father. For many, this is one of the strangest things about Christian prayer.

Illustration: Option 1. There is a story of a Muslim woman whose grandson was ill. As she sat by his side in the hospital, waiting for the results of some tests, his doctor—a nun—came by, and the two women began to chat. Their conversation turned to religion, and the grandmother, who admitted that she had long been troubled and searching for God, was very struck by how close and personal the doctor's experience of God seemed to be—such a sense of intimacy with the divine seemed to her almost shocking.

When the doctor suggested to the grandmother that she try talking to God as if he were her friend, or even her father, she at first found the idea impossible, too audacious, even sinful. However, later that evening, as she began to think about the warm relationship that she had had with her own earthly father, she began to feel a new sense of hope. Trembling but with growing confidence, she began to pour out her heart to the God she now dared to call "my Father".

Yet perhaps sometimes it takes something special to remind us that the word "Father" is not *just* a word.

Illustration: Option 2. During the last century there were a number of major wars, especially the two World Wars, and many of those who served in the armed forces were away for years at a time. We're told of one serviceman whose wife was expecting his child when he left to go to war. The child, a beautiful little girl, was born shortly after his departure.

The child's mother was careful to make sure that her daughter was always aware of her father. Every day she talked about him and showed the little girl pictures of him. She talked about how much he loved and cared about her, and always looked forward to the time when he would be able to come home.

One day, when the little girl was about 4, she was playing in her front yard when a man came up to the gate. She looked up, and saw the love in his eyes. Recognising at once who he must be, she exclaimed, "Daddy, you're for real! Daddy, you are for real!"

Perhaps sometimes we are too used to calling God "Father", and we lose sight of what it is that we are really saying. We need to stop and listen with all our being to the prayer that the Lord gave us.

To say to God

"Our Father"

Is wondering gratitude,

Is ardent venturing awe,

Is humble penitence,

Is reverential praise,

Is endless fellowship,

Is all-committing love

To say "our Father"

Truly, is

To pray.

Jane Hers Marchant

Jesus begins his model prayer with the humility and awe that is God's due.

- **"May your holy name be honoured;..."**

He encourages us not to rush headlong into God's presence with a string of requests—imagine how your best friend would feel if you kept asking, "Give me...", without, at the same time, sharing your appreciation of your partner? So, to avoid "grocery list praying", when we enter God's presence in prayer we first allow ourselves to be caught up in adoration of God.

But we are not just asking in a vague kind of way that somehow or other God be generally well thought of; we are declaring our own commitment to honouring him in every part of our lives. After all, it would be bizarre to pray that God be given the honour due to him but then to live in a way that does not "fit" with what we say about the God we claim to worship. When we say these words, we are committing ourselves to live our lives in such a way that others may see our good deeds and praise our Father who is in heaven (Mt 5:16).

Jesus' model prayer then expands more on what this honouring of God's "name" means—that God's rule (his kingdom) should be fully recognised and acknowledged.

- **"May your kingdom come."**

Matthew expands on this and explains a little of what it means (Matthew 6.10) when he adds: "may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". But how can we pray that God's kingdom come, if we don't seek to show God's rule at work in our own lives? Underlying these words is a parallel prayer: "May my life, day by day, be increasingly committed to doing what would please him, and not doing what would displease him."

François Fenelon picks up this theme: "Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of you; you only know what I need. ... I open my heart to you. Behold my needs which I know not myself. Smite, or heal; depress me, or raise me up; I adore all your purposes without knowing them; I am silent; I yield myself to you; I would have no other desire than to accomplish your will. Teach me to pray. Pray yourself in me. Amen."

When we pray for God's will and purpose to be fulfilled—for his kingdom to come—we declare ourselves willing to be his agents in this world. We are called to serve him in every possible way in his church and in his world.

But Jesus' model prayer reminds us also of our dependence on God.

- **We ask him for *provision*—to give us "day by day the food we need", the basic necessities of life.** By this we mean food and everything else we need for our physical life, but we also are asking for spiritual sustenance as well.

There is something very important to note here. As an unknown poet has written,

No "I" in the Lord's Prayer

You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "I."

You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "My."

Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for one another.

And when you ask for daily bread, you must include your brother.

For others are included ... in each and every plea,

From the beginning to the end of it, it doesn't once say "Me."

God knows our need for food, for clothing and for shelter, and also our need for companionship, for love, and for all that keeps us well and safe. But he also knows our need for something even more important: as Matthew's Gospel reminds us, Jesus told his tempter the Devil: "Human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks" (Mt 4:4, referring to Deut 8.6). As Christians, we need spiritual as well as physical sustenance. We need to nourish our souls with the Word of God, so regular daily reading of the Bible is an essential habit. If you aren't currently following any particular system for reading the Bible but would like to find one, a local Christian bookshop or an organisation like Bible Society or Scripture Union (or perhaps your local church) will be able to help you.

But, as our poet noted, Jesus' model prayer does not focus just on our individual needs. Jesus did not tell us to pray, "Give me day by day the bread I need." In this prayer, we see the needs of others and our own needs all in the same light: "Give us day by day the bread we need." And as we pray for our needs—the needs of all God's people—to be met, we remind ourselves that this, too, is actually part of

the coming of God's kingdom, and that we have a role to play in helping to bring it about that all the needs of all God's people are met. For example, we can help to ensure that others can receive God's Word by contributing to organisations like the Bible Society.

We also ask God for *pardon*—"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive everyone who does us wrong."

The model that Jesus gave us for our prayer begins, as we have seen, by recognising the holiness and the sovereignty of God, and continues by recognising our dependence on God for everything that sustains us. Now it comes to something else that is absolutely vital—our need for forgiveness—but it deals with this need in a most extraordinary way. The Biblical scholar Tom Wright points out that this clause "...commits the pray-er to actions which back up the petition just offered ... Prayer and life are here locked indissolubly together. And, please note: this *isn't* saying that we do this in order to *earn* God's forgiveness. It's a further statement of our loyalty to Jesus and his Kingdom. Claiming this central blessing of the Kingdom [forgiveness] only makes sense if we are living by the same central blessing ourselves." Out of our experience of God's forgiveness, we are able to forgive others.

Illustration, Option 1. Jackie Robinson was an African-American baseball player who broke down the barrier of prejudice preventing African Americans from playing professional baseball. In doing so, he had to find the courage not to fight back when his opponents insulted him or even tried to injure him. He had to learn to "turn the other cheek", and to let his answer to prejudice and hatred be simply his superb playing. His struggles and his achievements became the subject of a film, *The Jackie Robinson Story* (United Artists, 1950).

Illustration, Option 2. Five days before Christmas a stranger came up to Christopher Carrier, then 10 years old, claiming to be a friend of his father and asking Christopher to help him buy a present for his dad. The boy agreed, and went off with the stranger in his motor home. After driving to an isolated area, the stranger stabbed him in the back with an ice pick, shot him in the left temple, and left him for dead in the alligator-infested Florida Everglades.

It was six days before Christopher was found, but amazingly he survived his injuries, though he was blind in the left eye. However, he could not identify his attacker, so the police could not make an arrest. The experience left the boy badly frightened for a long time.

Three years later a turning point came when he gave his life to the Lord, and eventually decided to enter full-time ministry, hoping that he could help others find the peace Jesus Christ had brought him.

After many years, Christopher received a phone call from a detective to tell him that a man had confessed to the attack, which had been an act of revenge against Christopher's father for having given the man the sack. Christopher went to visit him, now feeble, blind and living in a nursing home.

At first, the man denied involvement, but eventually relented and even apologised. However, Christopher told him that God had turned what had been meant as an evil into a great blessing, because it had been the means of opening many doors in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Afterwards, Christopher went home and told his wife and his children about the meeting, and the whole family began visiting the old man almost daily. The relationship became close, and one Sunday afternoon during a visit the old man accepted Jesus as his Saviour. A few days later, he died peacefully in his sleep.

Knowing the forgiveness of God gives us the strength to forgive those who try to harm us, and so to bring the light of Christ more fully into the world as we live in it.

- **We ask God for *protection*—"And do not bring us to hard testing."**

Literally, we are praying: "Lead us not into the time of trial", and the version of the prayer in Matthew's Gospel expands this by adding "but keep us safe from the Evil One." We are asking for protection from spiritual, moral and physical danger. In many countries, this prayer is understood very literally: "Help me

in my persecution as I suffer for my faith." In the West, some of our greatest tests are moral and spiritual: "Help me to conquer the benefits of affluence, the tendencies toward having a workaholic personality, and the tests of ambition."

"But wait, there's more!" Biblical scholar Tom Wright suggests that when we pray this part of the Lord's Prayer we are also praying for more than our immediate safety. He notes that Jesus' way "is to recognise the reality and power of evil, and to confront it with the reality and power of the kingdom-announcement....His way for his followers is that they, too, recognize evil for what it is, and that they learn to pray, Deliver Us From Evil....Jesus intends his followers to recognize not only the reality of evil but the reality of his victory over it....Evil is real and powerful. It is not only 'out there', in other people, but it is present and active within each of us....But Jesus' victory over evil is also real and powerful. It, too, is not only 'out there', a fact of history two thousand years ago, but it is available here and now for each of us. Where human beings turn from idolatry and worship the God they see revealed on Calvary, they are turning from darkness to light....To pray 'deliver us from evil'...is to inhale the victory of the cross, and thereby to hold the line for another moment, another hour, another day, against the forces of destruction within ourselves and the world." This petition, too, is part of the Kingdom prayer.

Conclusion

We have looked at what it means to pray the model prayer that the Lord gave us, and we have seen how tightly it is connected with the coming of God's Kingdom in and through our own lives. We have also seen the essential truth contained within this prayer, that the lives of all God's people are bound together through their relationship with God—"You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say 'I'". However, this is very much at odds with much current thinking. Focusing on the individual self, thinkers such as Abraham Maslow offer the image of a "hierarchy of needs", in which everything depends on fundamental personal physiological needs, pre-eminently food and clothing, and the need for personal safety. Maslow argues that the poor do not seek to have their higher needs (which he defines, in ascending order, as 'love', 'esteem' and 'self-actualisation') met if these fundamental needs for food, clothing and protection are not met. His hierarchy builds up to his highest perceived need, self-actualisation.

While Jesus' model prayer certainly recognises our fundamental needs for food, clothing and security (including spiritual nourishment and protection), it places these needs in a very different context. Most obviously, it is not crassly individualistic but recognises that these are the needs of the whole community—"Give us..."; "forgive us..."; "lead us..." Relationships matter. We are not islands, remote from each other. We are at one with other people in webs of relationships.

However, the Lord's Prayer places all these real needs in a very different context. First, we learn to worship God, and to place ourselves and our whole lives at God's disposal—"may your Kingdom come". Then, recognising our dependence on God, we ask him for provision, pardon and protection. Paradoxically, it is in worshipping God and in acknowledging our dependence on him in the context of our membership of God's family that we become most truly and most fully the people God created us to be. Thus, praying Jesus' Model Prayer with all our being, we find ourselves undergoing a radical and dynamic shift—from a narrow, blind focus on self to liberating openness to God, and from concern only with our own immediate wellbeing to the joy of life in the community of all God's people.

We pray, and our life changes.