

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

Dr. Bill Mounce

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31. The Lord's Prayer

Prayer is arguably the greatest mystery of life. It lies at the very heart of a mysterious relationship that we enjoy with God. And there are some things that we simply do not understand about prayer. And yet there are many things that we do know about prayer because we have been taught them directly; and nowhere more clearly than Matthew 6:9-13, a passage that we call "The Lord's Prayer." But actually it isn't a very good title; it should be called the "Disciples' Prayer" because Jesus can't pray it, because Jesus cannot ask for forgiveness because he has not sinned. But it is the pattern of how you and I as disciples of Jesus Christ are to pray.

You know, the Lord's Prayer was never intended to be repeated. We are to pray like this. And the Lord's Prayer or the Disciples' Prayer is the pattern of what Biblical prayer looks like and it's given to us against the backdrop of meaningless repetition of words in other kinds of prayers. Yet it is so unfortunate, is it not, that the very thing that the Lord's Prayer was designed to do, stop meaningless repetition of words, it in fact has been used many, many times. But the Lord's Prayer is a pattern. It tells us what we are to pray like and I just want to work our way through the Lord's Prayer.

I. Prayer Starts with a Proper View of God

A. "Our"

So it begins "Our Father in heaven." Notice that it's OUR Father it is not MY Father. Certainly there are occasions for individual prayer. There are times in which we go into our inner rooms and we pray one on one. And yet the Lord's Prayer begins OUR Father. The pronouns all the way through are plural. And the Lord's Prayer is instructions on how, at least, we pray together as a body, as brothers and sisters, as the church. The American church has largely forgotten the need and the power of corporate prayer. We mistakenly think that God wants us to be rugged individualists and just get alone and pray with him and nothing else. Be a prayer warrior by ourselves and we think wrongly. We think unbiblically. There is a time for individual prayer but that's not what the Lord's Prayer is about. The Lord's Prayer is how we as a group, and then by implication how we as individuals are to pray. I don't have time to go into this in a lot of detail, but there is an excellent sermon by John Piper. I would encourage you to read his discussion of the needs and the requirements of corporate prayer in the American church. But the Lord's Prayer begins, "OUR Father in heaven."

B. "Father in heaven"

Father, or in the original Aramaic, Abba, is the family term for father. It's the term that the children would have used of their fathers within the context of the home. It's the word that stresses that God is approachable; that he's personal and that he cares about you and he will respond to what you ask him. And addressing God as Father, and God as Abba was revolutionary in that day. Judaism just did not conceive of God being a personal father to individuals or to groups. Judaism was much more comfortable with the "in heaven" side of the salutation. They were much more comfortable talking about God's otherness and his majesty and his wonder and the fear of God and the fact that he is Lord and the fact that he is Judge. That's something that their culture could handle easier.

I'm reminded of the passage in Exodus 19 in the giving of the Ten Commandments. This is the God that Jesus' disciples approach in prayer and this is the God that you and I approach in prayer. "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder." That is our God in heaven.

The words of the hymn 'Immortal, Invisible, God', say this so well. This is the God we pray to: "Immortal, invisible, God only wise. In light, inaccessible, hid from our eyes. Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days. Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise. Great Father of glory, pure Father of light. Thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight. All praise we would render, oh help us to see 'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee." This is the majestic and the awesome and the awe-inspiring side of our Father in heaven. And it is our job in prayer and in life to balance both sides of this theological teeter-totter.

And I would suspect that any culture has troubles with one and not quite so much with the other. But our culture today desperately needs to discover the latter. Our culture, our church culture, our American culture, desperately needs to rediscover the majesty and the wonder and the trembling and the shaking of our God when we pray, "Our Father in heaven." So often we treat God with disrespectful familiarity.

I remember one of the most disgusting sermons I've ever had to sit through, not in this state. It was a Christmas service. It was one of those two opportunities that every pastor gets to proclaim the gospel to people who go to church twice a year. And instead of making use of the opportunity to praise God for the incarnation and the birth of his son and the coming death of his son and everything that's entailed with Jesus being born. We were encouraged to wave to Jesus for his birthday. It was terrible. There was nothing majestic; nothing honoring; there was nothing glorifying in the service. And yet in prayer when we come to him we pray, "Our Father;" with everything that means, who is "in heaven;" with everything that means.

II. Prayer Focuses First on God

So Jesus begins by orienting ourselves in prayer with a proper vision of God, of rightly thinking about who God is. And then it focuses on God and his glory. This is the first of the two basic truths that are taught in the Lord's Prayer. And that is that prayer is not primarily about me. Prayer is a time to be focused on God. And what we have are three imperatives. It doesn't come through in your translations, but the first three verbal forms are imperatives because in the prayer, what we are doing is calling on God to act, not for my glory, but to act for his glory.

A. "May your name be holy"

And so we start with the first imperative: "Hallowed be your name." Hallowed means "holy." And the name of the person refers to the person himself. So when you and I pray, "May your name be hallowed," "May your name be holy," we understand that God is holy, but what we're calling on God to do is act in and through me. We're calling

on God to act in and through us as his children in such a way that when the world looks and sees what I do and what I don't do, what I say and what I don't say, that the world sees that he is, in fact, holy. When we pray, "May your name be hallowed," we're calling on God to act through me and through us so that the world will see that he is sinless, that he is perfect. It's not about me.

B. "Your kingdom come"

Second imperative, "Your kingdom come." God's kingdom is not some earthly realm. It is his kingly rule in the lives of his disciples. And when you and I pray, "May your kingdom come," we're calling on God to rule in me and to rule in us and have that rule expand throughout our neighborhoods and cities and eventually to the world. And ultimately when we pray, "May your kingdom come," what we are calling on God to do is what the early church called on him to do when they cried out, "Maranatha," come Lord Jesus. We're calling on God to bring his kingdom and all its fullness, and all its fulfillment and all of its finality so that every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. May your kingdom come in me and in our church and in this world and ultimately may it come, may you come back Jesus. May you put an end to this world. May you put an end to sin and suffering and all the wickedness. And may you establish your realm in its totality among us. May your kingdom come.

C. "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"

The third imperative is: "May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." How is God's will done in heaven? It's always done, and it is perfectly done. And when we pray this prayer we are repeating the very words of Jesus in Gethsemane, "Not my will but yours be done." In our lives may you act in such a way that your will will always perfectly be done." This is a prayer that puts God first and puts us at a distant last place. You see, it's when we understand what it means when we say, "Our Father in heaven" that he is approachable and yet the awe-inspiring God of the universe. That when we understand, we fade into the background. You can't treat God as a coke machine. You can't treat God as something you can put your 50 cents in and get out what you want if you say, "Our father who is in heaven," because as soon as you understand that, you and I fade into the background and we become consumed with God's glory and not our glory. His glory is central and ours becomes nothing, and when we understand that, then we can pray, "May your name be seen to be holy, may your kingdom come in all its finality and may your will be done perfectly all the time."

It's a prayer that puts God first and puts us in last place, but it's a prayer that is in conflict with what we often think and unfortunately with what we often do. Remember the Lord's Prayer was not meant to be meaninglessly repeated. That's the exact opposite of what God intended for it. So when we say the Lord's Prayer the question is, do we really mean it or not? Because you see, if you and I pray, "May you be seen as holy;" and then go home and live more like a sinner than as a saint, then our sin is diminishing God in the eyes of the world and we are making him small.

The latest curse that is everywhere and unfortunately even on the lips of people in the church; the curse, "Oh my G__!" I can't even say it; it's so disgusting. It's a curse that is on the lips of many of our young children. It's a curse that shames God. And instead of crying out, "Oh God, may your name be seen to be holy by what I say and do and don't say and don't do," we are taking the name of our Father in heaven and we are using it

as a curse and we are making him less than he is. "May your kingdom come." Do we really believe that? Do we really want his reign to spread in us and in our families and in our neighborhoods and in our world? "May your kingdom come." Why then do we fight against God's lordship in our lives? Why do we work against God's kingdom growing and reaching out to the neighborhood and to the world? Prayers are often in conflict with what we think and what we do. And that's the challenge of prayer, to say what is true, to say, "God, by the power of your Spirit, this is what I want," and then by the power of the Spirit to learn to live in compliance with our words. That's the challenge of prayer. "Hallowed be your name. May your kingdom come. May your will be done."

III. Prayer Focuses Next on our Dependence

When our deepest desire, then, is to see God glorified: what happens is we come to understand our total dependence on him. And that's the second basic truth of the Lord's Prayer. That when you understand what it means to pray to a God who is our "Father in heaven," we start to understand who we are and how dependent we are upon him for absolutely everything. In this part of the prayer, at first glance it appears that the focus shifts away from God's glory to our needs. But that's not what really is going on.

Because in the admission of our needs what we are saying is "God we are dependent on you, only you can satisfy me and fulfill my needs as I live on dependence on you." The focus is still on God because he's the only one who can act on our behalf to answer the rest of the prayers.

A. Physical Needs

And so we first turn to express our dependence on him for our physical needs and we pray, "Give us this day, give us this day our daily bread." The God of the universe, the God who shook Mt. Sinai, the God whose majesty and wonder is beyond human words to describe is concerned about your and my mundane, daily needs. And he wants to give us our needs, not our greeds. He wants to give us our daily bread not our yearly bread. But he is concerned about me and he is concerned about you. And as we reflect on that we come to understand that everything we have comes from God, 1 Corinthians 4:7. And when you understand that everything that I have and everything that you have comes from him: our abilities, the opportunities that we have to work, and other things, all of these things are from him and we have to learn to live in total dependence on him. To say it another way, human security is an illusion. It's an absolute illusion. It does not matter how many businesses you own, whether your house is paid off or not, how many cars, how many boats, how many cabins, how much money; none of this provides real security. Security is a human illusion. I could lose my voice this afternoon and never regain it. You could lose your house tomorrow. There are many ways in which God can help us understand that we must live in complete and total reliance and dependence upon him. So what's our job? Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, (Matthew 6:33) and then all these things (including our daily bread) will be given to us. We gladly admit our complete and total dependence upon him for our physical needs.

B. Spiritual Needs

But we also gladly confess our dependence on him for our spiritual needs. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The Lord's Prayer thinks of sin as a debt owed to God. And the payment for that debt can only come from God. Forgive us our debts; forgive us our trespasses, our sins. As we have forgiven those who have trespassed against us, those who have sinned against us.

Notice please the relationship that exists between God forgiving and us and us forgiving other people. And in fact, it's so important that Jesus adds two more verses on to the end of the prayer to make it come clear. Matthew 6:14, 15: "For if you forgive others their trespasses (their sins), your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." You see, if I truly understand who God is, and I truly understand what God has done in my life: forgiving me the immense debt that I owed him because of my sin, then the only possible response is for me in turn and forgive you your petty debts, perhaps, that have been incurred because of your sin against me. But if I hold on to resentments: if I hold on to hurts; if I refuse to forgive; if I put my foot down and say, "I'm not going to forgive that person until I think they're really sorry" then I have not repented of my own sins. And God will not forgive me.

I don't think you can say it any clearer than Jesus says it. It's difficult. I think probably of all the phrases, all the imperatives in the Lord's Prayer, this is the one that is the absolute hardest to understand. And yet when we refuse to forgive, the only person we're really hurting is ourselves because it eats away, it chews away at us. But most importantly, it means that my relationship with my Lord is damaged because if I don't forgive you, then he will not forgive me. My forgiveness of others is not predicated upon their repentance. Jesus forgave the soldiers as they were killing him. Steven forgave the Jewish leaders as they were stoning him. My forgiveness of others is not predicated upon their repentance; rather God's forgiveness of me is predicated upon my forgiveness of others. If I am truly forgiven, then I will forgive.

Today is December 7th, and many years ago our nation was changed by what happened. I got to go to Hawaii once and we went out the Dole Plantation and I was sitting there looking out over the fields and it was just beautiful. In the distance was a mountain range that went along and then there was a dip in the mountain range. I was just sitting there looking at. It was just beautiful. My dad walked up to me and said, "Bill, do you know the historical significance of the dip in the mountains?" "No." "That's where the Japanese flew through to bomb Pearl Harbor." And I don't think ever in my life I had to deal with the sensations that flooded me. Sensation of absolute hatred, and absolute bitterness and just fury of what happened on December 7th. And I didn't lose anyone in the war. I never have. God has been gracious and my dad and my uncle and brothers, no one has been killed in these wars. But I imagine how hard it must be to forgive just as the Japanese are called to forgive us for what we have done. My dad tells another story that when he was at Whitworth College, it was the beginning of the school year and a young Japanese student came in and brought her parents to meet the president (which you might not know about my father is that he was trained to be a hell diver in WWII and he has lived most of his life ever since) and the young student brought her parents in to meet dad and as they were bowing to each other, the girl was doing the translating, dad realized that this Japanese gentlemen was precisely the person he was taught to hate and to kill. And right past the father's head on dad's wall was the picture of dad flying his hell diver.

The call to forgive has got to be the most difficult thing in the Lord's Prayer. I don't know your experiences and you don't know mine, and yet I do understand no matter what someone has done to you and no matter what someone has done to me, I have done worse to God. And the debt that my sin has incurred is far greater than any debt you will incur against me. And if I have really repented of my sins, if I have come to grasp the truth of who I am as a sinner on my way to hell, and yet God in his love and his grace and his mercy chose to forgive Bill Mounce; who am I not to extend forgiveness to you and who are you to not extend forgiveness, as hard as that is, to those who have sinned against you. Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.

C. Moral Needs

Jesus then moves into the sixth and final imperative: "And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." This is probably the most difficult of the passages to understand what it's saying because you look at, "lead us not into temptation," and you say, "Wait a minute, James 1:13 says God doesn't tempt anyone." The word translated "temptation" can also be translated, "testing." So it could be saying, "Lead us not into a time of testing," yet James 1:2 and Romans 5 tells us that testing of our faith is a good thing because of what it produces. And then to make things a little more complicated, the word translated, "evil," could also be translated, "evil one," meaning Satan. It's a difficult passage to deal with. And yet the basic idea is still crystal clear.

As we pray this final imperative we are expressing our dependence on God for all of our moral needs. When you and I say, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," what we are saying is, "I am incapable, in and of myself, to resist the power of sin. I cannot resist the power of the flesh. I cannot, you cannot resist Satan on your own. It's not possible. So we come to God in utter dependence on him, saying that only you can protect me from sin. And we ask him to do precisely that. It's what Paul says in Romans 7:24 as he has been talking about the sin in his own life and he says, "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to Jesus Christ." That it is God, through Jesus Christ, that is the only way in which you and I can be kept safe from sin.

If I can say it rather bluntly, and it seems to be the morning for being a little blunt, most of us, it seems to me, much of the time, are obsessed with ourselves. We're obsessed by our reputation, we're obsessed with our authority over ourselves, we're obsessed by our will being done, and that obsession shows itself in self-reliance. "I can take care of my physical needs. I can take care of my spiritual needs. I can take care of my moral needs." And instead of being free we are being enslaved. Rather, prayer teaches us that we should be obsessed with God, our Father in heaven; and with his holiness, and his reign and that his will always be perfectly done. And it is only within the context of that kind of obsession that you and I are going to see that we are utterly dependent upon him for everything. And instead of reminding God of all that he owes us, we come to him in prayer with our hands open and our hands empty and we pray, "Our Father in heaven." And we are free. We are free to rest in his arms. We're free to trust. And we're free to serve.

Prayer, to say it another way, is just worship. It's another way to come into the presence of God with singing, declaring who he is and what he has done.