

Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew 6:5-18

This section of the Sermon on the Mount provides some of Jesus' most pointed instructions about what and how to pray, resulting in verses 9-13, in what we know as the "Lord's Prayer"

- that said, we should note Jesus is not saying, pray *only* this prayer
- important as this prayer is, much of its importance is in its *structure*
 - Jesus says, "Pray in this way..."
 - he's saying something akin to, whatever you may pray for or about, structure your prayer this way
- and important, too, is our motivation for praying: as with everything else, do what you do in service to something bigger than yourself

"Father," the prayer begins...

- the Greek word is *Abba* and denotes the role *father*, but this is more than biology...
Abba denotes love, concern, and intentionality
- father becomes "daddy" and mother becomes "momma" because of the nature of the relationship between father/child and mother/child, because of what your child means to you, of you being there for him/her, and your willingness to sacrifice for him/her
- so it is with the Lord's Prayer...*Abba* says "father" but more nearly means "Daddy"
- Jesus, therefore, is instructing us to begin the prayer by thinking of God as "Daddy," with everything that suggests about the nature of our relationship with God

This is not merely a matter of semantics

- it is both profoundly theological and profoundly existential
- how we address God speaks of how we understand our relationship *with* God...
- that God is not a distant, disinterested, how-dare-you-approach-the-great-and-powerful-Oz kind of God, but a loving, caring God
- a God we can best understand the way we understand earthly daddies at their best are supposed to be, loving us so much that should we ask for a fish would not give us a snake, or for an egg not give us a scorpion

And so the prayer begins: *Daddy*...but not quite

- the very first word is not "daddy" ...the very first word is *Our*
- that means God is not *my* God, there only for *me*...just as much, God is *your* God, *everyone's* God
- so that when we say "Our Father" we are asserting an obvious but important truth: you and I and everyone are brothers and sisters, children of God...we are a *family* of faith

“...hallowed be your name...”

- we are reminded that prayer, whatever else it may be, is an act of worship
- and we’re reminded, too, that there is to be an order, a priority in our prayer, beginning by acknowledging that God is the Father and we are the children—not the other way around
- and that the first order of business is to worship and hallow God
 - this is part of the structure Jesus is talking about in saying, *pray in this way*
- followed by the second order of business which is to acknowledge what God—not us—wants and says is important: *“Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..”*
- only then do we give voice to our wants: *“Give us this day our daily bread”*

It isn’t accidental that Jesus tells us to pray first for the Kingdom, then for God’s will...again, it speaks to priority...to structure

- if you’re like me, when you pray that God’s will be done what you really mean much of the time is that your own will be done
 - not, “Your will be done” but “Please bless *my* will”
- but one of the great lessons of the Lord’s Prayer is that, for the most part, it’s not about *me* at all...it’s about the Kingdom
- so it is that Jesus says pray first for the Kingdom, then that God’s will be done

Now—why? Why those things in that order?

- so we don’t end up praying for the good of others in terms of what we think is best for ourselves
- individually, we play a role in the Kingdom, have a place in the Kingdom...but the Kingdom is not about any one of us
- the Kingdom is about all creation...that all creation will know peace and justice and compassion...that all creation will know God as *Daddy*
- and to know God as Daddy, we must first know Christ as Lord...*that* is God’s will
- and as we know Christ as Lord, through the power of the Holy Spirit we become vehicles for the work of the Kingdom
- and as that work is done, God’s will more nearly reigns on earth as it does in heaven

The point is this: “Your Kingdom come” is not a request we make of God to act on our behalf but a demand we make of *ourselves* on behalf of the Kingdom

- “The Kingdom of God is within you,” Jesus said, and so it is: God’s Kingdom comes, God’s will is done as God’s people spread the good news of Jesus Christ and work for peace and justice and compassion
- and that means the coming of the Kingdom—as much as it has to do with God, with the second coming of Christ—has to do with our willingness as Christians to actually live what we pray

“Give us this day our daily bread...”

- consider this: if the ratios of the world’s peoples remained the same but the world’s population was reduced to only 100 people...
- there would be 59 Asians, 15 Europeans, 11 Africans, 9 South and Central Americans, and 6 North Americans
- of those 6 North Americans, the five or so from the United States would possess 60% of the world’s wealth
- now how many of *us* would consider ourselves *wealthy*?
- and yet, if you have food in a refrigerator, clothes on your back, and a roof over your head, no matter where you live, you are richer than 75% of the people on earth

Asking God to give us our daily bread, with its echo of God feeding the Israelites manna in the wilderness, is both an acknowledgment of dependence and an expression of thanksgiving...

- that we realize what we have is a gift from a loving and gracious God
- but, even more, it is a plea to deliver us from our own greed: give us today what we *need*, Father, not what we *want*
- because in a land of such extraordinary abundance where a healthy economy depends on wants becoming needs, it’s so very difficult to keep the two separate
- we pray for our daily bread not just to feed ourselves, but that we might do our part in feeding others

“And forgive us our debts”—by which Jesus means sins—“as we forgive our debtors”

- consider the second part of the statement first: *as we forgive others*
- it begs the question, how *do* we forgive others?
 - do we really want God to forgive *us* as *we* forgive others?
 - do we extend to others the grace that we ourselves receive?
 - or do we instead hold on to hurt, work up anger, rev-up resentment because of something someone has done to us or, maybe, *not* done...and refuse to forgive, refuse to extend grace to others?
- the case can be made that Jesus’ words here are words about mercy...that in asking God to show mercy to us we promise to show mercy to others...
- not* always easy to do living in a culture that so often demeans mercy as misguided and a sign of weakness
- films, television, video games, many sports, celebrate not mercy but destruction, not compassion but death
 - in the end, anything less than annihilation is not victory
- but remember, God admonishes the Israelites...remember, Jesus admonishes those whom he heals and admonishes us...
- remember who and what you once were, what you would be still, had *you* not been forgiven, had *you* not been shown mercy, had *you* not received grace...
 - remember, and then do with others as God has done with you

And the first part of the statement—*forgive us our sins*—points us to “*do not bring us to the time of trial*” because both are confessions of sin

- we don't petition God not to lead us into temptation or evil, as if that's something God would ever do
- the words here are best understood as saying, “protect us” or “strengthen us” in the face of temptation because we *are* sinners, we *will* sin...
- with the apostle Paul we say, “I do not do what I want but what I do not want is what I do”

The poet Marie Howe says that thanks to computers, the internet, and social media, our moral lives are now much more a function of what we say than what we do

- if there's truth in that then our prayers are a manifestation of our moral centers...of all those things that structure and enliven who and what we are in the world
- and our moral center, as Jesus would have it, as it is spoken of in the Lord's Prayer, is
 - the work of worship...
 - the work of seeking first God's Kingdom...
 - the work of using the gifts with which we've been blessed to bless others...
 - the work of forgiving as we've been forgiven...
 - the work of being faithful in the face of sin and evil that threatens to overwhelm us...
 - the work of loving God, loving ourselves, and loving one another