

The Lord's Prayer and Our Petitions

MATTHEW 6:11-15

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THE LORD'S PRAYER RECORDS THE TEACHING of our Lord Jesus Christ's on the subject of prayer. It is a perfect teaching in every way, and for that reason I feel a bit out of place trying to add on to something that is already perfect.

Unfortunately, many of us have memorized this prayer without ever giving thought to the principles it teaches. Some of us even recite this prayer in an attempt to persuade God to make something happen. And because the prayer is so misused and abused, the precious principles contained within the prayer are lost. For many people, the only way these principles can be recovered is for them to take a fresh look at the teaching. I hope last Sunday's message and this Sunday's message can provide you with a fresh look at the Lord's Prayer. It is my desire that the three principles taken from the Lord's Prayer that I am sharing with you these two Sundays really will impact your approach to prayer and the actual way you pray.

The two principles we discussed last week call us to enter into a state of adoration. The first principle is to notice the One with whom we are talking. Notice Him for the awesome God that He is. And notice Him as the loving Father who sacrificed everything to adopt us as His children. The words, "Our Father in heaven" call us to recollect and meditate on the One with whom we are speaking.

Then the second principle tells us to begin our petitions by first asking what God wants before we ask what we want. And God wants three things. He wants His Name to be honored everywhere and among everyone. You know as well as I do how flippantly the Name of God is used these days. The ancient Jews felt that the very Name of God was so holy and sacred, and they so small and unworthy, that they dare not even mention it. The world we live in today has an entirely opposite attitude. Every time we hear God's Name used without reverence we should be reminded how it hurts the heart of God. His desire is for His name to be honored, and He wants us to have the same desire.

His second desire is for His Kingdom to be established, and that can only be done when people submit themselves to the authority of the King through the blood of Jesus Christ.

And God's third desire is for people to behave in a way that is in keeping with His will. Agreeing with God's desire for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven is agreeing to always work for improvement

upon this earth even though we are certain the earth, as we know it, will some day be destroyed.

When we abide by these two principles, what we are actually doing is entering into a state of adoration. And our prayers should always begin with adoration.

TODAY, WE TURN TO THE LAST OF THE THREE principles found in the Lord's Prayer. This third principle is found in the last three petitions of the prayer. The first petition is, "Give us today our daily bread." That is followed by, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." And then we have the last petition: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." Some people consider this last petition to be two; however, our Lord's use of the conjunction 'but' seems to indicate that it is really one petition looked at from two different angles.

These last three petitions of the Lord's Prayer cover every possible need a human being faces. With these three petitions, Jesus deals with every aspect of our lives. Our physical needs and our mental needs and our spiritual needs are all included in these requests. The body and the soul and the spirit are all covered.

So the third principle is telling us to bring all of our needs before the throne of grace. And the fact that the subject in all these requests is plural and not singular means that our petitions should not only include the needs of ourselves as individuals, but also the needs of others.

Let's consider each specific petition. The first petition is basically saying, "give us this day what is necessary for our physical survival." This is a prayer for physical necessities, bread representing the "staff of life," that which is needed for physical survival. This petition is the first thing that follows our adoration. It takes our thoughts from the highest of heights down to the basic level of physical needs. It connects the Creator of the Universe to our daily needs. I believe Jesus placed this petition directly after the words that focus on God and His great concerns, because He wanted to draw our attention to the fact that the King of the universe cares about the food we eat from day to day.

It must be emphasized here that we are praying for absolute necessities and not for luxuries or superabundance. Later on, in the sixth chapter of

MATTHEW, God promises to provide for the basic physical necessities of His children. He promises that, if we seek first His kingdom, then we are assured to have everything needed for our physical survival for as long as God intends us to live. But the promise does not go beyond what is necessary for physical survival, and neither should our petitions.

Now, with such a promise, why do we even need to ask God to do what He has already promised to do? If God already knows our needs, why should we have to even mention them to Him? The reason lies in the child/father relationship we have with Him. God is not like the ATM machine that provides for our needs upon request without having any feelings toward us. God loves us and He wants to talk to us just like a good human father likes to talk to his children. When my children are hungry, I like to hear them say, "Please dad, may I have something to eat?" Now I am committed to provide them with food and clothing and shelter even if they don't ask me for these things. But I like them to ask, because when they ask, they are talking to me. You see, I love them, and I take pleasure in talking with my children and hearing their requests.

It is a marvelous thing to think that God likes us to talk to Him. Because we are His children, He likes us to come to Him, and He likes to hear our petitions. God is in love with His children, and that is why it makes sense for us to come to Him often with our basic daily needs, and not just when we are facing a crisis in our lives.

And coming to God with petitions for basic needs not only makes Him glad, it also serves as a reminder to us how completely dependent we are on God for our basic survival. We cannot live for one day without Him. Our prayers of thanksgiving before we eat our meals should be a daily reminder of this fact.

From a petition for basic physical necessities we now shift our focus to a request for our basic emotional needs. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." There are two things about this phrase that give people difficulty.

The first problem some people have with this phrase has to do with a teaching that says "Christians don't need to ask God for forgiveness." Doesn't God forgive us once and for all at the point of our salvation? If so, then there is no need for us to continue asking Him to forgive us once we have been forgiven for all time. Those who have been justified by faith should not have to ask over and over again for forgiveness.

But Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, teaches God's children to pray for forgiveness? How do we explain this apparent contradiction of two teachings? Think, for a moment, what it means to be justified by faith. It means being freed from the penalty of sin, because we have believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It means that we can now stand before the judgement seat of God as "not guilty." We don't have to repeatedly ask God

to free us from the penalty of sin. In fact it can even be considered an insult to the cross of Christ to make repeated petitions, asking God to free us from the penalty of sin.

However, being justified by faith does not mean that we no longer have feelings of guilt and shame when we do things that are wrong. It is possible for a child of God to have confidence that he will not have to pay the ultimate penalty of sin which is eternity in hell and, at the same time, experience strong feelings of guilt and shame and humiliation for wrong things done, whether they were done intentionally or unintentionally.

There was a certain priest who served in the church where I grew up. I always considered him to be a godly person. I don't think he feared going to hell after he died. I believe he had confidence that Jesus paid that penalty for him. However, one day while driving to pay a visit to a church member, a small boy darted out in front of that priest's car. When the car hit the boy, the boy died instantly. I can remember my mother telling me how devastating that event was on that priest. He had strong feelings of remorse and guilt.

We are human beings who make mistakes and who get caught up in situations that do harm to other human beings. Soldiers, even Christian soldiers, who return home from wars have feelings of guilt and shame and remorse that they must deal with. We should be aware of this when we pray for our countrymen who are now fighting.

God is aware of our emotional needs, and He wants us to ask for His healing. In 1 JOHN 1:9, we are told that, if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. It is not wrong for Christians to ask God for emotional cleansing. In that sense, it is not wrong for Christians to ask God to forgive them, and even to do it on a daily basis.

The second difficulty people have with this petition is another apparent contradiction. It appears that we have here words that contradict the doctrine of grace. By saying, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," it appears that Jesus is teaching us that we can only be forgiven if we first forgive others. This thought is reinforced with the words found in verses 14 and 15: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

I think you can see the apparent contradiction. The doctrine of grace teaches us that forgiveness is a free gift from God made possible through the blood of Jesus Christ. Whether we are talking about forgiveness that takes away the penalty of our sins or forgiveness that cleanses us from the emotions of guilt and shame, it is all a free gift from God.

The only way I believe we can explain this apparent contradiction is to remind ourselves that the

Lord's Prayer is a teaching given to people who have already received forgiveness. It is a teaching for Christians, for people who can call God their Father. It is not a prayer for anybody, but only for those who have become children of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The text does not say, "Forgive us our debts, because we have forgiven our debtors." It says, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." As God's children we have already been forgiven, and the proof that we have already been forgiven lies in the fact that we forgive others. If we think that God has forgiven our sins and, at the same time, we refuse to forgive somebody else, then we are mistaken; we have never been forgiven in the first place. The person who has experienced forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ will forgive others. He will be merciful to others. It is a must. He cannot help himself. He knows that he, himself, deserves nothing but death. His heart has been broken as he realizes what Jesus did to save Him. Now he cannot refuse forgiveness. If you are stubbornly refusing forgiveness to someone, then I suggest you consider the fact that you have never been forgiven, even if you have been baptized.

What I am suggesting is also emphasized in the story of the unmerciful servant recorded in MATTHEW 18. In that story we find a servant who owed a great debt to his master. His master canceled his debt. But when the servant went out, he found a fellow servant who owed him a fraction of what he had owed the master who just canceled his debt. Then we read that the unmerciful servant refused to cancel his fellow servant's debt. The result? His master declares that his original debt is not forgiven. The forgiveness that was sincerely offered was not sincerely received and appreciated; therefore, he was not forgiven.

Whether or not we forgive others is not meant to be a condition for receiving forgiveness; rather, it is meant to be a test to prove whether or not we are forgiven. When we forgive others, we are not doing away with the penalty of their sin. Only God can do that. But we are reducing the amount of guilt and shame they feel.

Therefore, when we pray asking God for forgiveness, the logic of our prayer may sound something like this: "Because of what you have done, Lord, I am now able to forgive others. So I ask you, in the same way I am now able to forgive others, please forgive me once more. Take away the emotions of guilt and shame that now plague me. Forgive me as I forgive them because of what the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ has done in my heart."

Just like the petition for bread represented the essential physical needs we have as human beings, so this petition for forgiveness represents the essential emotional needs we have as individuals.

What is left? What is it that God still wants us

to bring before the throne of grace? We have already dealt with body and soul. What remains is our spirit. And our basic spiritual need to pursue holiness and keep from doing evil. So our Lord teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

The side margin of my New International Version tells me that the earliest manuscripts did not include the word "one." I personally prefer the translation that reads, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The reason I prefer that translation, is because I realize that Satan uses the world and the weakness of my flesh to tempt me. My battle is against an enemy who is complex, and it is a battle for holiness. My essential spiritual need is to keep holy, and here I am taught to ask God to help me be holy.

It makes little sense to pray that we will never be tested. In this life, we will be tested and tempted. The prayer is that we will never be led into a situation where we are likely to fall. We should request our heavenly Father to protect us from such situations. And when we feel the forces of evil are strong, and we are surely about to fall, then we should pray that our Father deliver us.

The reason why we pray like this is not to look good in comparison with others who do fall. We pray like this, because we don't want anything to come between our heavenly Father and us. We love Him with all of our hearts, and we don't want anything to interfere with this love-relationship. That is what drives us to pray for holiness. No other motivation will do.

THE POSTSCRIPT TO THE LORD'S PRAYER sounds like this, "For Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever." The translators of the New International Version decided not to include this postscript, but it is a very fitting conclusion to this prayer. It takes our thoughts back to where they began. It takes us from our petitions back to a focus on the One with whom we are speaking. He is the almighty God. He is the Father that we love. What can we say before we conclude? There must be some kind of final thanksgiving. We must end as we began, by praising Him.

Just like talking to the person with whom we are married is absolutely essential to the health of our marriage relationship; likewise, talking to God is vital to our relationship with Him. It cannot be replaced by any kind of religious activity. Without prayer, we have no relationship with God. Those of you who follow the principles of the Lord's Prayer know what I mean. You know that your private times with God cannot be replaced with anything else. Without the devotional life, everything else you do will eventually become meaningless.

This past week I came across a story of a

young boy named Hank who, at the age of five, was sent to a place by the seaside to recover from diphtheria. The story took place in Europe, just before the World War II. The nurse who cared for Hank for six weeks is the one who wrote the story.

Hank's files said that he was Roman Catholic, so the nurse prayed with him before and after supper and again just before she tucked him in for the night. Hank never prayed himself; he just listened. The nurse figured that his throat was so sore to talk, and that was the reason he didn't pray. But as he began to recover from his sickness and his ability to talk returned, he still said nothing during the prayer time. He devoutly folded his hands and closed his eyes, but he never prayed with the nurse.

At first she thought he had forgotten how to pray, then she realized that he had never been encouraged to pray. So she began to encourage him and teach him certain prayers and certain songs. At first his prayers were very brief with a lot of hesitation. But soon, he was most eager to pray. Before long he was leading the nurse in the Lord's Prayer and he even started praying on his own without being instructed what to pray for. The nurse's heart was touched every time she saw his little hands folded and his eyes closed as he knelt beside his bed. She waited for the day when his mother would return and see her son praying.

But when Hank's mother did come, she was full of anger. Her eyes flashed as she snapped at the nurse, "Who told you to teach Hank to pray?" It was obvious that she objected to prayer. "But," the nurse answered, "his files said he came from a Roman Catholic home, so I thought it was OK."

The mother snorted in anger, "That was his father. He filled in the forms and he had to write that down even though he never goes to church or prays." The mother assured the nurse that what Hank had been taught would soon be forgotten, because he was too small and neither she nor her husband would encourage him when he got home.

But what that mother failed to realize is that there is a direct connection between prayer and building a relationship with God. That boy was not only learning how to address God in prayer, he was also practicing adoration. Over a six-week period of time, Hank had developed a love relationship with his heavenly Father. He kept up his prayers and taught his little sisters how to pray as well. He wouldn't eat or

sleep without his prayers. Then, the example of the three children finally melted the hearts of the parents, and they also began to pray with their children.

Then the war broke out and the family prayed and sang together as Hank had taught them day after day. They all joined a church, and God sustained them through those difficult times.

I can't remember the first time I prayed, but I can remember my father kneeling down beside me when it was time for me to go to bed. He taught me the Lord's Prayer. Later, certain nuns taught me other prayers that helped me tell God how much I loved Him and how much I wanted to do His will. I learned how to ask God to forgive me and protect me from evil. I never heard the gospel explained clearly until I was in college. I can remember the day when I asked God to save me and enter into my heart. But I understand now that my salvation was not only in answer to a prayer I said in January 1972; it was also in answer to the many prayers I had been praying over the years.

Our relationships with God all have a starting point. As our prayer lives grow, so do our relationships with God. For each of us, there will come a critical point in this growth process. We call this point eternal life. Once we reach that point, our relationships with God continue to grow in proportion to the amount of time we spend talking to God. The measure of your relationship with God is your prayer life. It is not how well you do ministry. It is both the quality and quantity of time you spend talking with your heavenly Father.

During this period that we call "Lent," have you made any extra effort to improve your prayer life? Have you taken time out to think about the One with whom you are speaking even before you make your requests known? Have you thought through the things that matter to him the most before you bring your own needs before the throne? And have you come to God like a child to his father, asking him to provide for all your needs, physical and emotional and spiritual?

Some of you have made an extra effort while others have not. It's not too late. As long as you still have breath, it is never too late to start. If you forget everything else I have said about prayer in during these past several weeks, don't forget the relationship between your prayer life and your relationship with God. Pray and you will grow to know Him and love Him more and more with each passing day. *ABP*