

"Lord, Teach Us to Pray"

by Roland Foster

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'" (Luke 11:1-4)

Instead of calling this "The Lord's Prayer," we should call it "The Lord's Prayer Pattern." What Jesus gave them was not just a series of words to memorize and repeat, though we certainly use it that way. No, what he gave them was a pattern for prayer. Let's look at that pattern and see how to use it in a couple of different ways.

Because it's a little more complete, I'm going to use the version from Matthew 6, which is part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." Here He was speaking to a lot of people, not just the twelve disciples, and He said:

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.'" (Matt. 6:9-13)

Let's take this pattern apart and look at each piece of it. Maybe we can see how Jesus meant for us to use it.

"Our Father in Heaven..." Yes, He is the Father of all living, but more than that, He is especially the Father of His adopted children: those who have believed in His Son, Jesus.

Do you think of God as your Father? Maybe you have had a wonderful, supportive, loving earthly father; or maybe not. Maybe your father was neglectful, abusive, or long gone. Regardless of that, you certainly do have a wonderful, caring, loving Heavenly Father. By calling Him "Father," by recognizing and saying over and over that He is your Father, you will come to understand and believe and really know that it is true. Call Him "Father," call Him "Daddy," and delight in being His child.

And yes, He is in Heaven, but Heaven is not so much a place as it is a condition, the condition of being with God. More about that later.

"... hallowed be your name." The old English word, "hallowed," means "holy," but it also means "honored because it is holy." The name of God is indeed holy, and we should always use it with reverence. I cringe when I hear someone exclaim, "Oh my God!" or use "God," "Lord," "Jesus," or "Christ" in a profane or irreverent way.

While I'm at it, let me say that the use of "damn" or any of its more polite forms, such as "darn," is a misuse of God's name — "taking the Lord's name in vain," as the commandment puts it — because only God has the power and the authority to condemn. You and I do not. I urge you to honor God's name by keeping your speech free of such

expressions. You may have to overcome some ingrained habits — it can be done, if you work at it.

"Your kingdom come, ..." The Bible says, and Jesus repeats, *"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."* If we do that, then of course we are eager for God's Kingdom to come in all its fullness — to do away with wars, cruelty, pain, selfishness, and all the other evils of this fallen world; to replace them with goodness, love, and joy. All of the things we currently love and cling to are nothing in Eternity. The people we love are precious to God, even more than they are to us, and He will save them if they will let Him (though He may want us to help a little bit). So yes, Lord, let Your kingdom come at the exact right moment.

"Your will be done on Earth as it is in heaven." Of course God's will is done in Heaven. The angels and redeemed souls who have chosen to be with God eternally have also chosen to let Him be in charge, because they know His way is better than any other way. When we understand that, of course we say, "You know best. Let Your will be done on Earth, just as it is in Heaven."

"Give us today our daily bread." By asking for today's food, we acknowledge that God is the true Provider — everything we have, He gives us. We are telling Him, and also telling ourselves, that what He provides for us for today is enough. We don't need to worry about tomorrow, because we can be confident that He will also provide everything that we will need tomorrow.

"Forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us." With each phrase of this prayer pattern we see that we are talking not only to God, but to ourselves. By asking forgiveness for our sins, we admit that we are sinners and deserve punishment — we need His forgiveness, because without it we will die. We also remind ourselves that we need to forgive other people who have injured us in some way. In the next two verses Jesus warns: *"For if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins."*

Besides that, you need to be smart enough to know that not forgiving someone does not hurt them. Holding onto resentment and bitterness only hurts you. Forgive, and be forgiven.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one." We are tempted by so many things. To start with; there is our own selfish human nature. We want what we want when we want it. And then there is the world, which knows how to appeal to every selfish desire we have. "If it feels good, do it," the world says. We are endlessly promised happiness if only we can get this toy or have that experience. Finally, to make matters worse, the devil is lurking nearby, looking for ways to lead us astray. Many of you know better than I do what it means to be caught in one of Satan's traps. Jesus has a better way. He says to us, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly. ... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."* His promise is true, and eternal.

The blood of Jesus has washed us clean and delivered us from the power of sin. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can stay free. We need to ask God daily to protect us from the power of sin; from all the temptations that try to overwhelm us and drag us down into the muck again.

Now we've had a close look at the pattern Jesus gave us for prayer. Let me give you a quick summary, to use when you pray:

- + Confess that God is your Father and Lord. He is holy, and deserves our worship.
- + Pray for His kingdom to come in your heart and on all the earth.
- + Confess that His will is good, and we should always obey Him, as the angels do.
- + Say you trust Him to provide what you need, when you need it.
- + After you have forgiven others, ask God to forgive you.
- + Ask for wisdom to avoid temptation, strength to resist it when it occurs, and protection from the evil one.

I believe Jesus intended for this pattern to be used to guide all types of prayer. I want to write briefly about three kinds of prayer, and show how this Lord's Prayer Pattern might be used to guide each one.

Before I do that, though, I want to mention two things Jesus said in Matthew just before He gave them the Lord's Prayer Pattern. I'll summarize; you can read the full text for yourself (Matt. 6:5-8) He said we shouldn't pray for show, but do it in secret. He also said not to spout forth a lot of words. Remember those two things as well.

Three different types of prayer: conversation, contemplation and intercession. Certainly there are other types, but let's look at these three.

Do you ever have conversations with God? It's so easy and natural, but many of us never do it. But some do. One man gets up in the morning, looks out the window and says, "Good morning, Lord. I see you've given us another beautiful day. Thank you." And he chats with God about what they will do together that day.

A woman stands at her sink washing dishes, and meanwhile she's telling God that her daughter is pregnant and she hopes the baby will be a girl; or maybe that the house needs a new roof and she hopes the Lord will take care of it for her. Just whatever is on her mind at the time, just chatting with God because He's there. Often He will answer, not with words but with an idea or a decision made or even just a feeling. If you haven't done this, you should. It's very rewarding.

How does the Lord's Prayer Pattern apply to this? Very naturally. As things come up in the conversation, just apply whatever piece of the pattern fits. I was praying like this one day and I was suddenly so overwhelmed by the beauty and goodness and mercy and love of God that I just spoke aloud, almost shouted, "God, you are so neat!" Which is sort of a paraphrase of "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name."

Tell God your worries, and ask for wisdom and help, as His Spirit leads you to ask. Listen for His answers. Ask for His peace. Tell Him how you sinned today, and that you'll need extra help tomorrow to keep from doing it again.

Start having conversations with God throughout the day. Apply the pattern to whatever is on your mind. Don't make a big deal of it; just recognize that He is available, ready to listen and maybe to speak in various ways, all the time.

Contemplation or meditation is when you go apart by yourself in order to commune with God on a deep spiritual level. Your main task is to be quiet and let the Holy Spirit move your spirit and your mind in whatever direction God chooses.

The Lord's Prayer Pattern provides useful starting points for times of contemplative prayer. You can start with just the word "Father." Get quiet before God and start to think of Him as your loving Father, who gave you life, who provides all that you need, and who loves you more than you can possibly imagine. Then stop thinking about it, and just open yourself to the reality and the wonder of God's fatherhood.

You won't find this easy to do. Your mind will resist it. You will think of all kinds of things, some of them very distracting. Just keep at it, don't let anything bother you. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you, to guide and control your thoughts and lead you into the truth. That's why Jesus sent Him to help us. If you persist, you will eventually be blessed with a real foretaste of Heaven — a oneness with God that you could never have imagined. Such an experience is rare, I think, for most of us, though for some it is the way they live.

Intercession is a kind of prayer where you ask God to intervene — to take some action in order to change things from the way they are. It can be very simple: "Lord, please don't let Bobby steal my lunch today!" Often it is for healing: "Touch my mother's body and take away that cancer, please, Lord." Also it is common to pray for the soul of a loved one who has rejected God. And of course there are many other needs to pray about, and most of them are urgent.

Use the Lord's Prayer Pattern to guide such prayers. Pray, then, confessing that God is Lord and Father; asking for His kingdom to come into the situation, so that His will (which is always for good) may be done on earth; asking for His provision for the current need; confessing any sin and recognizing the need for forgiveness; begging for the grace to do what is right and avoid what is wrong in every situation.

I hope you will fasten onto the prayer pattern given by Jesus, using it to shape your individual prayers, and leading you into a new way of living in which prayer is a large part of who you are and what you do. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to proceed. He certainly will.

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