



Texts in Context

A Word in Season: Preaching the Lord's Prayer

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WHY PREACH A PRAYER? ISN'T A PRAYER MEANT TO BE PRAYED? AND WHY the Lord's Prayer? How would one dare preach on such a well known and well loved article of the church? Martin Luther wrote to his barber Peter that, "the Lord's Prayer...is the greatest martyr on earth. For everybody grieves it and abuses it, and few cheer and gladden it by rightly using it."¹ Would one dare risk further grieving or abusing of this great prayer?

Such questions may well enter a preacher's mind as she or he prepares a sermon or a sermon series based on the Lord's Prayer—or they should. If one is not aware of the potential risks, one may well miss out on the potential fruits of the word. But the risks are worth taking. The Lord's Prayer can be fertile ground in which preachers may work and from which a rich produce of the word may spring.

I. "A WORD IN SEASON, HOW GOOD IT IS!"

So why preach the Lord's Prayer? The Lord's Prayer is worth preaching because it is both timely and timeless. It can be readily applied to virtually any aspect of a person's life. It is as the Proverbs say "A word in season," and a good word indeed (Prov 15:23).

The abuse of the prayer, making it a martyr of the life of faith and in the lives of people of faith provides another reason for preaching on it. If the Lord's Prayer

¹Luther's Prayers, ed. Herbert F. Brokering (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967) 42.

*Jesus invites us to ask, to search, and to knock, promising that God will respond.
A sermon series on the Lord's Prayer can empower people to engage this promise.*

is too easily prayed by rote or muttered flippantly or piously, such misuse of prayer should be addressed.

Moreover, prayer is often not a part of many people's day-to-day life at all, or, if it is, it becomes an area of struggle and frustration. Whether as a result of this frustration, the overly busy clutter of our lives, or even willful neglect, prayer (in my experience) is the single most important thing missing from the lives of people in the church—particularly our young people. The pulpit can be a place from which to empower a vital prayer life. As Einar Billing has noted, "the Gospels show beyond all doubt that even [Jesus] admitted the need of seeking God in daily prayer, if He were not to lose [His] purpose in the confusion of the many tasks which the world brought to his attention."² We too stand in need of this help and seeking after God.

James Nestingen has pointed out that Martin Luther considered the Lord's Prayer an almost perfect expression of reformation theology. Nestingen writes,

When Luther originally wrote the Small Catechism, he planned to include a special section on what he had spoken of earlier in the Reformation as a "theology of the cross." When he went to work on the catechism, however, he found the theology of the cross so clearly expressed in the Lord's Prayer that he dropped his original plan. In recent years, the phrase "theology of the cross" has become something of a slogan. When it becomes a catch phrase, it is treated as an insider's wisdom or kind of theology of champions. And then it is just the opposite of what Luther was talking about, for the theology of the cross, as he spoke of it, is a theology that reflects on the suffering of daily life in order to speak the liberating Word within it. It speaks of the hiddenness of God, and of suffering with and for the neighbor in the unavoidable difficulties of life.³

Any effort to communicate and impart this liberating and life-giving gospel message is well served and perhaps best begun with the Lord's Prayer. If the theology of the cross is still vibrant and vital, then preaching a fine, clear expression of it is not only suitable but necessary. In our present context, this theology may be more relevant than ever. In the closing months of World War II Helmut Thielicke preached on the Lord's Prayer, speaking words that ring true for us in a different way:

In these fearful, fateful weeks many people appear to have become alienated from their faith in God; they begin to ask how he can "permit" such things to happen. It would be better, however, if they were alienated from their faith in *men* [*sic*]. It would be better if they were disabused of their fanciful faith in progress and stopped talking so emotionally and sentimentally about the "nobility of man."⁴

The Lord's Prayer is just the kind of prayer needed by people who are alien-

²Einar Billing, *Our Calling*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Chicago: Campus Ministry Communications, 1979) 15.

³James Nestingen, *Martin Luther: His Life and Teachings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 61.

⁴Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) 58.

ated from the faith or who find their assurance in humankind. Preaching the theology of the cross, the will and kingdom of God, the need for daily bread and the forgiveness of sins will be just what the doctor ordered.

All of these possibilities (and certainly many more) would prove helpful starting points for a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. But there is a simpler and more immediate reason for preaching on it.

II. "LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY"

The occasion of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Luke is a request from the disciples that Jesus teach them (Luke 11:1). And in Matt 6:5-15, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount (i.e., while *preaching*), Jesus teaches about prayer. Yet while we may occasionally hear a pastor solemnly say, "Let us pray as our Lord Jesus taught us..." the fact that the Lord's Prayer is a teaching exercise is often overlooked. The Lord's Prayer is instruction; it is a prayer, yes, but a prayer that teaches us to pray. If all we do is repeat this prayer, we are not learning all that is being taught. We are merely sipping at milk when we are ready for solid food (Heb 5:13-14). If we pray the Lord's Prayer only by memory, by rote, in even the most pious and faithful of recitations, are we not missing out on all that the prayer can give us?⁵ By preaching the Lord's Prayer, by teaching it anew through proclaiming it, we can recover or at least revisit Christ Jesus' teaching for us.

Luther wrote that the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer,

may well be termed seven good lessons and exhortations....[T]hey are seven reminders of our wretchedness and poverty by means of which man, led to a knowledge of self, can see what a miserable and perilous life he leads here on earth. Such a life is nothing but blasphemy of God's name, disobedience to his will, rejection of his kingdom, a hungry land without bread, an existence full of sin, a precarious sojourn, and an abounding in every evil.⁶

At first blush these words may sound harsh. Should blasphemy, disobedience, rejection, hunger, and evil really be the focus of prayer? It would seem that for both Jesus and Luther the answer is yes.⁷

But what does this mean for us? In preaching the Lord's Prayer what can we make of these "seven good lessons"?

⁵In the Large Catechism Luther went farther, saying that simplistic repetition is not prayer: "It is quite clear that the kind of babbling and bellowing that used to pass for prayers in the church was not really prayer. Such external repetition, when properly used, may serve as an exercise for young children, pupils, and simple folk; while it may be useful in singing or reading, it is not actually prayer." *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 441.

⁶Martin Luther, "An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen" (1519), *Luther's Works*, vol. 42, ed. Martin O. Dietrich (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 27.

⁷Luther: "As we shall see later, Christ himself talks of them in this prayer" (ibid.). The introduction to the Lord's Prayer in Matt 6 sets appropriate praying over against hypocritical, public prayer that is for show or prestige.

III. CHOOSING THE TEXT

As one prepares to preach the Lord's Prayer the first task will be to choose the text from which to operate. The Lord's Prayer as we pray it today is closer to the version found in Matt 6:5-15 than to that in Luke 11:1-13. (Luke lacks the petitions that God's will be done and for deliverance from evil.) But naturally either Matthew or Luke is suitable. Which text preachers choose may depend on the context out of which they wish to begin.

Matthew 6:5-15

Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer comes, as we have noted, in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus prefaces his instruction on prayer with a contrast:

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret....When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matt 6:5-8)

There is a contrast between public and private prayer, between "heaped up phrases" and brevity. This is a good place to begin teaching prayer—and perhaps even a better point for pastors and worship leaders: prayer need not be long and windy to be heard! But it is helpful for those who are not theologically trained to hear those who are state publicly that standard liturgical prayer is not the only right way to pray, that there is another way that is available to everyone. According to Matthew, humble, heartfelt prayer will be heard by the Father.

Attitude, then, is the context out of which the Lord's Prayer springs in Matthew. Devout, honest, simple prayer is the goal here. But following the body of the prayer itself, Matthew's Gospel has more to say about prayer and forgiveness. Jesus concludes his preaching on prayer by saying, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:14-15). Here again there is a contrast, this time between forgiveness and *unforgiveness*. In Matthew, this is particularly fitting. The Sermon on the Mount, including the Beatitudes, the particular and pointed interpretation of the law, and the emphasis on the relationship of humankind with itself and with God, inform the spirit in which this prayer is to be offered. Forgiveness is central, not only forgiveness for ourselves, but of others as well.

Culturally, we stand in need of a renewing breath of this spirit. We are a people loathe to forgive. Without forgiveness, for us and from us, there can be no real, full, abundant life. The Lord's Prayer, so familiar, so well loved, can speak powerfully to us at this point. Preaching this spirit, this potential, this life-giving kingdom, will, bread, and deliverance is a place to begin.

Luke 11:1-13

Luke's version arises out of a more familiar context in which Jesus' disciples ask him for instruction: "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'" (Luke 11:1). The context in Luke is quite readily parsed. The structure in Luke 11 can be broken down like this:

1. Verses 2-4: "What to pray"
2. Verses 5-8: "How to pray"
3. Verses 9-13: "The promise of prayer"

The first part contains the pattern of the Lord's Prayer, "When you pray say...." The second part is a description of persistence, and what it will bring in prayer. And the third part offers a promise of what will come to one who prays.

Using these three pieces, one building on the other, could be an effective way to teach prayer and to proclaim the powerful promise of prayer. But will we dare do this? Will we dare proclaim the outrageous promise that God listens to those who pray persistently and gives them not only the "fish" and the "egg" for which they ask but the Holy Spirit to boot?

IV. ASK, SEARCH, KNOCK

As a parish pastor, I am often asked to pray: at someone's home before supper, with a family at the bedside of a dying loved one, at the county fair. Each time, I have the feeling that my prayer is trusted as being somehow particularly effective; not more effective necessarily, but differently, especially effective. On several occasions I have heard from persons who claim that they simply cannot pray; they don't know how, or what to say, or maybe even why to pray. And once, a crass and cranky old fellow in a nursing home suggested that I'd better do the praying because my chances of being heard were better ("chance" clearly being the operative word).

Most recently I was approached by a young woman whose child was being prepared for surgery. She is not a member of either of the congregations I am serving, and in the course of our conversation I discovered that she is not a member of any church. She asked me if I would pray for her son. I said I would be happy to, and suggested that we pray together. She refused, saying, "No thank you. I came to you so you would pray, after all that's *your* job." And with that, she left.

What all of this suggests to me is that prayer is not understood, not recognized, not believed to be real and "for me" by many people. And it is here, at this point, that the gospel is most in need of preaching and most ready to be heard.⁸

After responding to the request of his disciples to teach them to pray, after the petitions and the exhortation to persistence, Jesus said, "So I say to you, ask, and it

⁸C. S. Lewis put into words the desire and need that underpins this situation. In *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harvest, 1964) 22, Lewis writes, "We want to know not how we should pray if we were perfect but how we should pray being as we are now.... We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11:9-10). Nestled in these two verses is the promise upon which all prayer hangs: Ask, search, knock, and it will be given, you will find, doors will be opened. As uncomfortable as this promise may make some of us, and as scandalous, outrageous, and even ridiculous as it may seem, it is the one made by Christ and the one that we are called to proclaim. Above all, it is this promise that God's people need to hear.

In a day when we are increasingly alienated from one another, from family, from community, from our God; in an age marked by increasing financial instability and worry; in an era of hunger for knowledge and of spiritual poverty, this promise makes rich soil indeed for a sowing of God's word. In such a time, the teaching Christ gave into our hands in his prayer is a vital word, ready to be preached, with rich reward in store for both the one who preaches and the one who hears. To quote again from the Large Catechism:

God has made and affirmed a promise: that what we pray is a certain and sure thing....Such promises certainly ought to awaken and kindle in our hearts a longing and love for prayer. For by his Word, God testifies that our prayer is heartily pleasing to him, and will assuredly be heard and granted, so that we may not despise it and cast it to the winds, or pray uncertainly.⁹

This promise provides the impetus for us to preach the Lord's Prayer. It is the promise of the gospel, the promise that we are called to proclaim, God's word: "A word in season, how good it is!" ⊕

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⁹*The Book of Concord*, 443.