



Texts in Context

Preaching on the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:1-8)*

IRVING J. ARNQUIST

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Clara City, Minnesota

LOUIS R. FLESSNER

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Jesus introduced the Lord's Prayer with these instructions: "when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret."

What has happened to this secret prayer? How did it get so far out of the closet? Who knows how many times it has been printed on bookmarks and pencils, needle pointed into wall hangings, inscribed, carved, and cross-stitched? Could even the Lord count the number of times it has been intoned over the blushing couple? And how often has it not been a convenient way to close a church meeting or to cue the ushers to send the people forward for Holy Communion? What has become of this secret prayer?

I. THE TEXT

St. Matthew wrote for people who had grown up in the religious tradition. They were folks who knew their rich heritage—they had heard God's word, and they had learned to pray in childhood.

A wide-lensed view of the gospel reveals Jesus as the fulfillment of the ancient promises, the one who announces the kingdom of heaven. For Matthew, the teaching of Jesus, as it is lived out in the community of faith, continues to bear the presence and saving action of God.

To focus more closely, the Sermon on the Mount (ch. 5-7) is Matthew's summary of Jesus' teaching; it directly follows the call of the disciples. Jesus is presented as the giver of the new and better commandment to love, which fulfills all the law and the prophets. Jesus calls into question the institutionalized version of righteousness practiced by some of the religious leaders of the day who failed to

*This article was written by a parish pastor and a seminary admissions director after conversations with professors Arland Hultgren and Michael Rogness of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary.

act according to the precepts they taught. The ethical teaching of Jesus is based on God's mercy and grace and offers a vision of life more faithful and free.

To zoom even closer, the section which bears the general theme of practicing one's piety

(6:1-18) forms the most immediate setting of the Lord's Prayer. Three examples of pious behaviors are offered: giving alms (6:2-4), praying (6:5-6), and fasting (6:16-18). The teaching is cast in a repeating form: do not be like the hypocrites who call attention to themselves by their piety—they have their reward—but practice your piety in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Into this three-stanza composition, the Lord's Prayer breaks (6:7-14)—inserted between the teachings on praying and on fasting. Matthew introduces the prayer with a warning about the gentiles and their many words and follows it with an important two-verse commentary on the single petition concerning forgiveness.

The position of the Lord's Prayer in the text clearly lifts it up as the example of faithful discourse with God. It is a prayer that is simple and private, in marked contrast to the hollow, public piety of the first-century religious leaders and gentiles.

But why does Jesus consider the secret chamber to be the most appropriate place for prayer? Why the exhortation to brevity?

Jesus does not here proclaim righteousness to be simply a private matter! The Sermon on the Mount, with its opening call to evangelical poverty, mercy, and peacemaking (5:3-11), can hardly be accused of quietism. Far from privatistic religion, Jesus calls the faithful to let their light shine before the world so that all people can see their good works and praise God (5:14-16). He preaches righteousness to be a matter for the courts, for friends and enemies, and for spouses and neighbors (5:21-48). A prayer sprouting from personalistic piety would hardly begin with "*Our* Father" (it uses the first person plural eight times and never the first person singular).

If Matthew here records Jesus' condemnation of all prayers that are long, then he also reports him praying through the night (14:23-25) and long enough in Gethsemane so that the disciples fall asleep (26:36-40). If length is forbidden, the evangelist John did not know of this when he sharpened his pencil for the High Priestly Prayer (John 17).

Jesus does not command a secret piety because he has a thing against trumpets. Nor does he teach brevity in prayer to indicate that the one who works hard enough to simplify the prayer is the one who is heard by God. Jesus commands brevity in prayer to keep the disciples from being distracted by anything they might do themselves. He offers them a prayer that does not even once ask God to make them holy, and he sends the disciples behind closed doors to pray because he doesn't want them to be worrying about what other people think. Not one petition asks God to make them look good.

This prayer of Jesus is intently focused upon God, not the self or others. And the private room is worthy of prayer because it helps the one who prays to focus on God. Jesus' prayer, the private room, and brevity keep the one who prays from looking anywhere else than to God.

The secret chamber also reminds the disciple that prayer primarily has to do with one's relationship with God. As the marriage chamber represents the intimacy of that relationship, so the prayer chamber is the place of openness and closeness

with God. Like the Holy of Holies, it is not open to the public, nor is it a place to be preoccupied with the opinions of others.

The early use of the word "hypocrite" had to do with acting and the wearing of masks. In prayer, as in any intimate communion, pretenses fall, honesty prevails, and one is no longer the

same, but lost in the other by this bond of relationship.

In the context of this relationship with God, Jesus' prayer reveals the nature of God's eschatological work. Some would even title it the Kingdom Prayer because it is saturated with the imminent reign of God. Even the more "earthly" petitions, like the request for daily bread, bear striking eschatological overtones.

Out of the relationship with God, exemplified by the Lord's Prayer, comes true piety. The disciple is to give, pray, and fast, but not by the rules or institutional demands of religion. Faithful living comes from the heart, and only God can do this work. When this happens, the reign of God has come.

Piety and righteousness are preoccupied with God in the same way that the watcher is intent upon the rising sun, and the eyes of accident victims are fixed upon the coming ambulance.

The Lord's Prayer has its focus in God's saving work. Only one petition has anything to do with the actions of the one who prays—the petition that asks God to forgive "as we forgive those who sin against us." And this, together with the fact that the commentary that follows the prayer concerns this petition on forgiveness, is revealing.

If the Sermon on the Mount is a summary of Jesus' teaching, and the Lord's Prayer is at the heart of this sermon, then this petition for forgiveness is at the epicenter of the gospel. Reconciliation is the point of Jesus' entire ministry. Thus, forgiveness is at the heart of the relationship with God, of piety, and of life in Christian community. No better word can be found to describe the saving work of God or the day-to-day work of Christ in setting relationships right.

Perhaps no other theme appears more often in Matthew's gospel than that of forgiveness. Matthew uses the word *aphiemi* forty-nine times, nearly one third of the total number of its occurrences in the New Testament. And few are the chapters without several references. One most directly related to the Lord's Prayer (and its brief commentary) is the parable of the forgiving king who hands over the unforgiving servant to the torturers for full payment (18:23-35). Jesus concludes with the shocking words, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (18:35).

Matthew gives extraordinary emphasis to how one's reconciliation with God is lived out in the Christian community. The readiness to forgive others is not optional for those who have been forgiven by God. "How can you be forgiven if you don't yourself forgive?" has often been categorized as a Jewish overstatement. But forgiveness of sins itself could never be an overstated theme.

II. THE CONTEXT

How does this eschatological prayer for God's reign relate to the churches of today? Our churches have much going for them. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for example, is rich in people, resources, and tradition. It has five and a quarter million members in 11,000 congregations, is served by well educated

clergy and lay associates, and is ministering in a host of settings and institutions throughout the world. And it has a rich biblical, theological, and musical tradition.

But, given all that seems to be right, there are yet some serious problems. Though total numbers may be impressive, for many years they have been declining. The church's mission is

crippled by the lack of financial support from members. Too many congregations have become survival oriented, cool in fervor for witness, and lacking in warmth and vitality in worship. In congregations, hostility often festers beneath the surface, and the same can be said about the clergy. Anger is left unresolved in congregation-pastor relationships. Bitterness arises between the local churches and their national and synodical expressions. And we all feel the temptation to withdraw from each other—divided by our many agendas, caught up in our own personal visions.

These problems, shared by many denominations, have to do with piety. At least we two pastors wonder if the mainline churches are neither cold nor hot, but nauseatingly lukewarm. And in our more sober moments, we wonder if the apocalyptic judgment given to Laodicea (Rev 3:14-19) might also today be appropriate for us—rich in resources, but spiritually wanting.

The problem is not piety itself. Indeed, Matthew seems to indicate that we might need more of it (5:20). Piety carries a breadth of meaning that the word “faith,” in its everyday usage, seems to have lost. Faith often seems to mean only intellectual knowledge of God and grace. But piety implies the response of the whole person. We are to love God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind. That is piety language; it describes righteousness that is lived out in daily life.

From somewhere it seems we have received a fear of piety—no doubt because there is, was, and always will be a lot of sick piety around, but also because we know that no piety is perfect.

We have become very adept at identifying the various flaws and shortcomings of any and every piety. And we pat ourselves on the back for our own gifts of discernment. But when all is said and done, we ourselves have nowhere left to lay our heads. So we seek in some way to live piously neutral. And we find ourselves with a beige church that, in more than a few places, is characterized by detachment and decline.

And should we be surprised? It happened in Jesus’ day, and it happened with the church at the time of the Reformation. Why wouldn’t it be a threat today? Our piety is no less vulnerable.

The problems are really no different, but neither is the hope! When Jesus saw the problem in his day, he offered the Lord’s Prayer; and this prayer still has a word to shape our righteousness, even today.

But there is one thing that can stand in the way—our unwillingness to forgive. Here we also find grace. The word Matthew uses for forgive, *aphiemi*, most frequently is translated “to leave,” or “to let go.” The disciples “left” their nets (4:22). The fever “left” the woman (8:15). The dead are “left” to bury their dead (8:22). And in death, Jesus “let go” of his Spirit (27:50). Forgiveness of sin means to stop hanging on to it: to cease that which damages us and our relationships. Even when we forgive, we have salvation by grace—not deeds done by us in righteousness.

And yet, how determined we can be to grasp resentments. How easy it is for the “conservatives” to resent the “liberals,” and the “liberals” to resent the “conser-

vatives.” What would it mean for Christians to “let go” of our own visions long enough to listen to another perspective—and even challenge it where necessary, but freely rather than out of our own bondages. What would it mean for pastors to “leave behind” the suspicions and judgments

and frustrations they have with their colleagues? What would it do for leaders in the church to dismiss the fault-finding and cease to be fixed on defending their own turf? Would that necessarily mean broad acceptance of anything that comes across the board?

Christian community and witness are endangered by dispute and rivalry. Prayer and piety are imperiled when congregations continue to hold something against their pastor, or when pastors hang onto an adversarial position against their flock.

How can we learn to loosen our grip on what hurts us the most? Jesus offers a prayer and directs our eyes to a dominion outside ourselves.

In this brief prayer, which summarizes all of Jesus' teaching, Christ himself is present. It was in the context of this "awful" presence that presiders in the early church exhorted the people to be bold to invoke God in this prayer. And it should be no surprise to us, in light of Christ's real presence in this Word, that Luther, who had huge concerns with prayer in connection with sacramental action, considers this prayer worthy to fall between the Words of Institution and the actual reception of the body and blood of Christ.

This Word of God actually carries with it the reign of heaven. The Lord's Prayer does what Jesus' death and resurrection (or the Word, or the Lord's Supper) does; it saves and gives new life to the believer through the forgiveness of sins.

And this gives shape to our piety. Without our praying for faithfulness, God goes to work and makes us righteous, and teaches us to "let go." It happens by itself. Luther spoke of this often, saying that one does not need to command a stone that is lying in the sun to become warm. It becomes warm by itself. And in the Small Catechism, the meanings of nearly all the petitions begin by stating the fact that God's name is holy, the Kingdom comes, God's will is done, God provides daily bread, etc., "of itself, without our prayer," but we pray that it may also be for us. We do not ask that God would grant us our desire to be sanctified; we look instead at the coming reign of God, pray for it to come, and God does the work.

Jesus, who summarizes his own piety in the Lord's Prayer, invites us also to pray it, and so enter into his piety and live in his righteousness.

When God comes to life in us in the secret chamber of prayer, sanctification happens, lives are changed, and communities are healed. The Kingdom of God comes to us. We open ourselves, not just to God, but also to the needs of others, who are vessels of God's spirit. God's "letting go" frees us to let go of that which we hold against ourselves and against our neighbor. We relate genuinely, ask for forgiveness, and offer it.

Out of this quiet work of God we are affected, changed, enriched. We are no longer the same. In Jesus' prayer we are connected and bonded with each other. We find our health, our integrity, and our righteousness; that is true piety.