



Learning to “Pray This Way”: Teaching the Lord’s Prayer

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“**L**ORD, TEACH US TO PRAY,” ONE OF THE DISCIPLES ASKED JESUS. IN RESPONSE, Jesus taught them a prayer. If we today are interested in encouraging and teaching people to pray, we also would do well to use this Lord’s Prayer that Jesus spoke. The words that Jesus taught—*what* to pray—have certainly demonstrated their power throughout the generations of Christian use. The Lord’s Prayer can, however, also serve as a powerful example of *how* to pray and provide a rich opportunity for teaching about prayer. In fact, teaching this prayer may be one of the more important things we can do, for it is one of the few things that Jesus is said explicitly to have taught his disciples.

In the following sections, I will identify ways that the Lord’s Prayer has offered teaching moments for spiritual discovery, and I will be most concerned with the pastoral aspects of how this prayer shapes our relationships with God and with each other.

1. Our Father, who art in heaven

We were starting a series focusing on the Lord’s Prayer for our children’s program. As a way of introducing the prayer, I told them that we were going to say the prayer together. Every time we said the words “I,” “my,” or “mine,” they were to jump up, clap their hands, turn around, clap their hands again, and sit down. We energetically practiced going through the routine a few times, and they were ready to say the Lord’s Prayer as they had never been ready before.

Teaching the Lord’s Prayer may be one of the more important things we do. It is one of the few things that Jesus explicitly taught his disciples.

As we recited the prayer together, their anticipation turned into puzzlement when they never got the chance to enact the routine. What did we learn from this exercise? Though the Lord's Prayer has often been important in personal devotions, it is ultimately a prayer that unites us in community.¹ It is "our Father" to whom we pray, not my personal deity. It is "our daily bread" that we ask God to give us, not just my piece of the pie. It is "our trespasses" that we ask to have forgiven just as "we forgive those who trespass against us."

When people are asked to note all the instances of "we," "our," and "us," it can provide an entry to a discussion on what things we do indeed share together. Instead of thinking only about the things I need, we are given language to pray for the daily needs for the children of God worldwide. Instead of thinking only about the things we want to receive from God, this prayer can challenge us to consider what we should be giving and sharing so that indeed we all have our daily bread. Likewise, "our trespasses" are not simply the things I do wrong, but our failures as a Christian community to be faithful in living out our relationship with God and others, perhaps even in sharing our daily bread.

In teaching the Lord's Prayer, the first thing we all have to learn is that we are in community in Christ. The way we begin to experience this is by learning to pray, "Our Father."²

2. *Hallowed be thy name*

"Thy" or "your"? Which version of the Lord's Prayer should we use in our congregations? The archaic wording of the traditional version does pose challenges to children and those unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the King James Version. (My young daughter, struggling to make sense of the Lord's Prayer as she heard it, used to think that we were saying "my" every time we said "thy"!) Though the contemporary version is more understandable, it is not an entirely satisfactory translation. Unless the contemporary version is printed and available for everyone to read, I tend to use the traditional version because more people know it, and so we can pray it as a community. One place where the contemporary version is helpful is in teaching situations where its wording can be compared to the older version and with the texts in Matthew and Luke in order to generate discussion.³

¹The "Prayer of Jabez" from 1 Chron 4:9-10 has gathered considerable attention lately due to the popularity of the book of that name by Bruce Wilkinson. It makes for an interesting contrast to perform the exercise I describe first with the "Prayer of Jabez" and then with the Lord's Prayer!

²Can we pray to God "our Mother"? I will not use this article to discuss the language issue except to note that in addition to the stereotypical masculine references to kingdom and will, the Lord's Prayer is consistent with the larger biblical witness in identifying God with the stereotypical feminine references to nurturing and caring. The main point in praying to our "Father" is not to establish gender identity but to acknowledge a parent-children relationship.

³For one such table comparing the versions of the Lord's Prayer, go to my online study at <http://members.aol.com/Crossmarks/lordpray>. People quickly observe that the Lukan version is shorter than Matthew's and that neither of them include the closing doxology. As will be noted below in this article, some of the words and wording of the fourth, fifth, and sixth petitions also can raise good discussion. For an even more interesting comparison, note the winning version of the Lord's Prayer in a contest for composing a text message format for mobile phones: "dad@hvn, ur spshl.we want wot u want&urth2b like hvn.giv us food&4giv r sins lyk we 4giv uvaz.don't test us!save us!bcos we kno ur boss,ur turf&ur cool 4 eva!ok?" (Online: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/0,,2-2001223504,00.html>)

Whether “thy” or “your,” the trio of references to God’s name, kingdom, and will clearly delineates the prayer into two parts. Just as the Ten Commandments begin with how humans relate to God before moving into matters of how humans relate to each other, so too the Lord’s Prayer attends to God before attending to our own matters. The prayer is not, however, simply a “God part” and an “us part,” set one after the other. It is the opening “our Father” that creates the context for the whole prayer and holds both parts together. As a model for all our prayers, as a model for all our conversations with God, the Lord’s Prayer reminds us first to listen to what “our Father” says and wills.

3. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done*

Another observation arising out of a careful comparison of the various versions of the prayer will be a distinct shift from the first part, where third person imperatives are used (more literally translated as, “let your name be hallowed, let your kingdom come, let your will happen”), to the second person imperatives of the second part. The use of these third person imperatives is interesting, because they do not indicate who is the agent that is responsible for making these petitions transpire. Are we responsible for hallowing God’s name, or are we simply acknowledging the intrinsic sacredness of God’s identity? Is it our job to cause God’s kingdom to come? Does it depend on us whether God’s will is done or not?

Martin Luther noted the strangeness of such expressions in his explanations to the first through fourth petitions of the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism. For example, with the third petition Luther gets at the essence of the matter:

God’s will is done, this is true,
Even if we don’t pray or if we do.⁴

So why bother to pray? Luther goes on to explain that we pray in order that God’s will “may be done also among us.” We may have our opinions about what we think God ought to do, but such a petition once again affirms the Christian conviction expressed by Paul in Rom 8:28 that “that all things work together for good for those who love God.” We can simply pray that God’s will be done and rest assured that not only will it be done but that it will work out for the best.

How then do we express such a faith when we pray for the people of God and for all people according to their needs? How should we pray with someone at a hospital bedside? What is the purpose of our congregational prayer chains? We are given a remarkable insight into how someone might live out this petition as we watch Jesus pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Father,” he says in Luke 22:42, “if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” Jesus’ expresses his will, and his desire to avoid suffering and death is clear: “Remove

⁴I am using here a rhyming paraphrase of Luther’s explanations I composed for a confirmation group in order to highlight my point. In addition to my paraphrase, I do also quote from the translation in *The Small Catechism by Martin Luther in Contemporary English with Lutheran Book of Worship Texts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

this cup from me.” This petition, however, is couched between two affirmations of God’s will being done. It is also couched, just as in the Lord’s Prayer, in the context of addressing one who is acknowledged as our Father.

Jesus introduces the Lord’s Prayer in Matt 6:8 by saying, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” So why ask for something that God is going to do anyway? The better question is, “Why would we not pray for the will of God to be done among us?” In situations where we truly do not know for what we should be praying, the Lord’s Prayer does give us the words to ask for what we need most. In any situation, however, the Lord’s Prayer not only reminds us for what we should be praying, but also encourages us to remember that the prayer will truly be heard and answered according to God’s good and gracious will for us.⁵

4. Give us this day our daily bread

“Gimme!” the child says, and every parent has probably more than once admonishingly replied, “What do you say?” “Give us bread,” we pray to God, and God says, “Of course!” Jesus elaborates in Matt 7:9-11: “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ...If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” Certainly there is a place and need for thanksgiving in our prayers, but consider the difference in how requests are perceived between a teenager asking for the keys to the car and an infant crying to be fed. With the teenager, we would expect respect, responsibility, and some gratitude to accompany the request. With the infant, however, we expect nothing except that the child be fed. The Lord’s Prayer, therefore, once again helps us understand our relationship with God not as a cooperative or contractual agreement but as one where we are completely dependent. Father, give us bread!

This perception of the relationship is also reinforced by the doubly emphasized “this day” and “daily.” For an infant, enough is just what is needed for now. An adult, however, is always concerned about how much is enough. Like Israel in the wilderness, daily gathering their manna for just that day, so too the Lord’s Prayer envisions our daily need to pray for daily bread.

Why is this important? A story is told about a rabbi who was asked why in Gen 3 the serpent was cursed to eat dust, since it would mean that the serpent would always have plenty of dust to eat. The rabbi observed that for the woman and the man the pain of childbirth and the pain needed to bring forth bread would always cause them to turn to God for help. The serpent, however, having more than enough of what it needs, would never have to turn to God again.⁶

⁵Note how Luther expresses this thought again in his explanation to the word “Amen”: “That I should be certain that such petitions are acceptable to and heard by our Father in heaven, for God himself commanded us to pray like this and has promised to hear us. ‘Amen, amen’ means ‘Yes, yes, it is going to come about like this.’” *A Contemporary Translation of Luther’s Small Catechism: Pocket Edition*, trans. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996) 34.

⁶I found this anecdote in Parson’s Bible Illustrator for Windows, but I have been unable to locate its source in the rabbinic corpus.

As I noted above, this petition speaks of “our” bread. It is also a “daily” bread for which we pray “this day.” This petition should certainly generate reflection on and critique of the current American materialism. It also brings us together in recognizing that we are always dependent on God and that God is that good parent who does daily provide for our needs.

5. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us

If we stand as dependent children in relationship to God from whom God expects nothing but that we turn to God for all our needs, we stand as responsible persons in relationship to each other. As we forgive others, so we are forgiven. What is described is a condition of being (as forgiving persons) more than a condition of doing (if we forgive).⁷ When we pray about “our trespasses,” we are perhaps not just talking about our individual failings considered collectively. As a description of who we are as a community, any one person’s sin is a failure for the whole community.

How can we, individually and communally, take this petition with the seriousness it requires? Consider how the liturgical forms of corporate confession function. In the “Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness” in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*,⁸ the consistent use of the plural pronouns is to be understood not just collectively but also corporately. We, as individuals and as the church, are in bondage to sin and unable to free ourselves. We have sinned in every way possible against God and against our neighbors. The promise of the absolution, however, is also the realized petition of the Lord’s Prayer. God does forgive our sins, and we are the “children of God” who are emboldened to pray this prayer to our Father.

6. And lead us not into temptation

I suspect that many people have often been bothered by the implication of this petition that God is the one who is responsible for whether or not we are led into temptation. The contemporary version of the Lord’s Prayer safely circumvents this issue with the expression, “Save us from the time of trial,” but it does so at the expense of the clear meaning of the phrase in its Greek original, expressed precisely in the traditional version.

Admittedly, the biblical dealings with this issue are complex, and the word *πειράζω* can have a range of meaning including test, tempt, or try. Temptations are nonetheless inevitable, whether it is because we are “in the flesh” as Luther explains in the Large Catechism or because they come from God or because they are simply needed to help discern true from false.⁹ These temptings or testings are not

⁷Matt 6:14-15 does set up a conditional situation. *If* we forgive others, then we are forgiven by God. Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer in 11:4, however, is even clearer that we are talking about how we are, at least ideally, in relationship to each other. “And forgive us our sins, for also [or indeed] we ourselves are forgiving all who are in debt to us.”

⁸*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 56.

⁹As a famous example, Gen 22:1 is explicit, “God tested (*πειράζω* in the Septuagint) Abraham.” Matt 4:1 says that “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted,” but it qualifies this with the note that the tempting will be done “by the devil.” Other passages (1 Cor 10:13; 2 Cor 13:5; James 1:2, 12-14; 1 Pet 4:12-13) may be cited to demonstrate that temptations are in some way necessary and that they can at least be used by God.

necessarily bad of themselves, but they are difficult to endure. In Luke 22:40 and 46, Jesus twice encourages his disciples, “Pray that you may not come into temptation” [rendered in the NRSV as “time of trial”], even as he is facing his greatest temptation and trial. So we also pray, Lord, lead us not into temptation if it can be avoided!

Yet what are the temptations we face? Once again Luther’s explanation is enlightening, and my paraphrased version of his explanation in *The Small Catechism* highlights what I find most interesting.

God never tempts anyone to sin,
But the devil, world, self would have us give in
To pride, false belief, and sins like despair,
So we ask God to keep us from such in this prayer.¹⁰

When I have asked an adult study group to list some of the temptations they face or, better yet, what temptations they most hope not to face, despair is not usually on the list, which typically looks more like the so-called “seven deadly sins.” What our group found most striking was that Luther would include despair among the “great and shameful sins.” It took us a moment to realize that we should not confuse despair with depression, a condition that does not appear tempting and which often is addressed with therapy or medication. What, then, is so tempting about despair? As we thought about this question, we realized that, in one way, despair is the opposite of hope, and no one would want to be tempted to lose hope. In another way, however, we concluded that despair is the opposite of pride. Pride is the belief that I can do it all on my own even without the help of God. Despair is the belief that no one, not even God, can help me. With either pride or despair, what is at stake is our relationship with God. People often recognize the temptation of pride, but in this sixth petition of the Lord’s Prayer we ask that we may not be led into any situation that jeopardizes our relationship with God.

7. But deliver us from evil

What the contemporary version of the Lord’s Prayer omits in the seventh petition because of its phrasing of the sixth is the word “but” (ὄλλά in the Greek). When we take the two petitions together, we see that the sense of Jesus’ prayer is a recognition that temptations are hard and that it would be preferable to avoid them. Temptations are inevitable and sometimes even necessary, *but* at least deliver us, Lord, from the power of evil. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus acknowledges that the Christian life will have its trials and temptations, but the prayer also comes with the promise that ultimately we will be delivered from evil. It is a promise guaranteed by the tempting and testing of Jesus who himself was ultimately delivered from evil.

¹⁰Luther’s explanation (1979 version) reads, “God tempts no one to sin, but we ask in this prayer that God would watch over us and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful self may not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins.” My addition of “pride” comes from Luther’s Large Catechism.

8. *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen*

We have a child in our congregation with Down syndrome, but that child understands what “Amen” means as well as any trained theologian. Trying to come up with a modern idiom for this common yet still complex word in our children’s program, we settled on an emphatic “Yes!” accompanied by the raised clenched hand and the elbow drawn down to one’s waist. Luther’s explanation in *The Small Catechism* indicates that “Amen means Yes, it shall be so.” The dramatic gesture our children learned, however, is an even stronger statement. In sophisticated theological terms, it is a proleptic proclamation of eschatological certainty. For that Down syndrome child, who now silently mouths a “Yes!” and makes the gesture in our worship services with a big smile when she catches my eye, it means, “Yes, it is so now! God has already heard and answered this prayer.”

With this Amen, we begin to comprehend the claim attributed to Søren Kierkegaard that “Prayer does not change God but changes the one who prays.” In the Lord’s Prayer we are given words that help us to affirm God’s will being done in our lives. It is not just these words, however, that change us but the relationships with God and with each other into which the prayer draws us. Ultimately, we are learning not only how to “pray this way,” as Jesus says in Matt 6:9, but we are also experiencing what it means to live as children of our Father in heaven. ☩

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