



The Lord's Prayer: Who Could Ask for Anything More?

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I was reading an interesting article about a man who got stuck in a New York elevator for a whole weekend when I ran across a fascinating bit of trivia, which was punctuated with a surprising insult:

In most elevators, at least in any built or installed since the early nineties, the door-close button doesn't work. It is there mainly to make you think it works.... Once you know this, it can be illuminating to watch people compulsively press the door-close button. That the door eventually closes reinforces their belief in the button's power. *It's a little like prayer.*¹

Is that so? When we pray, are we pressing a dummy button? Is prayer futile? Do we believe in the power of prayer only because sometimes, eventually, we obtain what we ask for? Do our prayers, rising up like incense, dissipate into thin air?

In defense of the power of prayer, I offer here my perspective on the internal dynamics of the quintessential prayer of Christian faith, the Lord's Prayer.² This is

¹Nick Paumgarten, "Up and Then Down," *New Yorker*, April 21, 2008, 111. Emphasis added.

²For the sake of economy, I limit myself here to the form of the Lord's Prayer generally used in worship. There are differences between that and either Matthew's or Luke's version of the prayer, but I think that my

The two parts of the Lord's Prayer work together harmoniously to make us a people who fulfill the two great commandments. We are all to become people who love God with heart and soul and mind; and through loving one another as Jesus has loved us, love one another even more than we love ourselves. What Jesus wants us to request from our heavenly Father coincides with what God wants from us and wants to do in us.

the button Christians push more often than any other. When we use these words Jesus taught us, do we get what we ask for?

Emphatically, yes. Christian faith seeks what God has promised us in Christ. The Lord's Prayer gives shape to this seeking, outlining what God has promised and showing us how faith responds. Just as love is faith put to work, so prayer is faith put to words. What words could be better than those our Lord taught his disciples to use? In the words of the song: "Who could ask for anything more?"³

My aim in this article is to show that:

1. The Lord's Prayer consists of two grand petitions which, taken together, sum it all up. "Be *God* to us!" and "Be *good* to us!" represent the whole of what God wants us to strive for. In the Lord's Prayer, each grand petition is subdivided into petitions. The order of the grand petitions is vital to the prayer. First things first!
2. The harmony of the second grand petition with the first is a function of our reconciliation with God through our Savior Jesus Christ. This is a prayer of faith,⁴ which is to say that we pray it in the Spirit in response to the promise that God is reconciled to us. Because of the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, the two grand petitions are one. Reconciliation means that what we want (our peace and well-being) and what God wills (our righteousness) become somehow the same.
3. In praying the Lord's Prayer and having our lives shaped by it, we are incorporated more and more into the work of fulfilling God's will. This "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6) is what God desires.

TWO GRAND PETITIONS

"Do not heap up empty phrases," Jesus advised in Matt 6:7. Heeding his own advice, he constructed an economical prayer for us to use. He carefully stacked a few full phrases in such a way as to represent all God wants, and therefore everything God wants us to desire and ask for.

The Lord's Prayer consists of two major divisions. (This in itself is a well-accepted fact, but I would like to offer a few new twists on it.) The two divisions bear a striking resemblance to the two great commandments as Jesus enumerated them: "You shall love the Lord your God..." and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–39). Those commandments are fulfilled, insofar as we live in accordance with this prayer.

interpretation is not significantly affected by those differences. Readers familiar with Martin Luther's interpretation of the prayer in his *Small Catechism* will, of course, recognize my frequent dependence on Luther.

³From Ira Gershwin, "I Got Rhythm" (1930). Full lyrics online, for example, at <http://www.stlyrics.com/songs/g/georgegershwin8836/igotrhythm299760.html> (accessed November 8, 2014).

⁴Could this be what James means when he refers to "*the* prayer of faith"? (James 5:13).

First grand petition: "Be God to us!"

When we pray the first three petitions (the first division of the prayer), we are saying to the Father in heaven, "Be God to us." It is as though we were explicitly responding to the "greatest and first" commandment, as Jesus called it in Matt 22:38. This is the chief topic of the Bible. Take Exod 6:7, for example: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God." God's work of salvation is the never-ending operation by which he brings straying sheep back into the fold. By saying "Be God to us," we are replying to God's request that we allow him to be our God.

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That single thought is expressed by three petitions (two in Luke) which together express the fullness of a right relationship with God. God must be our God in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. The triad "name, kingdom, will" suggests those realms:

Words. When we ask that the Father's name be hallowed, we mean that whenever people use the name of God, that is, the word which represents him, it should be to our Father's glory and not in vain.

Thoughts. When we ask that the Father's kingdom come, we mean that in heart, soul, and mind the Father should be Lord over us all, through our loving and trusting him.

Deeds. When we ask that the Father's will be done on earth as in heaven, we mean that in people's actions the Father should be shown to be our God.

To love God with what we say, think, and do—these are inseparable. Partial homage is not homage but hypocrisy: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matt 15:8).

Second grand petition: "Be good to us!"

The second set of petitions likewise presents one overarching grand petition to the Father in heaven: "Be good to us." Alternatively, we might say "Bless us"; "Take care of us"; "Give us life"; or "Give us your peace." Here we ask for what we need for ourselves. However—this is crucial—because we pray for "us" to be blessed, we do not distinguish between our needs and those of our neighbors, or even enemies ("Pray for those who persecute you," Matt 5:44). These are therefore the prayers of a world united through love. They constitute the prayer of love, just as the first set of petitions constitutes the prayer of faith (or love of God). A life consistent with these petitions is a life of unbounded love of others. The deeds that match these intentions are works of love. Such love fulfills the second great commandment: that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

I think we should count not four but three petitions in the second division. Humanity has three sorts of trouble, which are here broken down by time frame: (1) our *present* needs; (2) things in the *past* that still hurt us, through guilt and blame; and (3) things in the *future* that already hurt, by making us afraid. Thus the petitions of the second half ask God systematically and comprehensively for relief from all possible woe, everything that ever disturbs God's children.

The petition that asks for "daily bread" uses bread as a metaphor for all our current needs, whatever we need right now in order to have peace. Luther suggests that this includes "food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock...and the like."⁵

The next petition is about the forgiveness of sins: first, the wrongs we have done for which we need to be forgiven; and then the wrongs others have done to us, which we (just as surely) need to forgive. To be comprehensive, for us to be delivered into freedom by being saved from whatever is wrong in our past, the petition must cover both guilt and blame.

Finally, a two-part petition asks that we be set free from evils we may anticipate with fear. First, those for which we ourselves might be responsible; secondly, troubles which might befall us without being our fault. Thus this petition encompasses all possible future events which could ruin our lives, both in the present through our fear of them and in the future through the actual occurrence.

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Our Lord's tiny prayer is thus crafted so ingeniously as to constitute an outline for the comprehensive fulfillment of all God wants for God's children: that the world be filled with righteousness through our having faith in God, and with total peace through our unstinting love of one another. The angels once prayed the same two grand petitions: "[1] Glory to God in the highest heaven, and [2] on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 2:14).

Sequence

It is absolutely vital to the meaning of this prayer that the grand petitions be in the correct order: First, "Be our God!" Then, "Be good to us!" In Matt 6:33, the emphasis should fall not on "strive" but on "first": "But strive *first* for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." That verse becomes an outline of the Lord's Prayer. God is not God, if and when we reverse those priorities. To fulfill the first commandment, Luther reminds us in the *Small Catechism*, means that we fear, love, and trust in God *above* all things. When

⁵Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 357.

we allow the priority in our prayer to be the satisfaction of our needs, we are not praying for God's will to be done but our own. Our "peace" will not come from God pleasing us but from our pleasing God.

HOW IT WORKS

Does the Lord's Prayer work? How?

Edward Schroeder says, "The complementary term to Christian prayer is God's promise, not God's providence."⁶ His distinction led me to see that the engine under the hood of the Lord's Prayer must be the gospel. The Lord's Prayer cries out for a unified and dynamic interpretation that makes use of the cross of Christ. We do not pray the Lord's Prayer because God is withholding something we want or need, but because of the promises God has made to us for Christ's sake. "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom 8:32).

The petitions of the Lord's Prayer are not merely a wish list. They are potent, by virtue of the fact that the Crucified One who reconciles us to God authorizes and invites us to pray like this. He also said, "Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you" (John 16:23). That sounds powerful. But what sort of power does prayer need? What is it trying to do? Do our prayers inform God about our needs? Do they change God's mind? Do they satisfy a requirement God lays on us? If we accept that "prayer changes things," what do we mean by that?

In the doxology, which the church tacked on to this prayer, we say "The kingdom, the power, and the glory are *yours*." Power belongs to God, not to us or to our prayer. But what right do we have to expect God to be good to us? According to Ps 24:3–5,

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to
what is false, and do not swear deceitfully...will receive blessing from the Lord.

That rules us out! Because of our sin, we are not pleasing to God and deserve not life and blessing, but judgment and death. Jesus said that the very good man who went to the temple to pray did not go home justified (Luke 18:14). Sinners lack standing and all have sinned. End of story. So, the power prayer needs is reconciliation. We need someone somehow to remove the impediment of sin.

God solves our problem by giving us Jesus Christ. In his body, by his word, on the strength of his death and resurrection, we are reconciled to God so that we may approach our Father in heaven to ask for everything good. We may "ascend the hill of the Lord" with our petitions, since in baptism we have put on the clean hands and pure heart of our Lord Jesus.

⁶Edward H. Schroeder, "Prayer and Providence," Thursday Theology #197, March 27, 2002; at <http://www.crossings.org/thursday/2002/thur0321.shtml> (accessed September 8, 2014).

Without the context of Christ's reconciling work, we would pray "Thy will be done" at some peril. We could even be asking to be destroyed, so that those against whom we have sinned might obtain justice! But Christ extinguishes our fear of God's holy law by paying our debt and reconciling us to the Father, making us children of God who now love him for his gracious will. In Jesus, finally, "righteousness and peace will kiss each other" as the psalmist anticipated (Ps 85:10).

The power of the Lord's Prayer, then, is the power in the promise of salvation that is accomplished in Jesus Christ, who licenses us to boldly pray the grand petitions. When we pray the first grand petition *as believers in Christ*, we are asking for God to be God to us on the terms that Christ makes available, believing that *God's* name is hallowed when we praise God's Son; *God's* kingdom comes among us when God's Son is recognized as Lord; and *God's* will is done when we obey the Messiah, the Son of God, when we do everything he has commanded us (Matt 28:20). When we follow the first grand petition with the second, we who are righteous not for our own sake but for Christ's sake must seek the good of others as much as our own. Because Christ authorizes us to ask, because we ask in his name, because he has taken our sins upon himself, we have the necessary standing to pray this prayer and know that we will receive all that we have asked for: to put it one way, "goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of our life, and [we] shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (Ps 23:6 RSV, modified). Because of Christ, it is no longer our dying that will make this world a better place but our living.

TAKING EFFECT IN US

So what happens when this prayer works? I have already said that this prayer is a response of faith to the good news in Jesus Christ. But does that mean we sit back and wait for life and peace and every blessing to be delivered like pizza? Is that what we want, or what God wants for us?

No. This prayer asks for God's will to be *done* on earth as it is in heaven; and God's will is that we be filled with faith and love so that we live our life together to God's glory. The Lord's Prayer effectuates that in two ways. First, by rehearsing what God is doing in and for us, so that we may believe in it; second, by influencing believers to participate in getting it done.

As we pray the six petitions of this prayer, we are re-catechized to the effect that God, who is our Father in heaven (following the outline of the prayer):

1. has made his own name glorious, and will always do so;
2. has given us the kingdom, a kingdom which will stand forever and to which we belong;
3. always accomplishes what he sets out to do;
4. provides for us—and always will;
5. forgives our sins and gives us the power to forgive the sins of others; and

6. holds our future in his hand, so that death and its agents have no dominion over us.

Simultaneously, praying this prayer is a way of assuming the responsibilities of the children of God, who want to:

1. lift up the name of the Lord however we can, for example, in worship;
2. belong to the kingdom of his Son Jesus, and bring others into that kingdom;
3. enact the good and gracious will of God in all our lives;
4. provide for the needs of others;
5. forgive the sins of others, and help them to know God's forgiveness; and
6. defend and protect one another from any sort of evil.

The requests in this prayer, even as they are directed at God, are also reflected back upon us who pray, so that as God molds our intentions into faith and love, we become the means by which God restores peace and hope to the world.

Each and every petition introduces the idea that we who pray are perforce involved in making it all happen. When we pray this prayer in Christ, we are urging ourselves on in every good direction. As Phil 2:13 puts it: "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Or Eph 2:10: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

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The first three petitions do not actually ask God to do anything! We only ask God to *be* God to us. It is not God who needs changing but us and our neighbors. That is why the power in prayer is exercised upon us. These petitions should quicken *our* love for the word of God, propel *us* to worship, and energize *us* to serve God in every possible way.

The petitions of the second division, in contrast, seem to be asking *God* to do something for us. But in a subtle way, each of them also involves us personally in delivering the goods.

The fourth petition asks for our daily bread: something we have to make! (We don't ask for manna.) In the next petition, no sooner do we ask for God's absolution than we commit ourselves to forgiving those who have wronged us. The sixth petition (at least in Matthew) asks for protection from bad things that might simply happen to us ("deliver us from evil"), but it also talks about the harm we

might do ourselves by failing in trial or succumbing to temptation. I believe that each of these petitions was deliberately constructed in such a way as to remind us, whenever we pray to God, that *ora* (prayer) is never too far from *labora* (work).

The other way in which these petitions reflect back upon those who pray is through the use of the plural of the first person pronoun, *our* (what I call the actual “sweet ‘our’ of prayer”—playing off the hymn). The Lord’s Prayer cannot be edited into a prayer for me alone. To do so (“*My Father in heaven,*” etc.) would obliterate the author’s intention. But why would I need to pray it that way, since we are all praying for one other!⁷ By putting the plural where by nature we are inclined to use the singular (“*Help me, Lord!*”), this prayer indoctrinates us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Conscientious and fervent use of this prayer, allowing our hearts and minds to be transformed by the pattern of its words, should help transform the self-centered patterns of our life.

The power in the Lord’s Prayer is to remind us that God’s will is to do good to us all. The effect is to stir us to faith, so that we reengage in God’s works of love to all. When all is said and done, God is the same before and after our prayer, but we have been changed as we increase in faith in God and love of neighbor. We ask the Father in heaven for everything, and God’s generous reply—similar to that of the host at a banquet—is: “*Help yourselves!*” *Not* as though we must save ourselves, but so that we become agents of God as we hurry to respond to the cries of God’s children.

Two grand petitions unfold into a prayer that God would work in us and in the world, for the sake of Jesus Christ and by the power of his Spirit, to make us a people who fulfill the two great commandments. We are all to become people who love God with heart and soul and mind; and through loving one another as Jesus has loved us (John 13:34), love one another even more than we love ourselves. What Jesus wants us to request from our heavenly Father coincides with what God wants from us and wants to do in us. This is stated in many ways in scripture, for example: “do justice,” “love kindness,” and “walk humbly with [our] God” (Mic 6:8). Thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, this is the effect, these are the effects, of praying and living the powerful prayer he taught us. All of our prayers should be shaped by this one. Because, who could ask for anything more? ☩

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⁷Regarding the issue: “Whose prayers does God hear?”—This question is generally raised in the context of whether those people who are in Christ are better off because they will obtain what they ask for. What a misguided notion that is! Since Christians always pray for everything for everybody anyway, we should not think that just because others don’t pray as we do, or with the same basis, God will show them less mercy than God shows us.