

"The Lord's Prayer" (Part 1) - Introduction

The "Lord's Prayer" - actually a "model prayer" - is found in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. The Matthew account was given during the "Sermon on the Mount." The Luke account, a shortened form of the prayer, was given at a later time.

In both accounts, additional comments about the nature of prayer, and of trust in God, can be found in the surrounding verses. In Matthew, the prayer is preceded by instructions about how *not* to pray. Later portions of the chapter focus on trusting God for our needs, and seeking first God's kingdom and the righteousness he desires in us. In the Luke passage, the prayer is followed by comments about the importance of trusting God, and about God's eagerness to give us what is best.

"Teach us to pray!"

In Luke 11:1, we read that one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Why would this be? Was it because they didn't know how to pray? Actually, as God-fearing Jews, prayer would have played an active role in their lives. Besides learning about the numerous prayers recorded in the Old Testament, every devout Jew would have prayed specific memorized prayers, several times a day.

However, with the coming of John the baptizer (Jesus' forerunner), a new era was dawning. John was proclaiming a message of repentance, preparing the people for the one who would come after him (Jesus). In keeping with the purpose and mission for which he was called, John had taught his followers a *new* way to pray.

Jesus also proclaimed a new message - the good news about the kingdom of God - and he also prayed differently. Because of this, it seemed quite natural to the disciples that there would be a different way of praying that *they* should learn.

How did devout Jews pray in Jesus' day?

Three times a day - daybreak, mid-afternoon, and nighttime - they prayed a group of 18 benedictions (blessings) called the "Tefillah." Twice a day they would quote the "Shema" - a creed based on Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41. Both of these would be in the Old Testament Hebrew language, even though the everyday language for communication had become Aramaic.

The Synagogue service also contained various prayer activities, including time for spontaneous prayer. All the liturgical prayers were in Hebrew, except for the closing prayer, the "Kaddish," which was in Aramaic.

- The first three lines of the "Lord's Prayer" have similarities with the "Kaddish." Jesus took these ideas and defined them so that they fit his mission and purpose.

How was Jesus' praying different?

- *The time of prayer* - Jesus would pray any time, not just during the "regular" times.
- *The language of prayer* - Jesus prayed in the "regular" language of the people (Aramaic), not in the "religious" language of the Hebrew liturgies. He used the common language, but respectfully.
- *The manner of addressing God* - Jesus called him "Father" (example, Matthew 11:25-26).

- *The content of prayer* - In addition to the usual topics of prayer, Jesus prayed for things that weren't considered "normal." For example, he prayed in behalf of his disciples (Luke 22:31-32); he gave thanks even in bad circumstances (Matthew 11:25-26); on the cross, he even prayed for those who were killing him (Luke 23:34)!

How NOT to pray

Matthew 6 starts out by focusing on three of the practices that were observed by all devout Jews: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In each case, Jesus teaches both *how* and *how not* to do them.

- The other three practices of devout Jews were: study of the Torah (the books of Moses), temple reverence and Sabbath observance.

Prayer is an aspect of personal righteousness or piety; and to not pray is sin. But one's intent or motives for praying is also a factor. Because of this, praying for the wrong reason is also sin.

Don't pray to be seen by people (v. 5-6)

This is what hypocrites do! This is the way the religious leaders were doing it!

Who are we trying to impress? We only need "our Father's" attention. This passage does not forbid praying in public; but if we do so *more* than in private, there may be a problem! It's easy to fall into the trap of doing good things for the wrong reason.

- Sometimes hypocrisy may be obvious only to others (example, Matthew 7:1-5); or it may be obvious to everyone, including the hypocrite himself (example, Matthew 22:15). But here, it may be that nobody, including the hypocrite, is aware of it.
- The word translated as "hypocrisy" was originally a theater term, meaning "hiding under a mask"!

Don't try to "push" God with wordiness (v. 7-8)

This is what pagans do! They think that repetition and long-windedness will get God's attention and make him do things for them. This is manipulation.

Prayers can be short! (Compare to Ecclesiastes 5:2.) Don't confuse "quantity" of words with "quality" of prayer.

It's easy to fall into this trap, even when doing something that is often considered good.

- A "prayer chain" (a network of people who share prayer requests with each other) can become guilty of this, if its goal is to "bombard" God with a huge quantity of words.
- We also need to be careful how we use God's name in prayer. If God's name becomes mere repetition, perhaps even like a magical phrase, we may be guilty of breaking the third commandment that forbids "taking God's name in vain" (using it in a useless manner).

The word "OUR" - emphasizing "community"

Prayer is a corporate activity. The primary focus of prayer is *not* on the individual; it goes beyond individuality. We are part of a group; the "our" represents "us."

Why is this? Because we're *all* baptized into *one* family, and *together* are the people of God. It is a *shared* relationship.

- As individuals, we have no relationship, access or clout which isn't shared with all others in the family. We are an *interdependent* body, not individualistic and exclusive.
- This does *not* mean that we should never have private prayer! Yet even when we are praying in secret, we are *still* part of the body. Don't act (and pray) as though you're alone and *not* part of this greater family!

The phrase "OUR FATHER" - the basis for how we approach God

Jesus frequently referred to God as "Father." This can be seen in Luke 10:21-22, where he refers to God as "Father" five times, and to himself as "Son" three times.

The disciples, following the pattern Jesus gave them for prayer, would approach God in a way that marked them as distinct: They would address God as "Dear Father." This would be a change from the way they would have been previously taught to address God.

- Even so, there was some precedence for this in the Old Testament: The idea is present, though not emphasized. See Deuteronomy 32:6 (The LORD, your Father who bought/made/established you.), as well as Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8 (You are our Father).

The meaning of the word "Father"

The Greek word is "pater"; the Aramaic equivalent (which the disciples would have used) would be "Abba" - the word found in Romans 8:15. It was a typical child's word that was both respectful and intimate, perhaps half-way between the English words "Father" and "Daddy." Perhaps the best way we can translate it is, "Dear Father." The word acknowledges God's strength and authority, yet also implies intimacy with him.

We now have a *family* relationship with God, and can address God as Father. Jesus is our brother, and he shares with us the intimacy he has with the Father. However, there *are* differences between our relationship to the Father and Jesus' relationship to him.

- Our relationship with the Father is through *adoption*, and is made possible by the redemptive victory of Jesus on the cross. We are children by adoption, not by native right.
- Because of his *unique* son relationship (one that we don't have), Jesus could pray "*my* Father." He never prayed "*our* Father."

The significance of being part of God's family

The following are true of those who can rightfully call God "Our Father":

He has chosen us to be in this special relationship

A person is not just *born* into this relationship. He must come into a *covenant relationship* with God, based on the promises of God, or else he remains an outsider. There is *no* "Universal Fatherhood of God."

Jesus tells us that this relationship is made possible because he has revealed the Father to us. (Luke 10:22 and Matthew 11:27 - "No one knows the Father, except the Son, and those the Son reveals him to.")

- When he does this, we find ourselves in a unique kingdom relationship; the Holy Spirit is in us; and we have the great honor of talking (praying) to our Father.

From the perspective of *our* responsibility, we can only enter the kingdom (or family) of God, as humble (lowly) children - Matthew 18:3.

- This child-like relationship is referred to quite often in the gospels, such as in the phrase, "little one," which has the connotation of being "insignificant." Some of the verses about these "little ones" (people who are considered the "least") are: Matthew 10:42; 11:11; 18:6; 18:10; 18:14; Mark 9:42; Luke 7:28; 9:48; 12:32; 17:2.
- It's sad that most people want to be considered "big" (important), rather than "little" (insignificant)! Their attitude is a barrier that keeps them out of the kingdom of God.

We have security for the future, the assurance of eternal salvation

Not one of the "little ones" will be lost - this is what the Father has willed (Matthew 18:14)! This guarantees that we will have participation in the final day, when Jesus returns in victory.

We have *already* been given the kingdom - we have it *now* (Luke 12:32), and this also guarantees to us that we will share in the coming victory.

- Note that this is a gift, the kingdom is not something we have to create, or "build."
- When did we get this gift? At the same time Jesus revealed the Father to us - the moment we entered into a relationship as part of family of God.

We have security for the present, provision for today

In the last half of Matthew 6, Jesus reminds us about the way our Father takes care of the plants and animals. How much more will he take care of us who are members of his family!

- We see this concept even in the Old Testament, in verses that mention God's care for widows, the oppressed, and the hungry.
- God knows our needs before we ask. (Compare to Isa 65:24 - Before you call, I will hear!) But prayer is the means by which this provision comes.

We know he hears us; and we can trust him when things are not going well for us

It was with *great pleasure* that God chose to adopt us into his family (Ephesians 1:5). He is now our "Dear Father," who cares dearly for us, so we *know* we can trust him with a childlike trust. Because of this relationship, we have the assurance that our prayers are heard (Mark 11:24; Matthew 7:7-8). Moreover, Jesus assures us that the things our "heavenly Father" gives to his children are far better than *anything* that an earthly father might give to his own children (Matthew 7:9-11).

Sometimes life's experiences look as though our prayers are *not* being heard. Yet they *are* heard, and our Father *will* answer at the right time. He understands, and so does our brother, Jesus.

- This is what Jesus experienced at Gethsemane (Luke 22:42) and as he was dying on the cross (Matthew 27:46). It might seem that his prayers weren't being heard. Yet Hebrews 5:7-10 tells us that God *did* hear his prayers, and then describes the final outcome of all that Jesus experienced: He has now become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (v. 9)!