

Scripture Reading for March 10th 2019

Luke 11:1-4 (NIV)

11 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” ² He said to them, “When you pray, say: “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.””

Luke 22:39-46 (NIV)

³⁹ Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” ⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ⁴² “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground ⁴⁵ When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. ⁴⁶ “Why are you sleeping?” he asked them. “Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.”

Sermon: The Content of the Lord's Prayer (Part 1)

Lent is here! And for many that means giving up something, or – more positively – taking up a cause for the season. The British comic author, Adrian Plass, decided this was time to reinvigorate his spiritual practices. So, without telling his wife, he set his alarm for 5am in order to get up early to pray. Given that he was not a morning person, this was a crazy idea. Predictably, both he and his wife were woken from a dead sleep and his quest for Lenten serenity began with marital strife. Later, kneeling in front of the couch in his living room, he prays with all the earnestness he can muster on anything and everything. After what he thinks must be half-an-hour of solid prayer, he opens his eyes to see only 3 minutes have passed! At 8am, his wife finds him asleep in that same uncomfortable position. I don't think anyone finds prayer easy! So, in the context of honing our spiritual disciplines in this season of Lent, we continue our short series in prayer by considering the Lord's Prayer.

In Luke's gospel, the disciples did what anyone might do in the company of holy person, they asked Jesus to "teach them to pray."¹ And so Jesus taught his disciples *how* to pray and *what* to pray for. This was a model for *private* prayer² and *not* a substitute for the public liturgical prayers of the synagogue. This begs the question, "Why then do some Christian traditions recite it weekly in *public* worship?" (I don't know!) Three brief introductory comments. First, Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer is slightly longer and the one most church's use.³ (Consequently, I will be implicitly using that version today.) Second, the Lord's Prayer is *not* the child's prayer; it's meant for adults - for *disciples*. Third, the Lord's Prayer is very *Jewish*! There is no mention of the return of Jesus the Messiah, no mention of the Church, and there's no added "in Jesus' name we pray" or "through Jesus Christ our Lord" that would make it overtly Christian. This is a prayer that can be prayed by both Jews and Christians. It begins by focusing on God, who is given supreme place,⁴ and only half-way through does it turn to bold petitions for our needs.

Some people are offended when we are taught to address God as *Father*; I will get on to that in a minute. We should not overlook the small word "Our," in contrast to "My," at the beginning of this prayer, because it reminds us that, even though it is a private prayer, it is also a *collective* prayer and God is the Father of *all* of us.⁵ This means that I cannot domesticate God to *my* viewpoint, or attempt to manipulate him. God is who he is *to all of us* - and we, by saying "Our Father," are acknowledging both his relationship to us and our relationship to him.⁶ We are God's people,⁷ God's family, we are friends with God. Even if we pray on our own, we are never praying alone. Not only are friends, family

¹ Luke 11:1. Luke gives a lot of emphasis to Jesus praying: 3:21–22, 5:16, 6:12–13, 9:18,28; 22:40–42; 23:34, 46.

² This is made explicit in Matt 6:5-8 (i.e., within the *public* "Sermon on the Mount"). Later on, the *Didache* 8:3 encouraged Christians to recite the Lord's prayer three times a day, early morning, mid-afternoon, and at sunset (cf. Dan 6:10).

³ Matt 6:9–13, with the added doxology from 1 Chron 29:11.

⁴ The prayer begins with the *glorification* of God, his transcendence ("in heaven"), his otherness, ("hallowed be thy name"), his sovereignty ("your kingdom come").

⁵ Even if we pray alone, as we are encouraged to do (Matt 6:6), it is still "Our Father . . ."

⁶ Even so, the divine prerogative abounds; see John 15:14-16 ("You did not choose me, but I chose you . . .").

⁷ 1 Pet 2:10.

and a church supporting us in prayer, but both the Holy Spirit⁸ and Jesus himself intercede on our behalf before “our Father in heaven.”⁹

This prayer does *not* begin with “Creator God,” but with “Our Father in heaven.” The relationship with God that allows us to call him “Father” is because, in Jesus the Messiah, God has revealed himself to us and has saved us.¹⁰ We’re not looking at creation to deduce the Creator, we are looking at the Son in order to know the Father, and only because Jesus *is* the Son can we speak of God as “Our Father.”¹¹ As Paul says in Galatians: God sent his Son . . . so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “*Abba!* Father!”¹²

As I mentioned earlier, many have problems referencing “God as Father,” not merely because of gender issues, but because of poor male role models. If you have had bad experiences of fathers or of men, this can be projected onto your understanding of “God as Father” and so become a barrier to prayer.¹³ I suggest you find an alternative word when you pray; the Aramaic word Jesus used, “*Abba*,”¹⁴ may be a good substitute since it doesn’t have those negative associations and yet it expresses an intimate, rather than a formal, relationship with God. The use of “*Abba*” reminds us that we are adopted into God’s family by *his* initiative.

What does, “Hallowed be your name” mean? God is *not* a concept but told his name to Moses as “I Am Who I Am”; he is sovereign, free, untamed, compassionate, and holy. This is God’s nature and character and is equivalent to God’s *name*. The psalmist often begins with praise to God, acknowledging his nature, character, and mighty acts - and all creation is meant to acknowledge those qualities. “Hallowing” God’s name is honouring and respecting God’s *otherness*, his holiness, his uniqueness. It is a command and scholars have debated to whom is it addressed. Most say that it is to *God*, and this is consistent with a modern song which has the line “glorify your name in all the earth.”¹⁵ Even so, Jesus has commissioned his followers to live lives that make visible to God’s world the character and purposes of a holy God. Consequently, we also have a role; we’re both asking God to “Glorify his name in all the world” and pledging ourselves not to misuse his name, or reputation, either through trivial swearing or by blaspheming when we drag God’s name into *our* unholy crusades and causes. God *alone* is to be honoured, that is his due, and it is to him whom we belong.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This is another God-oriented affirmation and an implied command, and again, while this is *God’s* initiative, we are promising to

⁸ Rom 8:26-27.

⁹ Rom 8:34; Heb 4:14-16 (Jesus being our Great High Priest, one who intercedes for us, is a persistent theme of Hebrews).

¹⁰ John 1:18.

¹¹ Notice that the Creeds first describe God as “Father,” only then follow words that link him to being the Creator.

¹² Gal 4:4-7. See also Mark 14:36; Roms 8:15.

¹³ “God as Father” stands as judge against *all* the failings of human fatherhood.

¹⁴ Aramaic “*Abba*” had wider social use than on the lips of children to their dads, but it does convey both intimacy and respect. Note that while this prayer does *not* signify a conversation between the first and second members of the *Trinity*, it does speak of the intimacy in which Jesus approached God in prayer and his instruction for us to do the same.

¹⁵ The song is “*Glorify Your Name*” (and is addressed to the Trinity!) See also the lyrics of “*Abba Father Let Me Be*.”

cooperate with God in bringing his kingdom to completion. We are pledging our allegiance to that kingdom and rejecting our loyalties to worldly kingdoms and personal autonomy. This, then, speaks of God's purposes in rescuing the world. "Your will be done" is *not* a fatalistic resignation to what is, but is our commitment to the vision that Jesus began. It is true, the word "kingdom" can sound very *political* to us. Yet Luke tells us that, in the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus with all the glories of political power, and he resisted.¹⁶ The rest of Luke's gospel, and the others too for that matter, spell out what the reality of what the kingdom of God means. That kingdom *has* begun in Jesus the Messiah, but it is not yet here in all its fullness. The prayer "Your kingdom come" is seeking the reality of God's *completed* reign "on Earth as it is in heaven." Through these words we are being reminded of the tension that we live in, between our present messy world and God's final redemption of it.¹⁷ So when we pray this line, we are committing to live in hope and in accordance with God's values. We are not withdrawing from this world, but seeking God's transformation of it into the vision *he* has in mind, not one of our own.

The Lord's Prayer then changes from being oriented toward God in praise and affirmation, to a series of blunt petitions: "give us," "forgive us," "lead us," and "deliver us." You will notice the word "please" is never mentioned! And, just as oddly, neither is the word "thank you!"¹⁸

"Give us today our daily bread" is a reminder that God is the *provider* of the basic needs we have each and every day.¹⁹ The Israelites' experience of God's provision of *manna* in the wilderness was such that it appeared daily and could not be stored-up for the future.²⁰ We do not like to live without some form of longer-term security today, and so this line of the prayer goes totally against the grain for most of us. Yet stock markets can crash, jobs can be lost through no fault of your own, good health is not guaranteed. "In God We Trust" may appear on US currency, yet we really trust in ourselves. We have insurance policies, we save for a rainy-day and even then, we still live anxiously because we are afraid we don't have enough. And so we hoard, we are greedy; as nations we don't share our resources with others and stockpile goods to maintain the economic markets in our favour. We wouldn't live like this if we all truly "loved our neighbours as we love ourselves!"²¹ "Give us today our daily bread" is a reminder of our *dependence* on "Our Father" and on his character and nature. Life itself is a *continual* gift from God, and so is our daily sustenance. We must continually reach out to God for *all* our collective needs to be met, while being mindful to share God's generous provision with others in need.

I am going to skip over "forgive us our sins here" and make forgiveness the topic of next week's sermon, in order to do justice to it.

¹⁶ Luke 4:5-8. Nevertheless, the struggle continues.

¹⁷ We know God *will* bring history to completion, and as we live in the present, we take hope in God's future that has already begun through the saving work of Jesus.

¹⁸ Paul often stresses prayers of thanksgiving in his letters; e.g., Phil 4:6.

¹⁹ While it is easy to "spiritualize" this by (a) speaking of Jesus as the "Bread of Life" (John 6:25-59), or (b) see this as pertaining to Holy Communion, or (c) as feasting in the Heavenly Banquet (following on from the eschatological theme of Matt 6:10 or Luke 11:2), the emphasis on "daily" shows that this is prayer for *physical* sustenance.

²⁰ Exod 16:4,16-35. See also Luke 12:22-31; Matt 6:19-21.

²¹ Luke 10:27; Mark 12:31; Matt 22:39.

“Lead us not into temptation [NIV],” begs a serious question: “Does God *tempt* us?” I said at the beginning, this is a very *Jewish* prayer. And both Matthew and Luke emphasise God’s sovereignty, holiness, and rule over history. Moreover, there are many references to God being directly responsible for both good *and* evil within the Old Testament, and that could include temptation.²² However, the book of James is another very Jewish book and he makes it abundantly clear that God is *not* the source of temptation or entrapment.²³ Most Christians have understood this petition to mean “grant me the strength to resist temptation,”²⁴ and therefore we need to be careful in interpreting the text.²⁵

The Greek word for “tempt” can also mean a time of “testing” or “trial.”²⁶ This speaks of a time of *crisis*. Sometimes that crisis is due to a sudden and dramatic change in circumstances: job loss, divorce, an accident, a terrible diagnosis, an unexpected death. Of course, these words could also be seen in the context of saving us or delivering us from “times of trial” for being an overt follower of Jesus in our secular culture.²⁷ Both meanings remind us that we are embarking on an unpredictable adventure in following Jesus.²⁸ However, the connection with the following “deliver us from evil” suggests that this petition is more to do with the latter. The lectionary reading for today happens to be the account of the *temptation* of Jesus in wilderness at the very beginning of his ministry.²⁹ At the end of his ministry we have the *time of trial* in Gethsemane, where he prayed “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”³⁰ According to Matthew, Jesus prayed that prayer three times. And in the silence, Jesus continued to trust God for his ultimate deliverance. This embodies the spirit of the Lord’s Prayer, in that the petition “lead us not to a time of trial, but deliver us from the evil” is said in the context of God’s sovereignty; it is a request, *not* a demand. If the wording is better expressed as: “Grant me the strength to endure my times of trial and deliver me from evil” then we are *not* asking to *avoid* such times but trusting God to save us *through* them. In praying to God to “deliver us,” we are acknowledging that God is greater than anything or anyone that opposes God and God’s mission. This

²² The providence of God portrayed by the Gospel writers is inconsistent. While God’s sovereignty is central to the Lord’s prayer, Jesus is tempted by the devil (not God)! Systematic theology is not the same as biblical studies.

²³ James 1:13-14. (This book is often considered to be in line with the Old Testament Wisdom literature tradition.) Our view of God’s providence (i.e., God’s action in the world) have undergone extensive theological development over the years. Most theologians agree with James!

²⁴ Some modern translations/paraphrases say words to such effect, i.e., a *positive* request, rather than “lead us *not* . . .”

²⁵ To be human is to face temptation daily. Many temptations, having been dealt with, no longer exercise any real power over us, but others remain troublesome throughout our lives. And there are unanticipated temptations that catches off guard and find us vulnerable. Here is some practical advice: know your weaknesses and try to avoid temptation, don’t put yourself in situations where you know you’re vulnerable. If that is not possible, don’t face temptations alone; actively resist temptation – don’t flirt with it! Depend upon God to help you - in the knowledge that Jesus has already defeated the powers of evil, and sympathises with those who are tempted and are experiencing times of trial. (See 2 Thess 3:3; 1 Cor 10:12-13.)

²⁶ The OT also has references to God “testing” us, (e.g. Gen 22:1), but this could just be the writer’s viewpoint!

²⁷ Jesus had persistent opposition to his ministry, which the gospel writers portray as being through religious and civic leaders, even through demons, who recognised who it was and what he was trying to accomplish! Should we expect less?

²⁸ Whatever the origin, there is the *potential* for something good to come out of a trial; but this is by no means *guaranteed*! Therefore, it is quite legitimate to pray for strength to endure those trials.

²⁹ Luke 4:1-13. (see also Matt 4:1-11). Luke follows the *temptation* scene with *rejection* at Nazareth, his home town.

³⁰ Luke 22:44 (see also Matt 26:35-45; Mark 14:32-41). In Luke 22:45 we read: “An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him” (c.f. Matt 4:11b). Incidentally, in Luke Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives, not Gethsemane.

will mean different things to each of us as we grapple with times of testing, temptation, and the general challenges of life.

The words “deliver us from evil” should make us ask the question, “What is meant by ‘evil’?”³¹ That is something we have been considering in the Wednesday evening Book Study.³² First, take a *good* look at the state of the world. We can’t pretend that evil does not really exist, or if it does, it doesn’t really matter. Evil is *real*. We can’t minimise or trivialise it, nor should we exaggerate it; but we must take it seriously, even if we find “evil” hard to define. Here’s my take. Evil is *not* merely the passive “absence of the good.” Evil is real and powerful and is *more* than the total sum of all the negative impulses and actions in the world. Evil is a potent force that distorts God’s creation and *actively* opposes the work of God’s kingdom and reign. Evil is cosmic, intentional, subtle, and pervasive. Some of these powers³³ are global and *systemic*, like materialism, consumerism, capitalism, or the financial markets. We are all immersed within such systems and can become entrapped by their whims, driven by national, corporate, or personal greed. There other powers, like racism and nationalism, which demand a loyalty that conflicts with that of the kingdom of God. Then there is the media, including social media and the power of the internet. These can become addictive, controlling powers that subtly influence the way we think and choose, whether we so-called “good” people realise it or not. And what about more personal powers like ambition, love of money, phobias and anxiety, pornography, and other addictions that can hold us in bondage and from which we need deliverance. We need God to save us from all these powers that are trying to influence and even control us. Yet mixed in with evil is good. But “good” does not effortlessly expand into a vacuum, it is resisted. Nevertheless, in light of the resurrection we know that deliverance from evil is *also* powerful. Even so, the battle goes on until Christ returns and his kingdom comes in all its fulness.

In the mean time, we *pray* and *work* against the powers of destruction, dehumanisation, and the things that resist God’s redemption of all things. When we pray for deliverance from evil, we are acknowledging that we do not have the resources to resist evil on our own. Consequently, the Lord’s prayer takes evil seriously; it acknowledges our weakness and we reach out to God for rescue.³⁴

In summary, we don’t find prayer easy, but the Lord’s Prayer tells us what to pray for and how to pray. By simply reciting it unthinkingly, we minimise its effectiveness; I encourage you to adapt and personalise this prayer around its basic themes and use it in your private prayers. Start by recognising *who* God is and who we are in relation to him, and recall the big picture of *what* God is doing in history. Only from that perspective can we come confidently to “Our *Abba*” and boldly present our needs, both for daily sustenance and for strength to live the Jesus way. The Lord’s Prayer is really the *Disciple’s* Prayer – and it’s not for whimps! Let us pray.

³¹ In Matt 13:19,38 there is added “evil one.” Reference to satan or the devil was common in NT times.

³² We are exploring Richard Rice’s *Suffering and the Search for Meaning* (IVP, 2014).

³³ See also Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (Harmony Books, 1999).

³⁴ The various “Anonymous” groups recognise both the need for a supportive community and to seek a power greater than ourselves.