

Commentary on Matthew 6:9-13

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THE LORD'S PRAYER ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 6:9-13

I. THE PRAYER IN ITS CONTEXT.

A. The Eschatological Framework.

The Sermon within which the prayer is recorded is built on the declaration of 4:17. See those comments.

B. Disciples and Hypocrites.

The Lord's Prayer presupposes, and is set in contrast to, the "religious" prayer of 6:5-6. The present prayer centers on God, not oneself. Cf. the first three petitions, the first of which is "hallowed be your name" (in contrast to the reverencing of one's own name, v. 5). Furthermore, it offers a model for the one who enters his private chamber, v. 6 (cf. "pray to your Father," v. 6, with the address of v. 9, "Our Father...").

C. Disciples and Pagans.

This prayer presupposes, and is set in contrast to, the pagan prayers of 6:7-8. "Do not be like them," says Jesus.

1. Economy of words. Over against the "many words" of the pagan prayers, the Lord's Prayer in Mt contains only 57 words in the Greek text and only 54 in the English text according to the RSV. This is not a criticism of the length of prayers as such (cf. Lk 6:17). The warning of 6:8 pertains not to length as such but to the pagans' use of length as a means of manipulating a god. (Even our use of the Lord's Prayer, for all its conciseness, can be a mere recitation in which scant attention is given to the words.) Jesus calls for **pointedness and conciseness** in prayer. Offering the same petition in ten different ways may be "heaping up words" like the pagans.

2. Using God's name. In the Lord's Prayer, the name of God is restricted to the address. It is possible to use the name (or a name) of God excessively, as though the more often I employ the word "Lord" or "Jesus" in my prayer, the more likely it is that he will hear me. Is there not a warning here against our using prayers (and in particular a rather nervous and anxious repetition of the name or names of God) as a means toward

winning his favor - a usage reminiscent of the pagans' prayers? God is our Father; and who talks to his own father or to a friend by constantly repeating his name? (Cf. Jesus' prayers in Mt 26:39-44.)

3. The place of asking. Having said, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (v. 8), Jesus presents a prayer that consists entirely of asking for things. NB the connection between the disciples' requests and God's provision. Mt 7:7-11 indicates that it is precisely those who ask of God, who receive from God; cf. comments on 6:7-8. This does not restrict God to giving only what is requested (cf. Eph 3:20). Yet the fact remains, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (Js 4:2). Jesus, having instructed the disciples not to make requests like the pagans (v. 8a), shows them by means of the Lord's Prayer how they should make their requests.

II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PRAYER.

A. The Sevenfold Structure.

The address (1) is followed by three petitions focusing on God (2-4, "**your** name, **your** kingdom, **your** will"), which are followed in turn by three petitions focusing on human needs (5-7, "forgive **us**, lead **us** not, deliver **us** from the evil one").

B. The Benediction.

It is absent from the NIV text, and present in the NIV margin. As I once heard C. F. D. Moule say, it is highly probable that Jesus (given his Jewish heritage and the models of prayer provided in the OT) would have prescribed a prayer with a benediction. But the benediction which we have grown accustomed to using with this prayer, is very poorly attested in the earliest manuscripts (cf. NIV mg., "some late manuscripts"). Cf. Metzger, TC, 16-17.

C. Two Sets of Three Petitions.

The two sets are alike in that each has three petitions), but there is a notable difference: the members of the first set ("Hallowed ..., your kingdom come, your will be done") are more tightly knit together than those of the second set. The first set lacks the conjunctive **kais** ("ands") which join together the members of the second set ("Give us today..., **and** [this **kai** is left untranslated in the NIV] forgive us our debts..., **and** lead us not into temptation").

This is owing (at least in part) to the model of the **Qaddish**, an ancient Aramaic prayer which formed the conclusion of the service in the synagogue and with which Jesus was

no doubt familiar from childhood (J. Jeremias, The Lord's Prayer, 21). Moreover, in each of the first three petitions the word order is the same in the Greek: imperative verb, definite article, noun, pronoun. These linguistic features indicate that the concepts of the first three petitions must be taken together. This is in fact one threefold petition, in contrast to the three distinct petitions of the "we" section.

D. The Lukan Parallel.

Lk 11:2-4 is manifestly much shorter (according to the Greek text which, in my judgment, is the original; cf. KJV for a Lukan text which has been amplified to the point where it is virtually identical with that of Mt). Many scholars conclude that Luke's version is "the original," with Mt's being a later expansion for liturgical purposes. We are closer to what actually happened if we think of Jesus' employing variations of the same essential prayer on different occasions - which serves as a safeguard against the notion that he means for disciples to restrict themselves to one fixed set of words. In saying "Pray thus [**houtōs**]," Jesus does not mean that one should confine himself to these precise words; but he does mean nonetheless that one's prayer is not sufficiently comprehensive unless all these elements are included.

III. THE ADDRESS. "Our Father in heaven."

A. God the Father.

We conclude from Jesus' own use, and the usage of the early church, that **abba** lies behind this (for Christian usage, see Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). Jesus invites his people to address God as he himself has done (Mk 14:36), and thus invites them into a relationship of intimacy like that of his own. What he goes on to say about the content of the prayer is rooted in this deeply personal union.

B. God our Father.

The Lord's Prayer contains no singular pronouns. This reflects the importance of being aware of **community**, even when one is praying alone (v. 6). This is a safeguard against selfishness in prayer, and a reminder of our responsibility to intercede for brothers and sisters in Christ - in the same terms that we use for our own prayers. There is no room for individualism or isolationism in the community of the Kingdom.

C. Our Father in Heaven.

This provides the needed fullness for the disciples' view of God. The words "in heaven" do not merely distinguish God from earthly fathers. They point to "divine majesty as a complement to divine fatherhood" (Gundry, 106). Given the intimacy that is established, the disciples must be reminded that their Father remains the Lord of heaven and earth (cf. Jesus' own ascription in Mt 11:25). This guards the disciples from the wrong kind of familiarity with the Father. "Nothing is more contrary to reverence for God than the levity that marks an excess of frivolity utterly devoid of awe" (Calvin, Institutes, Battles 854).

IV. THE THREE "THOU" PETITIONS.

A. The Historical Reference.

1. "The Kingdom of God." Kingdom (Greek **basileia**) basically means "God's Rule" (realm being a secondary or derivative concept). Jesus announces (4:17, 23) a process by which what is God's by right (**de jure**) becomes God's in fact (**de facto**). If there were nothing yet to be realized respecting God's rule, why would Jesus instruct his disciples to pray this way (v. 10)?

2. "Thy Kingdom come." Disciples thus pray for the consummation of the Rule inaugurated in Jesus' first advent.

3. "Thy will be done." This petition is closely parallel to the preceding. When God's will is done on earth as it is done in heaven, precisely then and there his Kingdom comes. Conversely, it is the establishing of God's eschatological Rule, that causes his will to be done on earth.

4. "Hallowed be thy name." Viewed in its eschatological context, this petition refers to the final universal acknowledgment of God as ruler of all. To hallow God's name is to reverence, God himself (the "name" denotes his being, his character). The three "Thou"-petitions employ the **aorist** imperative. According to Birger Gerhardsson, this tense is chosen to denote God's "resolute intervention" at the end of history, his "final, eschatological act of redemption" (The NT Age, ed. W. C. Weinrich, 1: 210-11).

B. The Personal Reference.

In applying these petitions to ourselves personally, we must not forget the historical reference. The effective, intelligent personal application, rests upon that historical awareness.

1. Human coöperation. Gerhardsson calls attention to the use of the third person (rather than the second) imperative in the "Thou"-petitions. (1) This expresses one's humility and deference before the divine will (it would sound presumptuous to say "Hallow your name" or "Bring your kingdom" or "Do your will"). (2) The form of the entreaty leaves room for human involvement in the achievement of God's purpose. When I pray this prayer, I commit myself to taking responsible **action**.

2. "Thy Kingdom come." Such a prayer commits me to living as an instrument in God's hand for bringing about that result - in my own generation and society. Elsewhere in the Sermon, Jesus teaches us how to go about this. Cf. e.g. 5:6 (the twin longing for social justice and personal righteousness, both of which can lead to persecution, 5:10-12), and 5:9 ("the peacemakers").

3. "Thy will be done..." This prayer commits me to personal obedience to God's will as I understand it. Obeying God's will means acting as his instrument for bringing his Kingdom to full realization. Discussing this petition, C. S. Lewis emphasizes the last word, "Thy will be done": "The petition, then, is not merely that I may patiently suffer God's will but also that I may vigorously do it. I must be an agent as well as a patient. I am asking that I may be enabled to do it.... There are always duties to be done; usually, for me, neglected duties to be caught up with. 'Thy will be done - by me - now' brings one back to brass tacks" (Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer, 40). Indeed, the immediate context of the petition, "Thy will be done," makes it clear that the dominant note is that we may be agents for the realization of God's rule on earth.

4. "Hallowed be thy name." I thus commit myself to live for the honor of God, lest anything in my character or conduct be out of accord with the life prescribed for citizens of the Kingdom, lest anything I do (in contrast to the model of 5:16) cause people to dishonor or irreverence God; and, more positively, that by my own witness (both by precept and example) other people may come to reverence Him and to share in the Life of the Kingdom. (Gundry, 105-106, thinks that "the Name" to be hallowed is specifically the name in the address, "Father." To hallow this particular name of God, entails becoming his child by union with his Son. While I think the reference is broader, Gundry's reading does underscore the pertinence of this petition in evangelism.)

V. THE THREE "WE" PETITIONS.

Verses 11-13 are based upon what the Prayer has thus far affirmed about God and about his purposes in history. He is no less central in these petitions, and his action no less decisive: the disciple is dependent on him for the provision of food, for the forgiveness of sins, and for protection amid trials.

A. The Historical Reference.

1. "Give us today our daily bread" (v. 11, NIV). The key to this petition is understanding the Greek word **epiousios**. As the term only occurs twice in the NT (here and in the parallel, Lk 11:3), the task is not easy. Essentially the question is whether the term comes from **epeinai** or from **epienai**. In the first instance it would mean "what is necessary for existence," in the second "coming" or "tomorrow's." The latter is more likely (for the reasons, see Jeremias, *NT Theology*, 1: 199). Jeremias goes on to argue that Jesus has in view God's great Tomorrow, i.e. the very End, when the Kingdom will have fully come (6:10). On this showing the disciples are to pray: "The Bread of the Future - the Bread of Life - let us have in advance. Let us partake now of the Life of the Kingdom. Let its powers be unleashed in our lives today."

2. "Forgive us our debts" (v. 12). On Jeremias's view, "this request looks toward the great reckoning which the world is approaching, the disclosure of God's majesty in the final judgment" (*Lord's Prayer*, 27). On this showing, the disciples are pleading: "Let us experience your forgiveness already now, lest our guilt cling to us until the Final Judgment," or (in Jeremias' words, *ibid.*), "Grant us, dear Father, this one great gift of the Messiah's time, already in this day and in this place."

3. "Lead us not into temptation" (v. 13). Calling attention to the singular **peirasmos**, Jeremias argues that Jesus speaks here not of temptations or trials in general, but specifically of the last great trial, the "great tribulation" of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. On this showing the disciples are to pray, not that they may be spared the trial, but that when it comes they will remain faithful to Christ and will not become apostates. Cf. the scene in Gethsemane and Jesus' warning, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation [**peirasmos**]," Mt 26:41.

B. The Personal Reference.

The historical and eschatological dimension of the Prayer must be kept constantly in view. Yet the line of interpretation suggested by Jeremias is not exhaustive. Indeed many (perhaps most) scholars have not found the strictly eschatological interpretation of the Prayer acceptable. While we must combine the historical with the personal throughout the prayer, in my judgment the personal references dominate the three "We"-petitions.

1. "Give us today our bread for the coming day." On this rendering of **epiousios**, cf. B. 1. The prayer may be offered in the morning (for needs of the new day) or in the evening (for needs of the next day). The prayer expresses dependence on the heavenly Father to provide for all his child's material and physical needs. See the comments on 6:19-34. The slave's task is to obey the Master (v. 33a), and to leave the matter of his

material and physical needs in the Master's hands. Note Matthew's use of the aorist imperative (of entreaty) **dos** (in contrast to Luke's present **didou**), in keeping with the counsel of 6:33-34. Matthew "shifts emphasis from the future succession of daily provisions to the provisions for this day alone" (Gundry, 107).

2. "And forgive us our debts."

a. Prayer within the community. This prayer is offered by persons who already belong to God in Christ - to people who, by virtue of their relationship to Jesus, are authorized to call God **Abba**. In other words, they have already received forgiveness with a capital F (5:3-10) - forgiveness that anticipates and foreshadows God's verdict of acquittal at the Last Judgment.

b. The urgency of repentance. This petition makes it clear that the child's **present** relationship with the Father may be disturbed by a failure to forgive another person. "Sin is likened to a 'debt' because it deserves to be punished" (Stott, Counter-Culture, 149). That Jesus, having ended the Prayer, immediately returns to the subject, shows its seriousness. The sober warning of 6:14-15 presupposes the special relationship to God ("your heavenly Father," 6:14; "your Father," 6:15). Yet because such a relationship exists, and because God's children have experienced his Forgiveness, it is vital that they forgive others. A persistent failure to do so, makes it doubtful whether one has really experienced God's forgiveness (the parable of 18:23-35 offers the best commentary on the meaning of 6:12, 14-15). Observe also that the petition for forgiveness presupposes that the offending party has already been forgiven (6:12b, the aorist **aph kamen**, "as we have forgiven"). The Matthean version likens the disciples' offer of forgiveness to the forgiveness sought from God. The Lukan version speaks rather of the disciples' offer of forgiveness as the condition (but not the basis) for the divine forgiveness.

3. "And lead us not into temptation...."

a. The parallels. The negative imperative of line 1 matches the positive imperative of line 2; each line has an "us"; and **peirasmos**, line 1 corresponds to **tou pon rou**, line 2.

b. "The evil one." NIV thus correctly translates **pon ros** (cf. mg. "from evil"). The parallel "temptation" lacks the definite article, so the presence of the article with **pon ros** is the more impressive. The other places in Mt where **pon ros** is singular, is used as a noun, and has the definite article (e.g. 5: 39; 13:19, 38), support the personal reference.

c. The application to the present. The noun **peirasmos** is indeed singular, but (as noted) it lacks the definite article. The reference is not to "the Great Tribulation" of the end, but to the kind of trial that confronts the people of God throughout the entire time between Jesus' advents (cf. 5:1-12, 44; 10:17 **et seq.**), which trials anticipate that last great Trial. Likewise, "the Evil One" threatens disciples now, not just at the End (13:19, 38).

d. Interpretation 1: "Do not lead us into a test or trial; but if you do choose to do so, do not let us become ensnared by the Evil One." The experience of Jesus in the wilderness offers support for this (cf. Mt 4:1, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted [**peirasth nai**] by the devil").

e. Interpretation 2. "The prayer 'lead us not into temptation' means this: 'Lord, may there be nothing in me that will force you to put me to the test in order to reveal what is in my heart.' We want to be progressing in the realms of transformation with no hidden sins so that God will not be forced to put us to the test" (Richard Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home, 189). Yet Foster offers no exegetical support for his interpretation, from Mt 6 or 1 Cor 5 or elsewhere.

f. Interpretation 3. Neither of the above interpretations takes sufficient account of the strong parallelism between the two lines (see a. above), and of the strong adversative **alla** at the beginning of 13b. Taking account of this parallelism, I conclude that the two lines are stating basically the same request - negatively, then positively. We may paraphrase: "O Father, let us not fall victim to the temptations of the Evil One, but, on the contrary, rescue us from his mighty power." Gundry similarly translates line 1, "Do not let us succumb to temptation." This rendering of 13a is defended by Jeremias, in light of a prayer offered by Jewish men both in the morning and in the evening: "Bring me not into the power of sin/ And not into the power of guilt/ And not into the power of temptation/ And not into the power of anything shameful" (in NT Theology 202). Cf. Mt 26:41; James 1:12-15.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What in the immediately surrounding context of the Lord's Prayer is very important to consider if one hopes to interpret the Lord's Prayer properly?
2. How can asking for the same thing many times in different words be more like pagan prayers than Christian prayers? Have you heard prayers wherein people continually repeat words like "Lord," "Father," "Jesus," etc.? How are these prayers like pagan prayers? How are they unlike pagan prayers?
3. If the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer are really one petition, how does this affect the way you should understand them?

4. How similar is the prayer in Luke 11 to the Lord's Prayer? Why are these prayers so similar? What do these similarities and differences tell you about both the way Christians must pray and the freedom Christians have in prayer?
- 5.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. What evidence is there that Jesus did not actually give the benediction listed in most English translations of the Lord's Prayer? What evidence is there that he did? How does the Bible's infallibility relate to the preservation of the biblical manuscripts?