

## Teach Us to Pray

In scanning the pages of Christ's life to see his single-minded devotion to God's glory, we skipped over an integral part of the story, especially considering our focus on prayer. Upon observing him in prayer, an unnamed disciple asked Jesus when he finished, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).<sup>1</sup> In a sense, this simple plea has been our focus throughout these lessons.

Apparently Jesus prayed regularly before his disciples, and perhaps before others. This should come as no surprise considering the man of prayer that he was, spending even whole nights in prayer with his father (cf. Mark 1:35). Equally unsurprising should be the impressive nature of the prayers he offered: "Disciples hearing them were made painfully conscious of their own incapacity, and after the Amen were ready instinctively to proffer the request, 'Lord, teach us to pray,' as if ashamed any more to attempt the exercise in their own feeble, vague, stammering words."<sup>2</sup> It may well have been this same painful realization that brought us to this study.

Prayer requires instruction and not mere passion, as this story reminds us. The great German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes as much in *The Cost of Discipleship*: "Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. What does this mean? It means that prayer is by no means an obvious or natural activity. It is the expression of a universal human instinct, but that does not justify it in the sight of God. Even where prayer is cultivated with discipline and perseverance it can still be profitless and void of God's blessing."<sup>3</sup> One suspects it is more than the *form* of prayer that must be learned; surely we struggle all too frequently with the *content* as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Though Luke records this opening petition, I will focus on Matthew's longer version of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; cf. Luke 11:2-4).

<sup>2</sup> A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve: Timeless Principles for Leadership Development* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971; originally published 1871): 53.

<sup>3</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959): 162.

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And so we come to Christ with the same humble petition uttered so long ago by the unnamed disciple: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Jesus complies, offering a model of prayer “[s]o simple that the child can lisp it, so divinely rich that it comprehends all that God can give.”<sup>4</sup>

### **“Our Father”**

In contrast to the rabbis of his day—indeed, even to the saints of the old covenant—Jesus addresses his prayer to *Abba*, “Father.” We pray neither to an impersonal force, nor to a harsh or demanding deity; no, we pray to a loving, caring Person, one who has adopted us as his sons and daughters by his unthinkable grace (Ephesians 1:4-5).

In many ways this address sets the tone of the prayer as a whole. We offer our petitions to God conscious of our relationship with him—and equally conscious of our unworthiness to stand before him. But by his grace he invites us to bring them still (Hebrews 4:16). Surely this should transform the nature of our requests! Jesus assumes this to be the case, offering a model prayer driven by a concern for God’s glory first, and only secondarily by our needs.

That he is our Father *in heaven* only serves to underscore his transcendence in the face of our wretchedness. What business do we have to justify our appearance before God in heaven? The business of children, dearly loved, who dearly love their Father in return, seeking his honor and fame in every request we bring.

### **His Name, His Kingdom, His Will**

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer: A 31-Day Course in Christian Prayer with Note on George Muller*, Scotts Valley reprint (London: James Nisbet, 1887): 8.

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We need not read much of the Lord's Prayer before we realize how different his concerns are than our own. For the first half of his prayer centers on God—petitions offered in behalf of the gracious Father whom we approach. Before seeking grace for our physical or spiritual needs, we plead with God for the glory of his name. This is not mere formality, but should reflect our highest aim, our chief end. As Jonathan Edwards argued, "Now our last and highest end is doubtless what should be first in our *desires*, and consequently first in our *prayers*, and therefore we may argue that since Christ directs that God's glory should be first in our prayers, that therefore this is our last end."<sup>5</sup> If our desires are rightly ordered, our prayers will be too.

So we begin not with our list of errands for God to perform, but with our earnest entreaty that he receive the glory due his name. His name, remember, calls to mind the excellences of his character (Exodus 34:6-7)—and the inevitable response of praise from his creation. Thus, when we pray, "hallowed be your name," we pray that all the earth would honor him as holy. Presumably this is a prayer for our own hearts first. Do we honor him as holy? Or do we dishonor him by presuming upon his grace, putting our selfish needs before his glory?

If he has the first place in our hearts, he will have the first place in our prayers. We will grow increasingly sensitive to the ways in which we have dishonored him, and before supplication we will offer confession—contrition and repentance—for our many sins. Before we pray for financial security, we will see our materialism, our failure to be content with his grace and the ways we have communicated that to our children, our neighbors, our friends. Before we seek healing for a loved one, we will grasp our unwillingness to suffer for his sake, the work of grace he longs to accomplish in our lives, the ways we have set ourselves as masters of our own destinies. Our desire for the glory of his

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<sup>5</sup> *The End for Which God Created the World* in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998): 199 (emphasis his).

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name, our mindfulness of the ways we have failed to honor him as holy, will lead inexorably to the next petition.

Starting with our own hearts, we long for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as in heaven. God is not honored in his creation. Many people rebel willfully against his gracious rule. Even in our own lives we see too much of our flesh, too much stubbornness, and not enough of his glorious reign. Against this tendency we pray, “May your kingdom come.”

God’s reign should be unending in time and space. God proclaimed through his prophet Malachi, “My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets” (1:11). His purpose is for *all* to glorify him *always*. We pray that he would accomplish this purpose, both by extending his reign here on earth among all peoples and by coming in his glory at the consummation of the kingdom. In praying this, we evince our passion for his fame to grow here and now, and we declare our zeal to see it perfected in the coming age. Lifting our eyes from our light and momentary concerns, we behold the majesty of God’s unfolding plan of redemption and eagerly seek its fulfillment regardless of what trials we may have to endure. If we could step back to take in the wonder of the canvas as a whole, we would worshipfully experience any and every masterful brushstroke, no matter how hard or darkly drawn.

And thus we pray that his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Like Jesus in Gethsemane, we bend our will to his—isn’t this the purpose of prayer, after all?—yielding our desire to his more perfect plan. Surely this is what Archbishop Trench meant in his famous declaration, “We must not conceive of prayer as overcoming God’s reluctance, but as laying hold of His highest willingness.” We often conceive of prayer as persuading God precisely because we ask for the wrong things. While we seek petty answers to felt needs, his kingdom awaits the asking! Were we to seek his glory first, as Jesus himself taught us to do, we would soon experience the wonder of answered prayer.

The anonymous writer of the classic *The Kneeling Christian* puts it thus: “When we lift up our souls to God in prayer [Psalm 25:1] it gives God an opportunity to do what He will in us and with us. It is putting ourselves at God’s disposal. God is always on our side, but we are not always on His side.”<sup>6</sup> God’s purposes for our lives are unfailingly good (cf. Romans 8:28), so we can trust in him. But we so evidently do not, because we do not seek his will but our own. We do not yearn for his glory above all else because we do not believe that this is in our best interest. To watch a loved one die of cancer—glorifying God by her longsuffering joy and peace—we wish God would do as we will, that our will would be done in heaven as we think it should be done on earth. However, his glory *is our highest good* and so the two thoughts should be wedded in paradoxical bliss. We seek his will—whether healing or untimely death, in this example—because we know it is better than our own.

Of course, based on what we have seen in preceding chapters, we know that God’s will is his own glory. To pray that his kingdom come, his will be done, is simply a fuller version of the opening petition, that his name be hallowed. The specifics of the petitions may vary, but we should seek God’s glory—his kingdom and will—no matter the circumstances. If we ask to see a loved one come to grace, we do so because God is glorified in the salvation of sinners. If we ask for freedom from besetting sins, it is so others will see our good deeds, the transformation his grace has worked in our lives, and then glorify our Father in heaven. Both of these examples align with the will of God; both represent the extension of his kingdom here on earth. Both end in his glory.

## **Our Daily Needs**

Though the focus of the prayer shifts in the final petitions to our needs, the central concern remains God’s glory. Consider the first petition: “Give us today our daily bread.” Our sustenance is a real need, and one for which we should pray. At first glance this seems singularly self-serving, of course, with little

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<sup>6</sup> *The Kneeling Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Clarion Classics, reprinted 1945): 52.

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(if any) thought of God's honor. Yet we must ask, is God not glorified in providing for his creatures?

David certainly thought so, including in one song of praise these words:

“The eyes of all look to you,

and you give them their food at the proper time.

You open your hand

and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (Psalm 145:15-16)

He concludes the psalm by adding, “Let every creature praise his holy name forever and ever” (verse 21)—in part because of God's gracious provision. Thus, in praying for our daily bread we are praying for God's glory, even if unwittingly.

Undoubtedly some may ask for provision selfishly; but if God's glory is our driving desire, we will be mindful to remember his name when asking for our daily bread. (I assume this is why so many families bow their heads to thank God for their food before each meal.) Indeed, this should even affect the content of our prayers, as we ask for daily bread knowing that we have a higher concern. When we ask for sustenance, we acknowledge that should God's withholding bread from us be for his glory, we would endure it. Paul knew as much, explaining to the Corinthians that God had put him and the apostles “on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena” (1 Corinthians 4:9). Part of the mistreatment they endured included hunger—along with thirst, poverty, and persecution. But their agony and deprivation served a purpose: they were “fools *for Christ*,” in service to his kingdom and glory (verses 10-11). We may not pray the fullness of this prayer explicitly, but if our desires are ordered along the lines Christ taught us, the thought will always linger nearby.

Of course, our spiritual needs are far greater than the merely physical, and so we ask God to “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Because of our unflagging sinfulness, we stand in need of both forgiveness and transformation. When we pray for and receive forgiveness, we remember the riches of God's love—and are driven ineluctably to worship: “In him we have redemption

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through his blood, the forgiveness of sins,” writes Paul, reminding us three times in his prayer that this is for “the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:3-14). In other words, every time we experience forgiveness—daily, even momentarily—we proclaim his gospel, his goodness, and his glory.

Likewise, when we forgive those who have harmed us, we give witness to his inconceivable grace. The watching world—even our brothers and sisters in Christ—see our love, meekness, humility. Knowing such traits do not spring from the utter corruption that pervades our hearts, they turn their eyes to the source of all that is good, and glorify our Father in heaven. Like the dull and lifeless moon, we catch the rays of the sun of righteousness, captivating nocturnal wanderers not with our own beauty, but with dim reflections of uncontainable glory. “For what we preach,” even in the dumb action of forgiving fellow pilgrims and outright rebels, “is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. . . . For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:5-7).

We sin and are sinned against; we ask forgiveness and forgive in turn. At some point, though, we long to grow in grace, to see an end to this tortured cycle. So Jesus teaches us to pray for transformation: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” Here especially our Lord has led us in prayer for his Father’s glory. As bearers of his image and name, we have often defamed him by our wretchedness. When Paul famously declares that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), he cannot mean that our glory does not measure up to God’s, as this could never be—even if we were sinless. Adam’s glory recedes before the majesty of his Creator. Paul surely means that we have fallen short of his glory by failing to bear his image sufficiently well, so to speak. We defame him when we do not live as we ought—Christians and non-Christians—and thus we rob him of glory that is rightly his. Jesus enjoins us to remedy this issue.

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One suspects that few issues have so minimized the impact of the church on the world as our sin. It takes only a few high-profile scandals—adultery, embezzlement, and the like—before the world rejects our apostolic overtures. How, then, do we not pray regularly that God would keep us from temptation, deliver us from the wiles and schemes of the enemy? Our desire is that our light shine before all people, “that they may see [our] good deeds and glorify [our] Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). We would not defame God; we would rather see him glorified in our lives and the eyes of others.

When we address our loving Father in intercessory prayer, we seek his glory before our good. This is how Jesus taught us to pray. Though Christ’s prayer serves as a model, not as the exact words to say,<sup>7</sup> the clear focus of the prayer should inform and transform our own offerings. Taking pains to ensure our desires share the same order as that of our Lord, we pray accordingly. Submitting to his teaching and example in this regard is one way we pray “in his name,” the topic we pursue next.

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<sup>7</sup> As many have pointed out, Jesus says, “This, then, is *how* you should pray,” not *what* you should pray (Matthew 6:9).

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