

Matthew 6. ⁹⁻¹³

⁹After this manner therefore pray ye:

Our Father which art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

¹⁰Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

There is no end of lessons to be learned from Jesus' instructional prayer, known as "The Lord's Prayer." We can, here, only examine two or three. First, we are impressed that Jesus' instructional prayer does far more than provide a "formula" or "pattern" for prayer—address Heavenly Father, thank him, ask him, and sign off with a resounding and heart felt "amen." If this prayer served as a pattern, it would be a simple matter to master the formula and move on to bigger and better things. But if we see the prayer for what it is—more a master class in effective prayer than tired and lifeless formula—then we will return to the prayer over and over again knowing that we can improve our prayer life with each sincere and searching inquiry.

As something far more than formula, we think of Jesus' start to prayer: "Our Father..." How unwise to imagine that Jesus' principal point is, "This is how you begin a prayer." Or, "These are a prayer's first words." Prayers established upon such shallow formalism are more likely to drop to the floor after leaving our lips than ascending to the ears of "Our Father which art in heaven." So what is the point of Jesus' "Our Father"?

Every time we read these words and every time we use them in prayer, we explore anew what it means to have a God who is "Father." "Papa." "Daddy." We are invited to believe that God, the greatest of all, really does possess sincere and deep feelings of intimacy with us, however flawed we may be. He really does wish to hear from us; to know what we are thinking and feeling. He really does wish to commune with us. He really is a Dad who wishes to engage in meaningful and honest conversation with his children.

We are also struck by the person and number of Jesus' pronouns.

"Give *us* this day *our* daily bread."

"Forgive *us our* debts, as *we* forgive *our* debtors."

"Lead *us* not into temptation."

"Deliver *us* from evil."

"Us," not "me." "Our," not "my." "We," not "I."

Prayer is personal, of course, and private. Yes, God wants to hear about our individual lives: our appreciations, concerns, needs, and hopes. But, as Jesus' language demonstrates, prayer is not selfish

and self-centered. Jesus wants our prayers to focus on others as well as ourselves: their concerns, their needs, and their hopes. He expects that we will use our prayers to pray for and in behalf of others. He wants to know that we are striving to make a better world and a more fertile environment for others to grow. Prayer is as much about getting outside our own heads as it is about revealing our minds to God.

We also see God's interest in having our prayers get outside our heads with the second element of Jesus' prayer: "Hallowed be thy name." It is an understatement of epic proportions to say that God is a unique Being (God's "holiness" signifies His uniqueness and superiority), or that His character (the meaning of his "name") is unmatched. Prayer is a time to not only pray about ourselves, those around us, and the lives we live; it is also a time to talk to God about God. Tell Him what and how we think of Him. What we appreciate about Him. It is a time to ask Him questions about Himself, His hopes, His plans, His life. And then, to listen to His response.

Though Jesus does not mention it, listening is one of the most important aspects of prayer. We all do far too much talking during prayer and far too little listening. It is probably not too far off the mark to suggest that we spend 100% of our prayer time talking, when it probably should be more 50-50: 50% of the time we do the talking, 50% of the time we stop talking and listen. Listening, yes, for direction in our life and direction on how to be of greater service to others. But also, listening to God tell us about Himself.

Oh, how glorious it is to hear Him talk about Himself!

These are just a few of the many things we learn from the Lord's Prayer.

Yes, we can use prayer to get an answer or two to this life's complexities. But we can use prayer for the higher and more eternal things of God. During Lent, we can more consistently use prayer to help us focus on the hope of God's kingdom, both on earth and in heaven. We can more diligently take stock of our prayer life and improve our prayers by examining and reexamining Jesus' instructional prayer. We can more thoughtfully use our prayers in the service of others and to seek blessings for others. We can use our prayers to come to know God more intimately, and to let God be the Dad that He so ardently desires to be.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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