


THE
PLYMOUTH  H
PULPIT

watch the sermons | plymouthchurch.org

“Praying the Lord’s Prayer”

Matthew 6:9-13

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

June 18, 2023

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:9-13

Some of us still have one friend who thinks graduation announcements cannot be emailed. When we take the proclamation of their child's achievement out of the mailbox, we smile, because we know that what we are holding is not really announcing a graduation. They are asking for a gift.

Most of us send money. Most graduates want money. I have been told that the gifts seniors want the least are books with titles like *The World is Waiting for You*, *If I Could Tell You Just One Thing*, and *Why* has no one told me this before? But what if we could pass along the wisdom they are waiting for, the few things they need to be told, and what someone should have told them by now? What do they need to know?

Last week on Jeopardy, the clue was "Matthew 6:9 says, 'Our Father which art in Heaven,' this 'be thy name.'" No one buzzed in. They did not even try to answer. These are smart people. They are on Jeopardy. How can they not

know the Lord's Prayer?

What if we could give the gift of wisdom? What if—and who knows how we would wrap it—we could give the Lord's Prayer? What if by some miracle of grace, we were able to give the sense of hopefulness that would lead graduates to pray this most recited prayer?

What would happen if they prayed these words, this poem, every day for four years of college? Some days they would go through the motions. The alarm goes off at 7:45 for their 8:00 class and as they hurry to Sociology, they run the 69 words together into about nine—“Our-hallowed-will-bread-kingdom-power-glory-forever-amen.” Some nights as they fall into bed, they recite it thinking, “It is three a.m. Does this count for yesterday or tomorrow?”

Some days they would take the prayer lightly, unthinkingly—like Les Dawson who said, “I knew I'd chosen the wrong airline when I noticed the air sick bag had the Lord's Prayer on it.” This prayer is performed more often than it is prayed.

But there would be other days when they would hear the words, when they would pray boldly, honestly, by heart. If we prayed this prayer, the prayer would push us deeper. Jesus designed the Lord's Prayer to give us the things we most need, things we too often seek elsewhere. God helps us remove the false objects of our affections so that we will have the better life God wants us to have.

Henry Ward Beecher writes, “I used to think the Lord's Prayer was a short prayer; but as I live longer, and see more of life, I begin to believe there is no such thing as getting through it. If a person, in praying that prayer, were to be stopped by every word until he had thoroughly prayed it, it

would take a lifetime.”

This prayer is such a gift from God. One of the difficult things about meeting new people is not knowing what to say at first. How should we address them? What subjects should we bring up? In giving us this prayer, Jesus keeps us from having to think up something to say to God. All we have to do is say these words by heart.

“Our Father, who art in heaven”—not “your majesty,” not “your highness,” but “father,” “abba,” “daddy.” The disciples are startled the first time they hear Jesus say it. These Jewish fishermen have been taught to be in awe of God. Jesus shocks them when he pictures God as a warm, gracious parent. God is the father of the prodigal forgetting his dignity, running to embrace his son. “Father” is a dazzling word for Jesus to put on our lips.

And it is “Our father”—not my father, ours. Not once in this prayer do we get to say “I,” “me,” or “mine.” We are in this together. The first word makes us ask, “Who do we include in this Our?” The first word reminds us that the story of God is bigger than our personal story, bigger than the story of our religion, bigger than the story of our humanity, and bigger than the story of all creation.

Prayer can be as self-centered as anything else. Even when we are praying, we are tempted to set our sights on health, wealth, and comfort. Not once in this prayer is there any hint of what has commonly thought of as personal growth, not a trace of making ourselves better, and no petitions for good lives.

This prayer is centered on God: “O Divine Father, Giver of Life, whose presence is heaven.” To pray is to recognize that God is different from us. God is “in heaven,” and we

are not. God is God, and we are not.

We pray “hallowed be thy name” in hushed tones to God whose splendor we see in the highest mountains and deepest oceans, who creates giant sequoias and plants pearls in oysters. “May our hearts always bow to you, whose presence is holiness, close to us as our breathing, we pray in awe.”

We pray to God who called Abraham and Sarah, led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, and when Jesus was baptized said, “This my beloved child. Listen to him.” To pray this prayer is to grow in our understanding that the God who created the universe loves us like a wonderful parent.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

We cannot pray, “Thy kingdom come” thinking only of ourselves. When we pray “Thy will be done” we have to ask, “Do we mean it?” because it is hard to mean it. A cynical person might suggest that this third petition of the Lord’s Prayer, thy kingdom come, is repeated daily by millions who do not have the slightest intention of letting anyone is will be done but their own. (Aldous Huxley)

Frederick Buechner writes, “Thy will be done” is asking God to be God. We are asking God to do not what we want, but what God wants. We are asking God to reveal the holiness that is now mostly hidden, to set free in all its terrible splendor the devastating power that is now mostly under restraint. “Thy kingdom come on earth” is what we are saying. And if that were suddenly to happen, what then? What would stand and what would fall? Who would be welcomed in and who would be thrown the hell out?

Which if any of our most precious visions of what God is and of what human beings are would prove to be more or less on the mark and which would turn out to be phony as three-dollar bills? To speak those words is to invite the tiger out of the cage, to unleash a power that makes atomic power look like a warm breeze.”

“Your kingdom come, your will be done.”

“May your rule of grace replace all powers, your delight be fulfilled, and creation become what you hope. Renew your world in the image of your love, as it is in your own heart, that the earth will be a holy place. May your story replace our own, the story of this world become the story of the inbreaking of heaven.” We pray, “God, your kingdom come, begin with me.”

We find it difficult to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” because most of us have more than enough. We stock our refrigerator for a week, not a day, but it is important to note that we do not get to pray, “Give me my daily bread.”

In a play by Archibald MacLeish, after reading of poverty, unemployment, and hunger a woman prays, “Forgive us our daily bread.”

It is not that I get more, it is that we all have enough. We easily become greedy children who do not notice what we have been given and seldom feel the gratitude that leads to joy, but if we pray this prayer, God erases the greed in our heart and makes us generous: “Keep us all alive with three square meals. Sustain us with the gift of life, moment by moment, one breath at a time. Give us what we need for today, and a hunger to see justice done.”

“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those

who trespass against us.”

The prayer is not saying that God is unwilling to forgive the unforgiving. Our lack of forgiveness is high on the list of things for which we need forgiveness. The truth of this prayer is that being unforgiving makes us incapable of receiving forgiveness. To accept forgiveness for ourselves we must accept forgiveness for others, because God’s grace is for all of us.

We have much to forgive. We have been mistreated. Others have taken advantage of us, taken us for granted, and taken us for fools. Sometimes the sins against us are heart breaking. But whatever we forgive, the forgiveness we give is tied to the forgiveness we have been given.

This prayer also reminds us that we have much to be forgiven. We pray for the hallowing of God’s name while caring most about our name. We ask God for the coming of God’s kingdom while seeking our little kingdoms. We pray for daily bread while sharing next to nothing. We ask for God’s forgiveness, while not forgiving someone who does not even know they hurt our feelings. That is why Jesus assumes that asking for forgiveness is a daily occurrence.

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

The Greek text asks for release from our “debts.” As long as wrongs from the past define the present, those wrongs also close off the future. The term “forgive” is literally “release.” To forgive is not to say that what happened does not matter. Rather, it is to say that the wrongs that have occurred no longer define the relationship. Forgiveness means that there can be a

different future, which is not defined by the past. Those who have received forgiveness from God extend it to others.

Real forgiveness brings change. Forgiveness opens a future that the wrongdoing from the past had closed off: “Forgive us, and give us the gift of forgiveness. Make us forgiving of ourselves and others. Free us from being judged, as we free others from our judgments. Set us free from our failings, as we set free all who have failed us. Accept our brokenness. Give us acceptance of others who are broken. Forgive us completely, and make us completely forgiving.”

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Some recent translations offer, “Save us from the time of trial,” reflecting discomfort with the idea that God would ever lead us into temptation. After we have prayed to a loving parent, for God’s desires to come to pass, for the sharing of what we have and the sharing of forgiveness, then we pray that we will not lose our way.

We need to pray, “Lead us down better paths. Guide us safely past our selfish desires. Rescue us from our arrogance. Keep us from doing injustice. Save us from cooperating with evil. Give us courage to follow your hopes.”

“For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”

None of the oldest copies of the gospel include these last words. Modern translations put this in a footnote. The early church provided this exclamation of wonder. As they grew into this prayer, they saw God at work in their lives and believed God would care for them forever.

And so, each Sunday, we wax poetic: “For all that is, and all power, and all glory, come from you. The world is yours. Creation is yours. Your love is the only home we need, in this moment and all eternity. Amen.”

If we prayed this prayer each day it would push us to live God’s best hopes, to care for the poor, ask forgiveness for our self-centeredness, and celebrate the love we have been given. This prayer helps us grow from giving lip service to God to sharing life with God. If we accept this gift, God will help us grow up. God will make us different, better people.

sermon © Brett Younger