

## What can we learn from the Lord's Prayer?

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German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that it is a common practice to equate expressing our wishes, hopes, and signs with prayer. In modern words, this is our disposition to treat God as a vending machine. Actually, prayer aims to find the way to God and to speak with Him. In brief, we need to put God first.<sup>1</sup> Jesus amended this mistake by introducing the Lord's Prayer, which is composed of two sets of petitions. The first set is concerned with God and petitions for ourselves is secondary. Nonetheless, the two components are harmonious in the sense that what we request from our heavenly Father coincides with what God wants from us and wants to do with us.<sup>2</sup>

### **“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”**

It is not the case that His name has not been hallowed yet and we pray for its happening. Rather, it is a reminder that we are speaking to our Father in heaven and His name should be hallowed.<sup>3</sup> According to the Archbishop of Canterbury Roman Williams, when we start our prayer with this phrase, this inspires a sense of wonder and respect, and we begin to be aware that we cannot trivialize it by making God a tool for our self-serving purposes.<sup>4</sup> American theologian Brian Lugiyo used this metaphor: When we know that we are going to meet with the President of the United States, should we be well-prepared? Should we be careful of what we will say? By the same token, when we talk to God, be aware that the Father in heaven is listening and His name should be hallowed.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, this phrase also reveals who we are in addition to who God is. Addressing God as heavenly Father suggests God's nearness and His love. On one hand we need to talk to God with respect and even a trembling heart, but on the other hand, as the children of God we can talk

to a loving Father. The Lord's Prayer appeared in both Matthew and Luke. In both contexts Jesus emphasized God's love for His children: "For your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8); "What father among you, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" (Luke 11:11-12). The Lord's Prayer is backed up by a firm promise that God cares for His children.<sup>6</sup> In addition, this phrase is a reminder that as children of God we need to hallow His name by living rightly. If I lead an unchristian lifestyle, it would "profane" His name.<sup>7</sup>

**"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."**

Again, it is not a "request" for the "coming" of God's kingdom. If so, it sounds like that God's kingdom has not been come. Before interpreting this verse, we need to understand what the Kingdom of God is. If this phrase is read literally, it seems the Kingdom of God is a "place" in heaven and it will eventually take over the earth, like raising a flag in a land and declaring ownership. To make it happen, Christians should work with God (e.g. by evangelism) to "conquer" the world (eschaton).<sup>8</sup> However, it is not the correct concept of the Kingdom of God. According to Ladd, the original meaning of Kingdom in Hebrews is primarily about a reign, dominion, or rule. The realm (place) in which a reign is exercised is secondary.<sup>9</sup> To put it bluntly, the Kingdom has already come and His will has been done on earth, because God's reign over every corner of the universe. As Lugioyo said, Heaven is wherever God present.<sup>10</sup>

However, if this is the case, then why do I pray for something that has already been done? Consider this metaphor: Neutrino is a tiny (almost massless) particle. Although it is ubiquitous, it is undetectable by any human sensory channel or regular scientific instrument. It takes very special equipment installed in very odd locations (e.g. deep underground) in order to detect its existence and to study its physical attributes. Likewise, although God's reign is everywhere, we

need to be spiritually sensitive in order to feel the presence of the Kingdom and to understand His will. As children of God, we have a special channel to the Kingdom, and we have to tune in. The Kingdom of God (God's presence) is not far. As Rowan Williams said, God has taken up residence in our heart.<sup>11</sup>

**“Give us this day our daily bread.”**

Modern people take material abundance for granted and thus we may not be able to fully comprehend the meaning of this phrase. This phrase is referred to as God's provision of daily bread (manna) for the Israelites when they wandered around the wilderness.<sup>12</sup> At the dawn of scientific revolution, people started fading their reliance on supernatural protection and turning their faith to technology. However, now we know that no matter how advanced our technology is, the problem of poverty is chronic. According to World Bank, as of 2013 about 1.2 billion people in the world live on less than \$1.25 per day.<sup>13</sup> Building a heaven on earth, in a material sense, is not attainable. We have to continue to count on God's providence. God is the provider and we, as the children of God, need to be humble enough to ask for His help.

A subtle thing that catches my eyes is the phrase “this day” and the word “daily.”<sup>14</sup> It reminds me of what Jesus said, “So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today” (Matt. 6:34). There is no need to ask for tomorrow's bread or the supply for a month. Doing so suggests that God may disappear tomorrow or a month later. He is there every day. Praying for daily bread is essentially praying for what is necessary for survival, not wealth or success. Obviously, this is contradictory with the prosperity Gospel preached by many TV Evangelists and megachurch leaders.

**“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”**

If we analyze this sentence logically, we may come to the conclusion that our gracious forgiveness to other people will bring about God's mercy on us.<sup>15</sup> Swiss theologian Karl Barth bluntly rejected this type of conditional forgiveness. Our sins had been forgiven due to Jesus's redemption. There is nothing more we can do to obtain additional pardon. According to Barth, this statement should be read as: When you receive forgiveness from God, you become capable of forgiveness to others.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Rowan Williams did not view forgiveness as a matter of persuading God or bargaining with God. Rather, forgiveness is about discovering for myself that God is ahead of us.<sup>17</sup> Everything that we want or request has been done.

Our willingness to forgive is inspired by God's love. It should never be forced upon by fear. Some Christians criticize the victim by saying, “If you don't forgive the perpetrator, God would not forgive you.” Swinton calls it “victimization by grace.” Forgiveness is a process, not an event. If the victim is not ready, give him some time. Criticizing him is nothing more than self-righteousness.<sup>18</sup> If no behavior is unforgiveable, then we should forgive “un-forgiveness.”

Before Jesus gave His instruction of the Lord's Prayer, he told his disciples, “But whenever you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret” (Matthew 6:6). Thus, some people misunderstand that the Lord's Prayer is private. Actually Jesus wanted to tell His disciplines not to show off their piety by praying. Quite the opposite, the Lord's Prayer is a public prayer, which is evidenced by the starting words “Our heavenly Father” (not “my heavenly father”).<sup>19</sup> Once again in this phrase we ask for forgiveness of “our debts,” not “my debt.” In the Protestant tradition faith is highly individualized (e.g. “Jesus is my personal savior”) and we forget that faith is also communal. Hence, sin is not just a personal matter; rather there is a social and collective aspect. We sin against each other and thus we need to confess to

each other as well as to God (James 5:16). Sin is so powerful because it is alone with people. According to Bonhoeffer, “the more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them.”<sup>20</sup> It is especially true in the modern culture that highly values privacy, confidentiality, and individualism. Further, Bonhoeffer pointed out that “the root of all sin is pride...I want to be myself; I have a right to be myself, a right to my hatred and my desires my life and my death.”<sup>21</sup> In the psychological term it is egocentrism. The countermeasure is to break the darkness and isolation by confession. Perhaps it is difficult to do it openly, but we can start with confessing to our pastor or a close friend in the church. If we don't have mutual confession and forgiveness, then how can we forgive “our debtors”?

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

The literal meaning of the phrase “lead us not into temptation” is that we ask for avoiding temptations. At first glance it makes sense. If I don't go to a bar or ask God for stopping me from going to a bar, then I will not face the temptation of binge drinking and casual sex. However, it is unrealistic and unhealthy. First, it is impossible for God to shut down any potential temptation for us. Today one can easily access online casinos and porn sites. Should we expect that God jam the WI-FI signal whenever we want to do so? The only way to avoid all temptations is to leave this world. Imagine this scenario: a parent sanitizes every object before letting a child touch it. When the child grows up, his immune system may be too weak to counterattack even a very common kind of virus. Similarly, making Christians ignorant may make things worse. However, when we combine the two phrases together, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” it makes more sense. We cannot ask for “no temptation at all;” rather we should ask for “let's not do evil things when we are tempted.”

“Deliver us from evil” doesn’t mean asking for protection against other evil-doers. Rather, this is a prayer of delivering us from our own evil. “Evil” is a very strong word. However, even though we are children of God, we are capable of doing evil things! Several authors, including Swinton, Walker, and Govier, pointed out that very often evil-doers are normal people, not psychopaths or moral monsters. When people are in the wrong situation (e.g. temptation), they have the propensity to become evil.<sup>22</sup> As a psychologist, I fully understand what they mean. How could German Christians unquestioningly obey the order of Hitler to commit the crime of Holocaust? How could the Chinese Red Guards blindly follow Chair Mao to persecute their parents during the Great Cultural Revolution? Milgram study, Zimbaro’s prison experiment, and my own research reached the same conclusion: People could do unusual things in unusual situations. Several years ago my colleagues and I conducted a study regarding binge drinking and casual sex. In this study we found that college students turned off their “alarm system” when they are in the vacation mode. Many students who had not engaged in binge drinking or casual sex before did both during the spring break. Christians are not totally immune. I am capable of doing evil things and therefore I must pray, “Deliver us from evil.”<sup>23</sup>

Further, not only could bad situations constitute temptations, but also good situations could lead people astray. In *Soul of Ministry*, Experienced pastor and theologian Ray Anderson documented many cases about how church leaders abuse their power. Very often success could turn into a curse in disguise.<sup>24</sup> When a person leads a fast-growing church and the audience admires him as an idol, it might impair his moral judgment. Again, I am not better than anyone. Even if I were “successful,” I must still turn on my “alarm system” and pray God for delivering me from evil.

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

Many scholars argue that the doxology is a later addition and therefore it will not be discussed in this essay. In conclusion, by reciting the Lord's Prayer we know what God wants from us and it reminds us about the Father's loving presence.

### End notes

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, D. (1974). *The Psalms: The prayer book of the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

<sup>2</sup> Felde, M. (2015, winter). The Lord's Prayer: Who could ask for anything more? *Word & World*, 35(1), 65-72.

<sup>3</sup> Barth, K. (1952/2002). *Prayer*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, R. & Beckett, W. (2008). *Living the Lord's Prayer*. UK: Lion.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Luz, U. (2007). *A commentary on Matthew 1–7*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>7</sup> In the Jewish Tradition God's chose people could hallow his name by living rightly, otherwise they would "profane" God's name and God would be disrespected among the nations. See Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>8</sup> Some Christians who subscribe to the inaugurated eschatology assert that God's Kingdom has come but it hasn't reached its fullness yet. Hence, believers must work with God (e.g. evangelism) to manifest the Kingdom of God on the earth. However, I don't believe that we can do anything to speed up the coming of God's Kingdom

<sup>9</sup> Ladd, G. E. (1974). *The presence of the future*. (Grand Rapids, MA: Eerdmans).

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Williams, R. (2002). *Ponder these things: Praying with icons of the Virgin*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete.

<sup>12</sup> Keener, C. S. (1993). Tertullian interpreted this verse in a spiritual sense. "Daily bread" could mean the Word of God, because the bread is the symbol of the body of Christ. But it is highly subjective. Almost everything in the Bible can carry a spiritual connotation. If Jesus wants us to ask for the Word of God, He could explicitly state it. See Origen, Cyprian, & Tertullian (2011). *On the Lord's Prayer*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

<sup>13</sup> World Bank. (2015). Poverty. Retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty>.

<sup>14</sup> In the Middle East fresh bread is baked early in the morning every day. If it is not eaten, by night the dried bread would become too hard to eat. Thus, people did not save bread for tomorrow. In addition, the word "daily" was a rare Greek word. It was only used twice in the New Testament (Matthew 6:11, Luke 11:13). See Utley, R. J. (2000). *The First Christian primer: Matthew* (Vol. 9). Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International.

<sup>15</sup> In the Aramaic language the word "hoba" could mean both "sin" and "debt." See Keener, C. S. (1993). In this context it is more likely that it means sin.

<sup>16</sup> Barth, K. (1952/2000).

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, R. (2002).

<sup>18</sup> Swinton, J. (2007). *Raging with compassion: Pastoral response to the problem of evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

<sup>19</sup> Utley, R. J. (2000).

<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, D. (1996). *Life together and prayer book of the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p.110.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, D. (1996), p.111.

<sup>22</sup> See Govier, T. (2002). *Forgiveness and revenge*. New York, NY: Routledge; Govier, T. (2002). *A delicate balance: What philosophy can tell us about terrorism*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Govier, T., & Verwoerd, W. (2004). How not to polarize "victims" and "perpetrators". *Peace Review*, 16, 371-377; Swinton, J. (2007). *Raging with compassion: Pastoral response to the problem of evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Walker, J. (2002). *Becoming evil: How ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Sonmez, S.; Apostolopoulos, Y; Yu, C. H.; Mattila, A., & Yu, L. C. (2006). Binge drinking and casual sex on spring break. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33, 895-917.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, R. (1997). *Soul of ministry: Forming leaders for God's people*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.