

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

Focus On Prayer

Matthew 5.20, 5.48, 6.7-15

3.20.22

^{5.20} "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

⁹ "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ¹⁰ 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ 'Give us this day our daily bread. ¹² 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen .'

¹⁴ "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ "But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

We've been looking at *The Sermon on the Mount* Jesus Christ's most famous sermon. Many have seen this teaching as the core or crux of the Jesus Way.

Today, He takes a short detour into the topic of prayer. And in this little excursus He actually gives the heart of the whole sermon. All the sermon's themes come together in this short digression.

It's a topic many people find a little troubling either because we find the practice of prayer difficult to maintain OR the logical troubles and mysteries of prayer (e.g. does prayer really change things? If there's an overarching plan, then why pray – if things are already determined then what's the use?) But this is more than just tips on praying – it's the Center.

In the coming of God in Jesus Christ – in the reign of God, the Kingdom of God that Jesus reveals and establishes... HE IS BRINGING HEAVEN TO EARTH. "On earth as it is in heaven..." is central to the Sermon on the Mount, central to the Christian understanding of life and history and everything. If we get it and believe it, THIS center of the sermon changes how we pray...and changes everything else!

Let's look at this well-known prayer:

1. **SURPRISES** from pleasant to perplexing
2. **SOLUTIONS** from minor to major
3. **SET-UP** for a New Way to Pray (and LIVE!)

The surprises we find in this, *The Lord's Prayer*, are some, just interesting, like the fact that there seems to be at least one prayer circulating at/around the time of Jesus that was very similar.

He's not plagiarizing from *The Kiddish* (it may have come much later than *The Lord's Prayer*) but the themes are similar...because they're both based on the Hebrew Bible... which is Jesus Christ's textbook.

Another pleasant surprise... especially to people who have a hard time praying is that it's really short – only 52 words as Matthew recorded it (shorter in Luke) – even young children can memorize it (as we've heard – TO OUR DELIGHT! at the 9:00am service!).

It stands in contrast to the long, showy prayers of the clergymen (in Jesus' day) and to the Gentiles, like the Prophets of Baal in their showdown with Elijah (1 Kings 18.20ff). Starting in the morning, they screamed until the evening (v. 29) these long prayers... repeated over and over... and when they still didn't get Baal's attention, they started cutting themselves to impress and force the hand of their god.

Jesus says, "Don't be like them because your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." It's a view of God – a God who doesn't require that we impress Him or are sincere/authentic enough. In fact, this is a written prayer. And while we may have a bias that extemporaneous/impromptu prayers are the ones that God honors, this model prayer disproves that (also that little book of prayers at the middle of the Bible). So written prayers are ok! 'Might be a pleasant surprise to you!

The petitions are PLURAL – not MY Father but "our" and "our daily bread...our debts...deliver US from evil.

It's structured, like the Ten Commandments, divided in two – the first half directed at God and His concerns and the second half focused on our human needs. The first four or five commandments are directed especially toward God; the sixth-tenth commandments start to focus on our sins toward our fellow human beings (murder, adultery, theft etc.)

Here in the six requests of *The Lord's Prayer* we find the FIRST THREE aimed at God ("Hallowed be Thy Name, The Kingdom, Thy Will") and the SECOND THREE are aimed at our needs... It's NOT that our needs don't enter in; we are embodied according to God's design and He wants us to bring our bodily and spiritual need to Him.

And right in the middle of these six requests – the heart of the core of the center of the prayer and of the whole *Sermon on the Mount* is the little phrase that turns out to be all-important...

Jonathan Pennington translates them, *“As these are in heaven, let them be also on earth”*. Three petitions on heaven and three about earth and in the middle of the prayer and of the whole *Sermon on the Mount* – *“On earth as it is in heaven.”* ‘More about that in a second.

Two more surprises, moving from pleasant to perplexing: FIRST, *“lead us not into temptation.”*

Is God in the business of leading us into temptation so we have to ask Him to stop? Well, as James says, God is NOT tempted by evil nor does He tempt (1.13) but God did test Israel in the wilderness when they wandered for 40 years AND He gave them, every day, their daily bread (certainly the Exodus is in mind as Jesus preaches this sermon and mentions *“daily bread”*). AND God’s Spirit did lead Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by the devil because Jesus Christ is the True Israel... and had to succeed where the nation of Israel had failed.

The words *“tempt”* and *“test”* are translated from the same Greek word... Jesus is saying, *“Father, as this is the New Exodus Generation, hear their prayers NOT to be tested. When they must face tests that will serve to purify and direct their faith to YOU – keep them from failing as the first Exodus Generation failed.*

“Deliver them from evil in the midst of various tests and trials...”

One final ...perplexing surprise is the overwhelming, emphasis on forgiveness. It’s IN the prayer and IN the explanation following the prayer. It’s put so starkly: *“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”* (6.14-15)

It’s so plain and it’s ...apparently... a condition of our forgiveness. If you don’t forgive you will not be forgiven. And, it’s a good and pastoral point for me to make at this stage that some people have been so deeply hurt and traumatized that forgiveness is all but impossible for them...

So, what do we do with that? It’s bigger than prayer – it’s forgiveness before God... It seems to say if you don’t forgive, you can’t know God!

And that brings me to the second point SOLUTIONS from minor to major.

The prayer is so short that we had to add a few lines... You may know that the oldest NT manuscripts don’t include the end of v. 13. It seems to have been added in the first or second

century...though...totally in keeping with the prayer. Maybe it seemed too short – like we couldn't handle the teaching.

Then there's the plural thing – here's a fantastic quote by Hauwerwas and Willimon, "There may be religions that come to you through quiet walks in the woods, or by sitting quietly in the library with a book, or rummaging around in the recesses of your psyche. Christianity is NOT one of them. Christianity is inherently communal, a matter of life in the Body, the church. Jesus did not call isolated individuals to follow him. He called a group of disciples." (*Lord, Teach Us*, p. 28)

It's not that OUR daily bread and OUR debts and deliver US... is really a surprise to us but maybe in the model prayer (esp. when Jesus just told us to go into a secret place to pray) and it clues us into the fact that this ISN'T simply a little life-hack, shortcut "tips on prayer"-thing. It's the center of the most famous sermon ever preached and, in this center, Jesus is again emphasizing NOT simply what we do, but the heart out of which our doing comes AND WHO WE ARE.

We're a people...we're a family...WE HAVE THE SAME FATHER AND WE, HIS CHILDREN, are brothers and sisters. We pray out of this familial sense. I belong to YOU and YOU belong to ME! "Our Father."

Let me remind us: this is the essence of Jesus Christ's teaching and at the center of the heart of the crux of it all is the Lord's Prayer and at the MOLTEN center of this prayer is a whole view of who the Christian is and part of that is a member of a large, international family with God as our Father.

And regarding the IN YOUR FACE emphasis on forgiveness is again the truth that WE are the Beatitude People (that's how the Sermon on the Mount begins). We are called to do things and we look at our own character...our training...our motives...our personal goodness... THE CUPBOARD is bare!

Blessed are the poor in spirit (the morally bankrupt)...and those who mourn over their own inability to be GOOD as God counts good... and those who are gentle because WHO AM I TO GET ROUGH WITH OTHERS when God has been, like a tender Father, gentle to me?!

We will never forgive perfectly...like we'll never repent perfectly... or give with complete self-forgetfulness ... BUT we meet God when we hear the Gospel and believe – somehow, concurrently we receive forgiveness and become forgiving. And while we may stumble and wrestle with relationships and hurts and offenses against us...

In Jesus Heaven came down to EARTH – He punctured the barrier...He tore the veil...

The King of the Kingdom came to us when we were unable and unwilling to climb to Him... and He said, as He hung between heaven and earth: "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing!"

The greater our view of our sins forgiven, the greater our ability to forgive. Jesus will later say, "Who is forgiven much, loves much..." On that occasion a Pharisee who'd convinced himself that he had hardly any sins on his record so that God's forgiveness was like no big deal – and that man loved little. The sinful woman who was present that day, felt such relief and rest that she loved with abandon.

And you don't have to be a wild, sexy, flamboyant criminal to feel immense relief.

I'm thinking of a woman I heard speak at our seminary, named Helen Roseveare... She was a missionary doctor who trained medical students in the Congo. On her second tour, 1963, she was kidnapped and held captive for five months. She was constantly beaten and repeatedly molested.

When she was eventually released by some villagers, she returned to England... but then she returned to the Congo. She did that because she had a wide deep view of her own sins...and a sense of infinite relief at being forgiven.

Or Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch Christian whose family harbored Jews during World War 2. They were caught and sent to a concentration camp where they were daily paraded around and starved. Her sister died in the camp.

Many years later she was speaking at a church about her experience and a man waited behind to speak with her. She recognized him as one of the cruel guards who had beaten women and humiliated her sister.

But he did not recognize HER...or so she thought. And then he asked to shake her hand, "I have become a Christian and I am sorry for all I have done...I believe God forgives me. Are you able to forgive me?"

She didn't feel it...until she remembered her own daily sins. And in a wooden, mechanical way she forced her hand out...in faith and she felt healing and warmth and hot tears. This is what she wrote:

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't. (excerpted from "I'm Still Learning to Forgive" by Corrie ten Boom))

"On earth as it is in heaven": the Christian begins to long for that. And He begins to long for God, whose name is Father... she wants that name to be revered, to be set apart as special and holy - "on earth as it is in heaven."

It's more than just a formula for praying efficiently or effectively – it's the core of the Christian Life. It sets us up for a new way of praying and living (Third Point).

We want God to be known for His Holy Character, His Kingdom and His beautiful reign to be demonstrated in the way people think, speak and act. God's will to be done... AND the Apple of the Father's Eye, the Beloved Son and Savior to be trusted and to have all the fruit of His suffering and victory. "On Earth as it IS in Heaven."

We see that having God as Father is the most important thing about us.

We're learning to depend on Him for everything – not just spiritual things but our daily bread, protection from evil, for an end to wars, international relations, things great and small.

We see our prayers as the God-ordained means to realize the God-ordained ends that Our Father has planned in His Reign/Kingdom that the Beloved Son has established.

And when we lose a job, we pray...when we take the SAT or the GRE test, we pray...and when we have a new grandchild, we pray...but always the prayer must be:

"Our Father in Heaven, in this test I am taking... in this time of unemployment ...
in the life of this grandchild...in the war on Ukraine may Your Name be
celebrated as holy ...may Your Kingdom come to be seen and Your will be done
ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN."