Lord's Prayer

Robert A. J. Gagnon

The Lord's Prayer has exerted an enormous influence on Christian civilization for the simple reason that it is the only model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray. This prayer, then, and not the recently popularized "Prayer of Jabez" (1 Chr. 4:9–10), is entitled to the pre-eminent place in the church's prayer life, not merely as a rote verbatim liturgical recitation but as a pedagogical tool for teaching people the epitome of Jesus' teaching and specifically *what* his followers should and should not desire and ask for in their prayer life.

FORM AND TRADITION HISTORY

The prayer appears in Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:1–4 (the "Q" source), with a version in the Didache 8:2–3, which differs from Matthew's version only in minor ways. In terms of form, the prayer consists of an introductory command to pray, an invocation to God as "Father," and the body of the prayer, which in turn is divided into two parts: a series of "you" (sg.) petitions for God (two in Luke, three in Matthew) and a series of "we" petitions for the community (three in both Luke and Matthew). In general, Luke preserves the original number and length of petitions more accurately than Matthew, while Matthew preserves better than Luke the precise wording of their shared petitions.

Consistent with his redaction elsewhere and bringing greater symmetry to the prayer, Matthew has expanded an original "Father" to "Our Father who is in the heavens," added a third "you" petition ("May your will be done, as in heaven, also on earth"), and a second clause to the third "we" petition ("but rescue us from evil [or: the evil one]"). Luke has softened some of the hard edges of Jesus' prayer by allowing a more long-term request for bread ("be giving to us day by day") and diluting slightly the sense that our forgiveness from God is contingent on forgiving others ("*for* we ourselves *are* also forgiving *everyone*"). He also changes "debts" to "sins" for a Gentile audience. Text-critical evidence indicates that the doxology that today is recited in connection with the Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer ("for yours is the kingdom . . .") is not original to Matthew's version, let alone dating back to Jesus.

LITERARY SETTING IN MATTHEW'S SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The setting in Luke 11:1 has a greater claim to originality than the setting in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them "how to pray, just as also John taught his disciples." However, Matthew has constructed the more profound theological setting for the prayer, inserting it in the center of the chiastic structure of the Sermon, where it functions as the outline or summary of Jesus' teaching on the "Mount" as a New Moses of word and deed.

In particular, the prayer highlights several themes of the sermon. First, the prayer opens with an implicit identification of those who are to inherit God's kingdom (cf. the invocation of God as their "Father" with 5:3–16, the nine beatitudes that begin the sermon) and concludes with implicit warnings about behavior that could jeopardize this inheritance (cf. the last two "we" petitions on contingent forgiveness and the request not to enter trial-temptation with the closing triad of warnings about two ways, false prophets, and two builders in 7:13–27). Second, it focuses on the necessity of doing God's will and on a tightened demand for righteousness (cf. the "you" petitions for God's rule and will with the two triads of antitheses in 5:18–48), on the one hand, and on seeking God's kingdom first while leaving this-worldly concerns about possessions to God (cf. the "we" petition on food only for the coming day with the triad of possessions, judging, and trusting prayer in 6:19–7:11), on the other hand. Third, the very simplicity of the prayer underscores the warning against "doing righteousness" to publicize one's personal piety

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(cf. the triad of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting in 6:1–18). In short, the prayer epitomizes Jesus' teaching as the fulfillment of "the law and the prophets," a phrase that brackets the main body of the sermon (5:17, 7:12).

THE RADICAL CONTENT OF THE PRAYER IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Both the overall structure of the prayer and each of the individual elements manifest the radical nature of Jesus' call to discipleship. The *Tefillah* ("prayer") or *Shemoneh Esreh* (the "Eighteen Benedictions"), prayed three times a day in post-70 Judaism with possible pre-70 antecedents, begins with petitions for humans and ends with petitions for God. The Lord's Prayer inverts that order in keeping with Matthew 6:33: "Seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [i.e. food and clothing] will be added to you." Both prayers have a request for forgiveness but only the Lord's Prayer makes the retention of God's forgiveness contingent on the extent to which the petitioners forgive others. Both prayers contain a request for food but in the *Tefillah* the request is for an abundant harvest as opposed to mere bread for the coming day. The Lord's Prayer also has a more intimate address of God as "Father" and greater brevity and simplicity. Regarding the individual elements of the Lord's Prayer:

1 "Father," while not unique as a form of address, is distinctive of Jesus' prayers (Mark 14:36; Matt. 11:25–26; Luke 10:21, 23:34, 46) – enough so that the earliest Greek-speaking churches preserved the Aramaic *abba* as the distinctive cry of the Spirit of God's Son indwelling believers (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6; cf. Mark 14:36). The address implies a high level of intimacy – an extension of Jesus' intimacy with God – but also a privilege that goes only to those who are obedient to God like a child to a parent (Matt. 5:45; 12:50; 13:43). It therefore has an ethical edge. "Father" is not merely a patriarchal holdover. It symbolizes the healthy tension between God's immanence and transcendence (and a rejection of a "mother Earth" image), as well as the tension between universalism and condemnation (God's love is mixed with discipline, warnings, and judgment; it is not just nurturing and gentle).

2 By front-ending the "you" petitions, the Lord's Prayer gives priority to God's interests in establishing his rule over human-earthly needs. The first petition is "May your name be sanctified [i.e. treated as holy]," a better translation for modern idiom than the archaic "hallowed be thy name," which some today confuse as a statement of fact rather than (as in the Greek) a polite request. When does the sanctifying of God's name happen? According to Ezekiel 36:22–23, God "will sanctify my great name . . . when through [Israel] I display my holiness" to the nations by restoring Israel and fulfilling the promises to the patriarchs. Jesus modified this vision a bit by including a time of judgment for Israel and an opening up of the messianic banquet to the outcasts of Israel and even to Gentiles (e.g. Matt. 8:5–13; Luke 13:24–30; 14:15–24, 10:13–16; 11:29–32). As the parallel post-70 synagogue prayer, the *Qaddish*, makes clear, the petitions for God's name to be sanctified and for God's kingdom to come refer ultimately to the climactic, supernatural inbreaking of God's rule into the world. The primary Christian hope expressed in prayer must be an apocalyptic one, expecting nothing less than the complete uprooting of evil and suffering from God's creation. Moreover, that hope mainly has in view an end to the dishonoring of God that happens whenever humans disobey God's rule. Matthew's gloss, "your will be done, as in heaven, also on earth," is thus wholly appropriate.

3 The "we" petitions for human needs all have in view Jesus' radical kingdom ethic. The first petition is best translated: "Our bread for the coming day give to us today" or more simply "Our next (loaf of) bread give . . ."; in effect, a request that God merely supply the basic life-sustaining necessities for the immediate moment. This is not a long-term plan for economic stability. The very wording of the request

stands as an implicit indictment of materialism. It echoes both the example of the manna in Exodus 16:14 (only a day's ration each day, requiring people to trust the Lord every day) and the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon about not worrying about what one will eat (Matt. 6:25–34).

4 The petition that God "forgive us our debts" carries with it a contingency clause: "as [i.e. only to the extent that] we ourselves also have forgiven our debtors." To underscore the seriousness of this contingency clause Matthew appends a saying drawn from Mark 11:25 immediately following the prayer; namely, that "if you do not forgive people, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (cf. Sir. 28:2–5; *b. Sabb.* 151b). The parable of the unforgiving servant later in Matthew 18:23–35 also communicates the point that God will retract forgiveness from followers who do not extend similar forgiveness to others.

5 The final petition ends on a sober note: "do not bring us into trial-and-temptation (or: testing; *peirasmon*). Early Jewish parallels indicate the following sense: do not, as punishment for our sins, turn us over to the power of evil, both in suffering and temptation, to such an extent that it leads to our apostasy and extermination (*Jubilees* 21:2122; *11QPsalms* 24:11; *Ps. Sol.* 5:5–6; Sir. 23:4–6; *b. Berakoth* 60b). A prayer that begins with an intimate "Father" ends on a concern that the untamable God could still remove us from the kingdom as punitive action for our sins. However, Matthew's appended "but rescue us from evil [or: the evil one]" gives a note of confidence in God's desire and capacity to rescue us from evil inasmuch as similar phrases appear in early Christian tradition as statements of fact: "The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial-and-temptation" (2 Pet. 2:9); "The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will save me for his heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18); "The Lord is faithful who will . . . keep you from evil" (2 Thess. 3:3). Paul likewise offers the assurance that "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tried-and-tempted beyond what you are able . . . to endure," without giving up a note of warning that the possibility of apostasy is real for those who put God to the test (1 Cor. 10:1–22).

CONTRIBUTION WITHIN CHRISTIAN CIVILIZATION

The contribution of the Lord's Prayer within Christian civilization is to remind supplicants 1) that prayer is simple and predicated on a childlike trust of God as one's Father; 2) that prayer is first and foremost about furthering God's interests and that nothing less than an apocalyptic assertion of God's full rule is the believer's ultimate hope; and 3) that humans restrain their own avarice in prayer for "what's in it for me" to the acquisition of their next basic meal, forgiveness from God that is in proportion to their forgiveness of others, and a request that God not punitively bring them into a time of trial, testing, and temptation that would lead to their eternal demise.

SEE ALSO: Kingdom of God: Biblical Perspectives; Prayer

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