

How Should We Pray?

Matthew 6: 9-13

The question for today, asked by a member of our congregation is this: could you explain, in *Crossroads-ease*, the different elements of the Lord's Prayer? My first question is, what is *Crossroads-ease*? We at Crossroads Church takes seriously the concept of soul-competency. That's when each person is believed to be capable and responsible in interpreting scripture and faith within themselves, with the guidance of the Spirit and with the community of faith providing some accountability. So, *Crossroads-ease* is each of us hearing each other.

What about me? I am the pastor and congregational teacher. It is an important role. In my teaching, I am not the only voice, but I am the consistent voice. My role is not to dominate, but to guide, interpret, and be a resource. I share and you listen, then you share and we listen. Together, we enlarge the voice of the teaching and the Spirit enlivens and enlightens the process. And that's *Crossroads-ease*!

The Lord's Prayer, from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel is part of Jesus' instruction on how to pray without going on too long. He warns people not to string together long prayers full of empty words designed to draw attention to yourself. That's the practice of hypocrites.

The Lord's Prayer also appears in Luke's gospel (11: 1-4) in response to the disciples' request for Jesus to "teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." Luke's version is a little simpler than Matthew's and uses sins instead of debts or trespasses. It is a model for prayer and a model prayer.

The prayer opens with a section of doxology with three petitions of praise:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Then, there is section of petitions for us:

Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Finally, as the prayer is normally constructed, there is a final doxology:

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Last Sunday, we heard portions of the Lord's Prayer in several languages other than English, including American sign language. Do you wonder what the words may have sounded like and meant as Jesus might have spoken them? His native language was Aramaic and modern scholars have resurrected it. The first few lines of the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic sound like this:

Avvon d-bish-maiya, nith-qaddash shim-mukh.
Tih-teh mal-chootukh. Nih-weh çiw-yanukh:
ei-chana d'bish-maiya: ap b'ar-ah.

A literal translation from the Aramaic yields a very contemporary sounding English version:

O, Birther of the Cosmos, focus your light within us – make it useful
Create your reign of unity now
Your one desire then acts with ours,
As in all light, so in all forms,
Grant us what we need each day in bread and insight:
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
As we release the strands we hold of other's guilt.
Don't let surface things delude us,
But free us from what holds us back.
From you is born all ruling will,
The power and the life to do,
The song that beautifies all,
from age to age it renews.
I affirm this with my whole being.
[from *Dances for Universal Peace* by Neil-Douglas Klotz]

The Message is a contemporary translation that seeks to capture the dynamism of the original Greek language of the New Testament:

Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are.
set the world right;
do what's best as above, so below.
keep us alive with three square meals.
keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You're in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You're ablaze in beauty!
Yes. Yes. Yes.

“Our Father who art in heaven.” What do you think about this way of addressing God? “Our” is an inclusive term that can recognize God as the father (parent) of all people. “Father” is a derivation of the Aramaic “Abba,” the intimate form of “father.” This address is very “Jewish” in many ways because the audience for Matthew’s gospel was largely Palestinian Jewish. In Jewish piety, Father and King were often combined and the deferential clarification “who art in heaven” would often follow.

Following the address, there are three petitions for praise: “Hallowed be Thy Name;” “Thy kingdom come,” and “Thy will be done on earth as in heaven.” They’re similar to each other. The verbs are used in a passive form.

God’s name means God’s nature and power. To hallow the name of God means to recognize and affirm the nature of God. Our understanding of the nature of God is probably quite a bit different than that of people in the first century. Some of us question the idea of God as a particular being, but prefer to think of God as being itself or the ground of all being.

I don’t see this petition as limiting us to a particular concept of God. It does challenge us to affirm that ultimate reality moves into our lives and connects us to itself and to all of life. “Hallowed be Thy name.”

Thy kingdom come – what do you make of this petition? I just finished a sermon series called *Kingdom Come*. I'm reminded that the nature of God that is both coming into and already present in the world, is what the New Testament often calls God's new creation. It is a world of *Shalom*, of justice and peace among people. This is a reality we celebrate in our worship and a life in which we participate now by faith.

If God's will is the coming of *Shalom*, then the petition for the doing of God's will among us now is a poetic restatement of the request for the coming of God's kingdom. Requesting God to hallow God's name, bring the kingdom, and have God's will done represents a commitment on the part of the pray-er to live in the reality of God's new creation – the world of *Shalom* – now.

The second main section of the prayer includes three petitions for us. These use active verbs. The first petition is, "Give us this day our daily bread." It is a request for what is needed for survival. While a very practical request, this petition also implies a tension between these practical survival needs and an image of the eschatological bread of the Messianic banquet – a gathering of all people for a feast of abundance. Eternal nourishment becomes available for our present situation – spiritual as well as physical.

"Forgive our trespasses (debts/sins)." Which would you rather have forgiven: trespasses, sins, or debts? As we forgive those who trespass (from Matthew 6: 14-15), or those who sin against us or are indebted to us, we are better able to receive forgiveness from others. This is not to say that forgiveness is conditional. God is not waiting before forgiving to see what we do. It implies more of a simultaneous interchange. Forgiving opens in people an ability to receive forgiveness and love.

In an illustration from the book *Blue Like Jazz*, the author tells the story of a Christian group on a very secular college campus who decide to set up a confessional booth in the middle of a bacchanalian festival. But the purpose of the booth was not to hear confessions from misbehaving students. It was to offer confessions on the part of the Christian Church for things such as the Crusades, televangelists, and how Christians have failed to be true to the example of Jesus. The result of this confessing was the opening of meaningful conversation with the non-Christian students and reconciliation on the campus.

"Lead us not into temptation" was probably not a request to be exempted from daily temptations to sin, but reference to the harsh testing of persecution in the first century. It is connected to the request, "deliver us from evil." Literally, this is a request to be saved from the Evil One, the antichrist. Today, we might request to be delivered from the entangling power of systemic evil.

The final praise (doxology) of the prayer, is a later addition to the prayer, not part of either gospel version. Originally, it might have been a congregational response to the reading of the Lord's Prayer in worship. The response came to be incorporated into the prayer itself – "Thine is the kingdom, power, glory forever. Amen." It represents a final statement of affirmation that the petitions requested are already assured because all things are already in God's hand. "Amen. So be it. Yes, yes, yes!"

A great deal of *The Lord's Prayer* is doxology -- "praise." How often and when do you honestly praise others or praise God? Doxology is an act of faith, a process of declaring where you stand. It means literally "words of glory." In what light, what glory, do you choose to stand?

The petition for forgiveness of debts, trespasses, or sins raises the question, “Where do you need forgiveness in your life?” “What debts, trespasses, or sin do you need to forgive? From what trials do you need to be spared? In what evil do you feel entwined or imprisoned?”

There you have it, the Lord’s Prayer in Crossroads-ese! As a whole, and in each part, this prayer is open to meanings we bring to it. In Matthew’s gospel, it was intended as an alternative to the lengthy prayers of self importance in the religious practice of Jesus’ day. Keep it short, simple, and focused on God’s glory, your real needs, and a reaffirmation of God’s glory.

In Luke’s Gospel, the Lord’s Prayer is a disciples’ prayer, both a model prayer and a model for prayer. It is not the only word on prayer in the New Testament. There are other prayers and other ways to pray. There are other ways to think about and address the reality we call God.

Any prayer requires something of us, a reaching beyond what is comfortable and secure. To pray is to step out as an act of faith. In this sense, all of life is prayer. As we pray, we are committing ourselves to live open to the spiritual reality that forms the context of our existence. We are committing ourselves to know our needs, to share them, and to seek the abundance that comes from simplicity. We are committing ourselves to forgive and receive forgiveness, and to hold sacred the source and direction of our spiritual journeys, following the path of Jesus. We are committing ourselves mind, body, and spirit, time, talents, and treasures. All these things we pray, saying these familiar words:

Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.