

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Lord, teach us to pray...

“One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray’” (Luke 11:1).

It might seem that Christian prayer, perhaps most simply described as listening and talking to God, should be instinctive and effortless for Christians.

For most of us, however, the awkward truth is that our conversations with God are anything but easy or automatic.

We struggle to fit prayer into overstuffed schedules. When we do pray, our efforts often seem like tangled thickets of thoughts and feelings, shopping lists of wants and needs sprinkled with pious phrases learned in Sunday school.

Frustrated by an inability to pray well, our prayers become less frequent and more erratic. Finally, something causes us to echo the plea of that anonymous disciple, “Lord, teach me to pray.” The answer Jesus gave, and still gives, to that humble request is what we now call the Lord’s Prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer is simple enough for a child to learn, yet so profound that mature Christian thinkers have probed its depths for centuries without exhausting its riches.

Its pattern can be followed easily by babes in Christ, yet these petitions and their sequence have awed the most insightful spiritual theologians from the first days of the Church to the present.

What is printed here is an excerpt of a study of The Lord’s Prayer written by the Rev. Robert P. Mills and posted at www.layman.org. In this abbreviated print edition, we will consider two implications of the disciple’s request: Our need to pray and our need to be taught how to pray. The extended study, available online, explores how the prayer Jesus taught meets those needs.

Let us tend to the Lord’s Prayer as we seek to pray as the Lord teaches us.

THE LORD’S PRAYER

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 our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom,
and the power,
and the glory,
for ever.
Amen.

For further study, visit www.layman.org
and download the full length study
of The Lord’s Prayer.

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Week 1: Our need to pray

Read *Luke 11:1-4* and *Matthew 6:4-13*

Throughout His earthly life, Jesus prayed. Have you ever wondered why? Jesus prayed for many reasons, but first of all because He was truly human, and, as John Leith observes, “To be truly human is to pray.”¹

As human beings, we were made to be in constant conversation with our Creator, to “live and move and have our being” in God (Acts 17:28). Our rebellion ruptured that intended communion (Gen. 3). To heal the breach caused by sin, God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, became fully human, lived a sinless human life, and atoned for our sins by His sacrificial death on the cross. Having been raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God in heaven, Jesus continues to pray to the Father on our behalf (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; I John 2:1).

In His earthly ministry, while never ceasing to be fully God, the fully human Jesus prayed (Mark 1:35; Matt. 14:23; 26:36-44; Luke 5:16; 11:1; John 17) and taught His followers the importance and the power of prayer (Mark 9:28-29; 11:24; Matt. 7:7-8; John 15:7, 16; 16:23-24). So when His disciple asked to be taught how to pray, Jesus did not say, “If you pray” but “When,” not so much commanding His disciples to pray as assuming they would follow His example as well as His instruction.

After all, if the Master found prayer vital to His life and work, how much more should His servants realize that our ministries of preaching, teaching, feeding and healing need to be nurtured and guided by periods of prayer?

Our need to learn

The Gospels never show Jesus’ disciples asking Him how to preach or teach. Rather, they asked Him how to pray. That Jesus’ first disciples were not quite certain how to talk to God is confirmed by such New Testament authors as Paul (“We do not know what we ought to pray for,” Rom. 8:26) and James (“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives,” James 4:3).

That’s not surprising. Think about the difficulties we have talking with each other as husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee, pastor and congregation. We spend enormous amounts of time and money on counselors and consultants who have learned, and have learned how to teach, the tools and techniques of effective interpersonal communication.

If we find talking with other people to be such a challenge, it is no wonder that we struggle to communicate with God. In the midst of such struggles, it is appropriate that we ask the only human being who also is fully God to share His knowledge with us.

As God Incarnate, Jesus knows His disciples better than we know ourselves (Psalm 139). He knew, for example, that Nathaniel had been sitting under a fig tree before Philip called him (John 1:48), and that Peter would deny Him three times before the night was over (Mark 14:30). And in the Sermon on the Mount, just before He taught His disciples how to pray, He taught them that God knows what we need before we ask (Matt. 6:8).

Since Jesus knows us intimately and is our teacher (Matt.

23:10), it is especially appropriate that we ask Him to teach us how to pray. It is hard to imagine instruction more beneficial, or inspiring more confidence, than that which comes from Him who now sits at God’s right hand and prays for His disciples, whom He loves.

“It is quite clear,” writes Teresa of Avila, “that when a master teaches anything, he develops a love for his pupil so that what he teaches will inspire and delight the pupil.” In a bit of understatement, she adds, “It is helpful also to pay attention to what is being taught.”²

For reflection and discussion:

1. Why do you pray? What motivates you to pray? What need(s) are fulfilled when you pray?
2. Have you ever prayed “Lord, teach me to pray”? If so, how has God answered that prayer?
3. Why do we need to be taught how to pray?
4. What can the Lord’s Prayer teach us about our own prayers?

Pray the Lord’s Prayer. “Our Father...”

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Week II: Paying attention

Certainly, it is helpful to pay attention when being taught, especially when the teacher is God and the subject of the lesson is how to improve our conversations with Him. Indeed, paying attention to God, a practice historically known as “contemplation,” is at the very heart of prayer.³ To help us learn to pay attention, Jesus has given us the Lord’s Prayer, both as a prayer we can pray and as a model for our own prayers.

- Contemplate each section of the Lord’s Prayer, asking the Lord to teach you.
- Focus attentively on each petition or phrase, asking the Lord to instruct you.
- Meditate on each word, asking the Lord to educate and equip you.

Whether we pray it verbatim throughout the day (a practice highly recommended by great saints throughout the ages) or use it as the framework upon which to construct our own prayers (equally commended), the Lord’s Prayer helps us clear the clamor of voices, internal and external, that constantly compete for stray bits of our fragmented concentration. Its crystalline structure and simple rhythms bring to our attention what God has revealed about Himself, His kingdom and His will, and they allow us to focus on what we know we need from God: daily provision, forgiveness for the sins that separate us from Him, and protection from the reality of evil.

The Lord’s Prayer is an extraordinary gift from the loving God to whom we pray. For those who wish to learn how to pray, and for those who wish to improve their skills for communicating with God, it is both an accessible starting point and an ultimate goal.

Not to be overlooked, however, is that “Lord, teach us to pray” also is a prayer we can profitably pray with regularity. For as Gerhard Ebeling notes, “Those who know how to pray ought also to know that at best they are in the process of learning how to pray.”⁴

Lord, teach us to pray.

For reflection and discussion:

1. Is it a new experience for you to pray slowly and attentively through the Lord’s Prayer?
2. What did you learn by praying contemplatively?
3. What did you learn by meditating on each word of the prayer?
4. What questions were raised for you during these spiritual exercises?

Pray the Lord’s Prayer and ask the Lord to teach you to pray.

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Week III: Ordered prayers, ordered life

From time to time within the Church, some have debated whether the Lord's Prayer is to be prayed word for word as Jesus taught it or, instead, was intended as a pattern for us to follow in composing our own prayers.

The options are not mutually exclusive. We can pray the Lord's Prayer just as Jesus taught it to His disciples, and we can pattern our prayers after His model.

The online amplified version of this study spends 24 weeks looking at the details of the prayer Jesus taught His disciples. Each phrase, and sometimes the individual words, are examined, contemplated and plumbed.

Here, we will take a step back to view the prayer as a whole, looking at how the order of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer helps us order both our prayers and our lives.

- Pray the Lord's Prayer
- Ordering our prayers and our lives

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, and when we pray our own prayers after this pattern, we begin by calling God "Father."

Long before we ever began to pray, God already was our Father. He remains our Father even when we call on Him by other names. Similarly, God's holiness does not increase at our request.

Rather, praying "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" immediately brings our relationship with God into proper perspective. We are God's children, not His creator nor His master. He is wholly other than we are. He alone is God. This petition allows us to regain a right sense of our relationship with God. Once we have done this, we are prepared to continue on in prayer.

We do so by praying, "Thy kingdom come." Just as we did not bring ourselves into being but have God as our Father, so we do not reign over our own lives but have God as our king. As those brought into relationship with God through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, we are not our own, but have been bought with a price (I Cor. 6:19-20). God is sovereign over all creation. Yet, while God already reigns, His kingdom is not yet fully established. Thus we pray, "Thy kingdom come."

The first set of three petitions concludes, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

A practical outworking of recognizing God as our Father and king, this request leads us toward bringing our will into alignment with His. For to pray "Thy will be done" is implicitly to commit ourselves to learning and doing God's will.

Endnotes

1. John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 263.
2. Teresa of Avila, *A Life of Prayer*, James M. Huston, ed., (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1983), p. 65.
3. On prayer as contemplation see Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).
4. Gerhard Ebeling, *On Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 43.
5. Gerhard Ebeling, *On Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 43.

For reflection and discussion:

1. What does it mean to "hallow" God's name?
2. How is God's name taken in vain, misused, dishonored today?
3. What does it mean to pray, "Thy Kingdom come?"
4. How is God's sovereignty and authority questioned or usurped in our culture? What ideas, entities or activities have people enthroned in place of God?
5. Read Matthew 26:36-44. Discuss what it meant for Jesus to pray, "Thy will be done."

Pray the Lord's Prayer.

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Week IV: Asking for all that we need

Last week we focused on the three petitions that properly orient us toward God. We now are freed to ask Him to supply our physical and spiritual needs. Spend some time reflecting on the petitions that God's name be hallowed, God's Kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

- Pray the Lord's Prayer

Our most basic physical need comes first, "Give us this day our daily bread." In praying for "our daily bread," each word is important.

Jesus didn't teach that I'm to pray for food for myself alone, or for a lifetime supply, or for filet mignon. Rather, I am to pray every day for enough basic food to feed myself and those who are with me for the day.

Praying in this way is important for several reasons. First, it reminds us that God, like any good father, wants His children to ask Him for what we need. Second, being rightly related to God as our Father means being rightly related to His other children which, in turn, means that selfishness and greed are to have no place in our lives. Finally, this prayer helps us to distinguish between wants and needs.

While it's perfectly permissible to pray for what we want, we are taught to pray for what we need – a distinction many of us struggle with throughout our lives.

Our needs are not limited to the physical realm. Next we are taught to pray, "And forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Although we have been forgiven, we have not yet been perfected. Because we continue to sin, we are to continue to ask God to forgive us. What a great gift God has given in loving us enough to continue to forgive the wrongs we have done to Him and to His other children.

The final petition, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," reminds us of one of the great truths of the Christian faith: We cannot save ourselves. To be freed from the powers of sin, death and the devil, we require a salvation that only can come from outside ourselves. Once again, we are blessed with the wonderful knowledge that our Deliverer wants to be in an ongoing relationship with us; a relationship He initiated with our creation; restored with our salvation; and nourishes and nurtures through our prayers, including the prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray.

And in the prayer's benediction, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen," we end our prayer where we began, by focusing our attention on our God.

Lord, teach us to pray

As God's children, as Christ's disciples, we pray because Jesus prayed. We pray because He told us that we are to pray and because He taught us how to pray. We pray because our conversations with God remind us of His love for us, help us grow in our relationship with Him, orient us toward His future, and assure us of the truth of all the words He has spoken.

As we noted in the first week's study, the disciples request, "Lord, teach us to pray," is a prayer every disciple can pray, for

"Those who know how to pray ought also to know that at best they are in the process of learning how to pray."⁵

Lord, teach us to pray.

Amen.

For reflection and response:

1. What has this study of the Lord's Prayer taught you about your own prayers?
2. How do Jesus' disciples, even those who have prayed faithfully and fervently for decades, still benefit from asking Jesus to teach us how to pray?
3. How can you use the Lord's Prayer to learn more about prayer?
4. How can you use the Lord's Prayer to help teach others how to pray?

Pray the Lord's Prayer together.