

Chapter 7

The Lord's Prayer

October 27, 1996

We have been considering the “parts” of prayer: adoration/thanksgiving; confession of sin; and petition or supplication. We now turn to the Lord's Prayer, the model prayer that our Savior taught his disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray. This prayer has all those parts of prayer in it, though adoration is more assumed than expressed.

Matthew 6:9-13 (parallel Luke 11:1-4)

In fact, this model prayer consists of an invocation followed by six petitions. You will have noticed that in both Matthew and Luke the conclusion of the prayer with which we are familiar from the KJV is omitted. There is no “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.” These words are omitted from the modern translations of the Bible because they are omitted from the modern versions of the Greek NT. The editors of the Greek NT omit these words because they are missing from the best and earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew and Luke and from the earliest commentaries on the Lord's Prayer by Church Fathers such as Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian.

However, the addition of that doxology was apparently entirely according to the accepted form that Jesus himself would have followed. According to the custom of the church in those days, the Lord's Prayer would never have been prayed without some closing words of praise to God. It would have been unthinkable to conclude the prayer with the word “temptation” or “evil one.”

In Judaism of that period, prayers were concluded with a “seal,” a sentence of praise freely formulated by the one praying. But that seal was not part of the prayer if it were written down. There is little doubt that that was what was intended and it was inevitable that after much use as a corporate prayer there would be sensed a need to give the seal a fixed form. [Jeremias, Prayers of Jesus, p. 106.]

Luke, by the way, gives the prayer in a shorter form than Matthew, leaving out “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” and “deliver us from the evil one.” This is another piece of evidence demonstrating that the Lord’s Prayer is a model prayer and not to be taken as the form of words God expects us to use primarily in our prayer to him. Another piece of the evidence is the “thus” or “in such a manner” in v. 9. Another is that nowhere else in the Bible do we have a prayer, even this prayer, recited by another though we do have many examples of prayers in both the OT and the NT.

Now, one thing is very interesting about the Lord’s prayer. It is very Jewish and not very original or distinctive. In the shorter time I have this evening I will make this point and draw an application from it.

1. The address “Our Father” was employed in Jewish prayers.
2. The concept of hallowing God’s name is found frequently in the LXX. Ezek. 36:23 God says “I will show the holiness of my great name to the nations. . .” And often the psalm writers pray or sing “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name” (29:2).
3. “Thy kingdom come” closely resembles the prayer that formed the conclusion of the synagogue service. Indeed that prayer, called the “Qad-dish,” in its original form, probably read “Hallowed be his great name in the world which he created according to his will; may he establish his Kingdom during your life, even speedily and soon. So say Amen.” [Hill, Com. pp. 136-137] Indeed, there was a Jewish axiom to the effect that “That prayer in which no mention is made of the kingdom of God is not a prayer.” [Witsius, p. 148]
4. “Thy will be done” David prays in Ps. 40:8: “I desire to do your will O God.” Rabbi Eliezer is asked: What is the shortest prayer. He replied, “Do thy will in heaven, and grant quietness of spirit to those who fear thee on earth.” [Witsius, p. 148]

5. “Give us this day. . .” The prayer of Agur, we already saw, is not only the same prayer, but in greater detail.
6. “Forgive our sins” is, of course, a commonplace in OT and NT prayer; and even with the “as we also forgive. . .” is common in Jewish prayers as well.
7. “And lead us not. . .” probably means much the same thing as the old Jewish evening prayer from this period: “Do not bring me into the power of a sin, a temptation, a shame” (B. Berak. 60b). There are other Jewish prayers that repeat the petition in very similar words.
8. “Deliver us from the evil one” Whether the word “evil” means evil in the moral sense or “the evil one,” that is the Devil, is not clear in the Greek [the form for neuter and masculine are the same]. Either meaning is possible. “Evil One” seems to go with “temptation” in the first half of the sentence, but “Evil One” never elsewhere appears as a name for the Devil and so certainty is not possible. As Calvin said, “there is no necessity of raising a debate on this point. . . for the meaning is nearly the same.” This prayer also has parallels in the Jewish prayers of the period.
9. Even the doxology that came to be fixed to the Lord’s Prayer and found its way into the MSS of the NT and eventually into the KJV, is similar to Jewish doxologies that ended their prayers. One reads, “For thine is the kingdom, and thou shalt reign in glory for ever and ever.”

All of this indicates that:

1. The Lord is teaching us to pray as the entire Scripture teaches us to pray much more comprehensively;
2. This is a model prayer, simply summing up the major biblical themes concerning the parts and subjects of prayer;
3. That the prayers of the godly in the ancient epoch were true and Christian prayers as much as prayers offered today.

But, especially, it indicates this. The Jews were not hypocrites because they had the wrong idea of what to say to God. Their prayers would have been

just fine. Jesus was happy with them and took them all up into his own model prayer. The problem was not with the prayer itself, the words, the form, the content, the nature of the petitions, even the address to God. All of that was as it should have been. The problem was they didn't pray with sincerity, reverence, and true penitence and faith. And the best prayer in the world is worse than useless when it does not express the true love and gratitude of the heart. God looks on the heart and he judges any prayer by the true faith with which it is offered.

There is a great warning in this simple fact, that any Jew of Jesus' time, that is, any church member, would have immediately recognized and consented to his model prayer. They would have found it a most acceptable prayer. But, God did not hear that prayer when they offered it because they did not pray in faith and love.

In the verses immediately before the ones we read we have a warning against the very idea of saying words over and over again in hopes that mere repetition will gain favor from God. This was the Jewish mentality, the ritualist, legalist mentality, and how often it has resurfaced in the life of the church. It was the mentality in Israel and Judah against which the prophets protested, and it became soon after the Apostles the mentality of too many Christians.

On the plane from Greenville, S.C. to Memphis, Tn. two weeks ago I found myself sitting next to a Roman Catholic priest. He had his morning devotions next to me, reading from the Catholic breviary, the book of daily readings and prayers. Then he got out his rosary, the string of beads used to count the prayers being offered, either the Lord's prayer or the Hail Mary or the Gloria Patri. Now, who would deny that a truly sincere worshipper might use such a device who wanted to be sure that he had prayed to God so many times a day as a method of increasing his or her discipline in the life of prayer. But, to make the counting of the same exact prayer, a feature of the Christian life, could not help but foster legalism and superstition, which is what it has done. I don't know if that priest had a living faith in Christ or not. But using a rosary is not evidence that one does.

Interestingly, already by the time of the Didache, perhaps as early as the later first century, Christians were being taught to say the Lord's Prayer 3 times each day, probably, like some Jewish prayers, morning, afternoon, and evening. But that is not what the Lord taught us to do. That teaching carries within it a fatal tendency, to turn prayer into a performance instead

of into the language of real love, real gratitude, and real, active dependence upon our heavenly father, whose will and kingdom we love and want to see advanced for his great name's sake. That is true prayer, but the form and content — however orthodox — is worthless, worse than worthless, if the heart is not humble before God, and if the prayer is not the true utterance of the heart.

All prayers, including this one! Which we do pray, after all, at least twice a month together. Let us learn our lesson!