

The Prayer that Changed the World

A new people an new prayer

John the Baptist was one of those people who lived on the cusp of a great change. The last great prophet of the dying age. And John had taught his followers to pray a certain way at this critical moment. He taught them to pray in *repentance* so that Israel's god would forgive their sin and renew his covenant and once again dwell among his chosen people. They prayed that they would be part of the change that was coming.

But now Jesus and his followers had formed a group distinct from the followers of John. So now they too needed their own way of prayer. The followers of Jesus, like those of John, sought to imitate the master -- pray like Jesus. Was there not a special prayer that would set them apart from others? a prayer no other group of people could really pray from the heart? *What* should they pray for? *How?* *now that the Messiah was among them.*

Jesus sees them as the new community, or as he called them his "little flock." He had hand-picked them people out of the bigger flock of Israel to be the "little flock" the breeding stock, a new people of God. All that he had taught them was based on his simple, Jesus Creed:

Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your god with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Through parables and discussions sometimes lasting late into the night he spoke of a new way to be in the world, one that needed to be distilled down into one potent, easily repeated statement of faith that could be learned and passed on to others. We now call it "the Lord's Prayer." It has been repeated daily, without ceasing for centuries throughout the world, but all too often without too much real thought. "The Our Father. . . " So common. So universal.

But the day it was first taught by Jesus, the vision behind this new prayer was truly revolutionary. It was the vision of passing on to others of the forgiveness that we ourselves have received: "forgive us our trespasses," he taught them to pray, "*as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

My hunch today is that we at times, have become so familiar with the easily recited words of "Lord's Prayer" that we have almost totally lost the revolutionary impact of those words on the original hearers. With these words Jesus was claiming the right to offer to his followers forgiveness that in Jewish normality was previously thought only to be available through the complex channels of priests, Temple, and strict observance of all kinds of traditional rules of holiness. For those people who first prayed this prayer, the only possible hope of forgiveness lay with a new covenant. To pray this prayer was to express their belief in . . .

The fulfilment of an old, old promise

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34

Since the days of Jeremiah the people of Israel had waited for the day when sins of the people would be forgiven once and for all. Now in praying the prayer Jesus taught them they are declaring that *that* day has finally come.

If God is truly fulfilling the promise made to Jeremiah, then this prayer is a vehicle of spiritual formation. They are recognizing that God has indeed written "his law within their hearts," They need no one to tell them to do instinctively what the law of love requires. They now "know the LORD." But if the disciples of Jesus are to make good on this claim to be the forgiven people of God, they must enact forgiveness amongst themselves. Forgive others as they would have others

forgive them. This would set them apart from a cold and unforgiving world. This prayer held a promise unknown until now.

This brings to mind . . .

An Amish custom

At an Amish farm auction, all the household goods are spread out on the front lawn on tables. But in the middle of the yard is a roped-off area. And there are a number of articles set inside the roped area. Among the roped-off items are those hand-crafted *quilts* for which the Amish are so famous. Now, while the auction is open to the general public, the rule is that the goods *inside* that rope can only be bid on by the Amish. These goods will remain within the Amish family. You know, Amish quilts are works of art and each could easily fetch hundreds, if not a thousand of dollars if the bidding were open to the highly competitive dealers from the cities. But that would put the price of the quilts far beyond the reach of the Amish. So a valuable quilt will be sold to the highest bidder for about twenty or thirty dollars a piece, not be mounted on the wall of some hipster's stylish downtown studio, but to be used for what a quilt is intended for – to keep young Amish couples warm at night. Very practical people, those Amish.

God hears the prayers of all humanity. There is not a soul on the face of this earth that God will not hear when they pray. Yet the Lord's Prayer" offers a depth of access reserved only for those who come by faith in Jesus and pray "Our Father, who art in heaven. . . " In the Lord's prayer we get to bid beyond the rope -- ask God for what is unavailable to others.

But do we know that depth? Have we dared yet to bid for things beyond the rope? Ask for blessings unknown to those who live outside of a covenant relationship with God through Jesus?

One of the interesting concepts in this passage is . . .

The need to learn pray

Maybe at this point in our history, when this famous Lord's Prayer is so much a cultural relic, we need to rediscover the LOST ART of really praying the Lord's Prayer. "Lord, teach us to pray. . .

But the phrase "learning to pray" sounds a little odd, doesn't it? I mean, we don't have to learn to breath or sneeze, so why do we need to learn to pray? Shouldn't it just happen? Shouldn't prayer be the natural outflow of hearts in conversation with God? Apparently not.

Prayer is something we learn because, in our fallen state, it's common for us to confuse our wishes, hopes, sighs, tears and rejoicings– all of which the heart can do all by itself– with prayer. We can confuse heaven and earth. And although God wants us to come to him with our every need, prayer is not permission to throw a temper tantrum at God feet. Prayer is not a venue for our selfishness.

Wm Barclay: "The prayer of a bitter person cannot penetrate the wall of their own bitterness."

So, learning to pray means finding the way to God and speaking with him, whether our heart is full or empty, up or down, joyful or broken.

And that's why the Lord's Prayer is still so important. It keeps us focussed
But it's only a MODEL.

In a competition for re-writing the Lord's Prayer for the mobile phone, using just 160 characters or less. (So that it would fit on a cell phone screen) the following version was submitted:

God@heaven.org, You rule, up and down. We need grub and a break. Will pass it on. Keep us focused. You totally rule, long term. Amen.

As for me, this is one of the few bible texts that I still retain in King James English. It cannot be rushed through because if we are to be truly FORMED this prayer, we must meditate on each part of it. Jesus wasn't giving us a set of magic words, but a model to be contemplated on a daily basis. We must ask God for certain things in a certain way, beginning first of all by . . .

Approaching God as a Father

The idea of Israel's god as father didn't begin with Jesus. In the Old Testament God-as-Father was often associated with his great acts of deliverance – like the Exodus. (Ex4:22). God-as-father in the Hebrew bible is not as a doting grandfather, harmless and incapable of judgment. But God-as-father is not, however, one who waits with a large stick to beat anyone who steps out of line. He is the creator and sustainer who can be lovingly trusted in all circumstances. In Jesus' mind, to invoke God as father is to stir up thoughts of his great past deliverance. By simply asking them to pray "Our Father who art in heaven," Jesus is inviting his followers to think of themselves as the true Israel, the final outcome of the Exodus, a people in covenant with Israel's god.

The parable which we'll come to in a moment, about giving good gifts for children, echos the same theme, as does the story of prodigal son. God-as-father means that even when we have strayed from God, we can always approach him with confidence knowing he can "do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...(Eph 3:20), He is ready to help us.(Matt7:11), We can come to him with the delight of children to their father, with affectionate desire, and secure within family love. (Rom8:1) With the words "our Father who art in heaven" we are invited to draw near to One to whom we are intimately related. But still we must do so all the while. . .

Creating sacred space

"Hallowed be your name" Prayer is not like placing an order from the Sears catalogue or booking a trip with some kind of a cosmic travel agent. There is a distance between us and God. He is in heaven and we are very much creatures of the earth. We could never come to him without Jesus leading us into his presence. And to be able to do that, Jesus had to *die on the cross*. That's what it took to create sacred space for us. He is too high and His glory is too infinite. He is not an earthly father but a heavenly One. So in our humanity, we must come to him with the deepest reverence and . . .

Come desperate "Your kingdom come. "

We hear news stories from time to time of the horrible even fatal conditions faced by stowaway migrants hiding in cargo containers, crossing deserts, climbing electric barbed wire fences, living years in the underground economy, trapped in legal limbo, all in their desperate attempt at a better life in the developed world. Imagine what it would be like to be *so* desperate to that we too would be willing to break some rules -- like Abraham in Egypt, who lied about his wife to get into a country as a refugee? Wouldn't *you* be willing to do , anything *anything* for a chance escape an intolerable homeland? starvation? war?

Well, just imagine the desperation of the disciples of Jesus living under Roman rule. In sheer desperation that prayed, "your kingdom come."

That is in fact the same urgency with which we must pray.

_____ *We need, somehow, by any means possible, to get to a better kingdom. We need to*

experience new life under a totally new regime. We need life to be “on earth as in heaven.” But the kingdom of God also has an immigration policy. There’s a only certain way in to God -- though faith in Jesus Christ. And that is the way we must enter. .

So when we pray “your kingdom come”, our lives must change just as much as that of the starving desert refugee who, first of all, becomes more and more discontent with their homeland; and then becomes eventually desperate enough to make a risky journey into the unknown, in order to get to the new place.

To really pray “your will be done. . .” is to commit to live more and more of our lives by the Jesus Creed: To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your mind and all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.”

That is how the kingdom comes to earth. For only those, who by the grace of God, follow Jesus can walk this earth as citizens of heaven.

But this prayer will also keep us grounded. It has a built in safeguards against us becoming “so heavenly minded, we are of no earthly use.” For although we are not of this world, we must nevertheless. . .

Ask continually for the *ordinary* 3

A little girl was shown the famous painting: *Our Daily Bread* by her children’s church teacher. You know the one – the old man is praying over his simple meal which is not much more than a loaf of course bread. The teacher asks the children, “What is going on in this painting?”

The little girl says, “That old man is sad because he doesn’t have any peanut butter!”

In her naive sympathy, she instinctively understood what we pray for as “our daily bread.”

Indeed she understood it as well as the great theologian Martin Luther:

“What is meant by *daily bread*? *Everything that is required to satisfy our bodily needs; such as food and raiment, house and home, fields and flocks, money and goods; pious parents, children, and servants; godly and faithful rulers, good government; seasonable weather, peace and health; order and honour; true friends, good neighbours, and the like.*”

[and somewhere in there must be peanut butter.]

Praying for our daily bread keeps us real.

Keeps us grounded in the world.

Looking to God for everything.

This is so important because the next petition reminds us that we are still very much. . .

A work in progress. 4

In teaching us to pray this every day, Jesus encourages us to be realistic about the temptations that exist all around us. Christians are not above it all. We must recognize our weaknesses and the ease with which we can give way to the seductions of the world, the flesh and the devil. We must keep updating our vigilance on a daily basis. It’s very much like that virus protection for our computers which we need to regularly upgrade against the new threats that are constantly being foisted on the Internet. Anyone using a computer without virus protection will find their computer almost immediately rendered useless by a whole host of viruses.

And so there are certain ideas that have come in, and like viruses have locked up the spiritual life of the nation. So we pray v4

We’re asking God to update our virus protection, that the Holy Spirit might to come in and do a scan and isolate and remove those things that would lock up our lives and make us useless in the kingdom.

But in this life of prayer, there's nothing to be squeamish or shy about. So in finishing off this teaching about prayer, Jesus tells two short parables. Because prayer is not just about asking, it is also about. . .

Receiving Boldly

The parable of the friend at midnight

A huge Chicago company is one of the world's largest magazine distribution firms. That means they handle subscription mailings by computer. Among other things, they send out renewal and expiration notices. One day the company's computer malfunctioned. Soon after, a rancher in

Powder Bluff, Colorado, got 9,734 separate mailings informing him that his subscription to National Geographic had expired. This got the rancher's attention. He dropped what he was doing and traveled 10 miles to the nearest post office, where he sent in money for a renewal along with a note that said, "*I give up! Just send me your [dad-burned] magazine!*"

We mustn't just dabble in prayer – try it once in a while. We must show a persistence. God has reasons why his answers don't come right away. The point of the parable is not that God is basically unwilling and must be pestered into helping us. That's not the point. He is eager to give. But we must *want* what we ask for enough to be persistent. If we don't want what we pray for enough, why should God give it?

Finally, in 11-13, Jesus concludes this teaching on prayer with a statement and second short parable both of which tell us that to pray, we must . . .

Believe 11-13

The God to whom we come does not ask us for *childish* belief, that of those who have never learned to think for themselves, but rather for the belief of a child. That is to say one who is absolutely confident within the relationship with their father. We can trust that God will never give us useless things like the stone or dangerous things like the scorpion, but will always give us the greatest and indispensable gift of all, the Holy Spirit.

During the depression this field was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. Mr. Yates wasn't able to make enough on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family (like many others) had to live on government subsidy. Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he was no doubt greatly troubled about how he would pay his bills. Then a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract. At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as large. In fact, 30 years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day.

And Yates owned it all. The day he purchased the land he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet, he'd been living on welfare. A multimillionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn't know the oil was there even though he owned it. Many Christians live in a spiritual poverty. They are entitled to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and his energizing power, but they are not aware of

their birthright, and so they don't really **believe**.

Amen

When we finish saying the Lord's Prayer, and say "Amen" what does that mean? The word itself is a Hebrew word meaning "so shall it be". But as we say it at the end of the prayer we are, in effect saying, "this is going to work." If we cast a glance back over the words we have just addressed to God, the word Amen asks:

Do you identify with the salvation in Jesus Christ that allows us to truly pray "Our father"?

Do you hallow God's name, in the sense that you would do anything, *anything*, to allow his purpose to triumph in you life?

Do you trust God to provide for you, even in the most mundane details of life?

Do you accept that you are a work in progress, far from perfect and need pardon and forgiveness on a daily basis?

If so, repeat after me: AMEN.