

LORD,
TEACH US
TO PRAY

*The Lord's Prayer for
Today's Church*

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Introduction

When I (Michael) was a youth, our family would occasionally visit aunt Ethel, a widowed relative who lived in the country. On one of these visits, our father gave me a small brass case with a magnetic compass inside. He had already taught us how to determine directions and to estimate the time by looking at where the sun was in the sky or by observing the position of certain stars. Holding the small compass, he explained how the needle always points north. He also told us how compasses had made it possible for ships to navigate in storms when the sun was obscured. He explained that compasses had made it possible to travel toward one's destination even in the darkest of nights—on land and at sea.

Our heavenly Father, through his Son Jesus Christ, has also provided us with a

kind of “compass” in the Lord’s Prayer.¹ This compass enables us to “navigate” our journeys through life, even in the darkest of life’s storms, to our destination with the One who, through Jesus Christ our Lord, summons us to our final home. From ancient times, Christians have prayed this Prayer at gatherings for worship and in private devotion.

Some have objected to praying the Lord’s Prayer, thinking that the petition for the coming of the kingdom was answered with the establishment of the church, making the Prayer irrelevant after Pentecost. This view overlooks a crucial aspect of the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer. Christians have long understood that, while the kingdom was inaugurated with Christ’s resurrection, the Father’s reign continues to come day by day throughout the world into the lives of those hearing the good news of

¹ The Gospels present the Prayer in two versions, a longer form in Matthew 6:9–13 and a shorter in Luke 11:2–4. The longer version is traditional in Christian worship and devotion, and our reflections will focus on it.

our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus most Christians understand the Prayer as inherently *missional*: those praying the Prayer answer the call of Jesus, asking the Lord for “workers for the harvest” (Matt 9:37–38).

There is also a real sense in which our Father’s Kingdom has *not* yet come in its fullness. Sin continues its seductions; wars continue to rage; death continues to ravage the world. In the midst of life’s struggles, in praying the Lord’s Prayer, Christians pray that the Father’s reign will be fully realized—“on earth as it is in heaven”—with the consummation of our Father’s intent for his creation through the return of Jesus Christ.

Others object that prayer should be extemporaneous and that praying the Lord’s Prayer amounts to “vain repetition” or praying “by rote.” We know, however, that much of what we do in life is routine: we often express our love for our spouse and children with the same words, closing phone calls and the like with “I love you.”

This does not suggest, however, that the statement does not reflect our intentions. We should not suggest that saying things by rote is the equivalent of thoughtless or meaningless speech. Indeed, no one would suggest that the church must stop singing “How Great Thou Art” or “Amazing Grace” because members no longer have to look at their books to sing them.

We should also reflect on the transformative power of memorizing scripture. Our Heavenly Father has promised that his word will not “return to [him] empty.” (Isa 55:11) To pray the Lord’s Prayer is to invite the word of the Father into our hearts, with the expectation and hope that our hearts will be shaped into the vessels he intends. In a sense, we pray the Lord’s Prayer *into* our hearts, in order that the prayers issuing *out of* our hearts are more purely reflective of the Father’s will. We pray the Lord’s Prayer so that, when the time comes, we too may be able to say “not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

The transformative power of praying the Prayer was vividly illustrated for me (Todd) a few years ago. A member of our congregation was resistant to praying the Lord's Prayer in our worship, largely based on the objection to it being "rote." At one point this person was forced into emergency surgery. I visited her in the hospital shortly after the procedure. She took my hand and said that as she lay on the gurney and tried to pray, she was so frightened she couldn't think of any words. Joyfully and tearfully, she told me that the only words that came to her were those of the Lord's Prayer. This is why we regularly pray the Lord's Prayer. The words of the Prayer take up residence in our hearts and do their work, coming to us in times of need.

The following reflections are offered to assist believers in Christ to pray this beautiful and meaningful Prayer, individually and corporately, with greater understanding and in so doing to draw nearer to our Father in heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ.



Our Father Who Art in Heaven

Many Christians, while familiar with Christian teachings and practices, fail to grasp the full implications of fundamental beliefs and teachings regarding the understanding and practice of prayer. Most of us, for example, understand that prayer is not merely about making requests of God. Most of us also know that Christian prayer is not meditation, nor an attempt to become one with the spiritual forces of the universe. Nonetheless, we still may not comprehend how the biblical disclosure of the nature

of God influences prayer in the life of the believer. God created humankind with the capacity to reflect; he created us to share his own nature: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26). The revelation of God’s intention in creating humankind suggests that he created us to live in relationship with him. In prayer we are invited to commune with the creator and sustainer of the vast universe in an intimate and personal manner.

Our Father

Jesus taught his disciples to address the creator in prayer as “Our Father.” Beginning his prayer in this manner, Jesus encouraged his disciples to approach the God of Abraham, the ultimate source of the universe, in a way that assumes that the creator is fully personal. It is *this* one whom Jesus, drawing upon his own experience, invites his disciples to address in prayer as “Father.”

Jesus also taught his disciples to call on

God as *our* Father. The first person plural pronoun reflects the shared life of the community emerging around Jesus, including Christians today. It is vitally important for us to understand that at no time do we approach the Father in isolation. At all times we speak to the Father as members of a community of countless large and small Christian gatherings throughout the world. The common life of these believers incarnates and enacts the Father's intentions for those created in his image. Thus it is difficult to overstate the importance of this Prayer being addressed to "our" Father rather than "my" Father.

The use of "our" at the opening of this Prayer conveys the significance of the relationship between believers. It also suggests the manner in which the believers' relationship with the Father mirrors that of the Father and the Son. In John 17, Jesus' prayer makes the life shared between the Father and the Son the basis of the life shared by Jesus' disciples: "The glory that

you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me” (John 17:22–23). Through the Lord’s Prayer, we are invited to enter into this relationship of eternal love that unites Father and Son.

Finally, the “our” of the Lord’s Prayer extends our vision beyond the boundaries of the Christian community. It reaches out to all persons created in the Father’s image, all of whom are objects of his love. The Lord’s Prayer serves as a constant reminder for Christians to carry the good news of what the creator has revealed in Christ. Our Father seeks this relationship of intimacy with every one of his creatures.

Our Father

Jesus teaches his disciples to address the Father with trust and respect. He thus distinguishes his teaching from attention-getting practices of both his Jewish and pagan contemporaries (Matt 6:5ff.), whom Jesus describes as “babbling,” thinking “they

will be heard because of their many words.” Jesus instructs his followers to address the creator and sustainer of the universe directly and simply as “Our Father.”

Although Matthew uses the Greek word for “Father” (*pater*), many scholars believe that Jesus’ use of the Aramaic word *abba* (Mark 14:36) stands behind the Greek text of the Gospels. This word conveys the image of God as a parent to whom all believers may turn with respect, trust, and confidence. *Abba* exemplifies the attributes associated with parents, including sacrificial nurture and protection for their children. (Ps 32:7; 91:14; Isa 49:15,16; 66:13; Luke 13:34).

Further, through his own prayers Jesus passed on the use of *abba* to his disciples, through whom it left its mark on the early Christian movement. The apostle Paul, for example, writing to Greek-speaking churches that included both Jewish and Gentile converts, uses *abba* without explanation or elaboration (Rom 8:15; Gal

4:6). This evidences the lasting influence of Jesus' own teachings and practices regarding prayer.

Jesus' teaching on prayer reveals that the creator and sustainer of the universe is not a distant celestial observer. Nor is he an impersonal force somehow permeating the creation. As Father, God is not less personal than those created in his own image. He is *more* personal, and he is indeed the source of our personhood. Through his Son, our Father invites each of his children to address him as *abba*, Father, and speak to him in simple and direct language.

In Heaven

Though our human minds can never fully comprehend in this life what it means to address our Father "in heaven," bound as we are by our human limitations, we do glimpse a picture of what the eternal and heavenly presence of our Father is through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The assurance of our Father's presence,

here in our world and surely in the world to come, has been a constant source of encouragement and comfort to believers through the ages.

Jesus teaches his followers to begin their prayers with the words, “Our Father in heaven.” In everyday conversation and in prayers, virtually all Christians commonly refer to or think of heaven as “up,” and to the Father as “looking down” upon his creation. On reflection, however, we realize that this kind of spatial identification of heaven does not accord with scripture. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach that God is creator not only of the earth, but of the heavens as well—that is, the vast and limitless universe (Gen 1:1; Neh 9:6; Ps 121:2; Col 1:15, 16).

Thus it makes more sense to say that space and time exist *within* God than that he exists somehow outside of space and time. Obviously, since our human minds cannot conceive of timelessness or spacelessness, it is even more difficult for us to imagine

existence “outside” such categories. This dilemma, however, is somewhat resolved when we return to the one who said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). God is “in heaven” (Matt 6:9); he was “in Christ” (2 Cor 5:19); when we become his followers, we are “in Christ” (Rom 8:1; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 2:10; Col 1:27). With these understandings, we conceive that somehow the Father’s existence is not bound by space and time. More importantly, we understand that our heavenly Father is neither distant nor apart from us in the truest sense.

It may be helpful to think of our Father’s presence as a “fourth dimension,” which, while not fully explained, is well captured in the words of John Bowring’s hymn, “Father and Friend, Thy Light, Thy Love:”

Father and Friend, Thy light, Thy love,
Beaming through all Thy works we see;
Thy glory gilds the heavens above,
And all the earth is full of Thee.

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Thy voice we hear, Thy presence feel,
While Thou, too pure for mortal sight,
Enrapt in clouds, invisible,
Reignest the Lord of life and light.

Thy children shall not faint nor fear,
Sustained by this delightful thought:
Since Thou, their God, art everywhere,
They cannot be where Thou art not.

The opening words of the Lord's Prayer bring us the comforting assurance that God, our heavenly Father, is a constant presence "in, with, and under" every moment of our daily pursuits throughout our earthly lives, who always listens when his children call.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is important about using the plural pronoun "our" (rather than "my") Father?
2. What is significant about addressing God as "Father" (Abba)?

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3. How does the relationship with our earthly fathers affect the way we think about our heavenly Father?
4. Though God is “in heaven,” how do we sense his presence with us?

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praying the Lord's
Prayer with greater
understanding, thus
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