

# The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:7-15

The Sermon on the Mount contains many memorable and evocative phrases, but there are probably none which are seared into the memory of the church, and even wider society, as are the words of the Lord's Prayer.

In the NIV translation used by most of us, the prayer amounts to only 53 words. And yet they have shaped the lives and intercessions of communities of Christians for the last two thousand years. Richard Foster has commented that, 'The paternoster is really a total prayer. Its concerns embrace the whole world, from the coming of the kingdom to daily bread. Large things and small things, spiritual things and material things, inward things and outwards – nothing is beyond the scope of this prayer.'<sup>1</sup>

This is a prayer handed on to us by the Master himself, and it begins with an invitation to draw alongside him, as we approach God, addressing him as Father. Dick France comments that, 'The first half of the prayer is concerned with God's honour, kingdom and purpose, and only after that, do our own needs find a place.'<sup>2</sup> The start of the prayer bears strong similarities to the Qaddish, a piece of liturgy which was in regular use in Jewish synagogues of the day, giving expression to the deepest hopes of Israel:

*Exalted and hallowed be his great name  
in the kingdom which he created according to his will.  
May he let his kingdom rule  
in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of  
Israel, speedily and soon.  
Praised be his great name from eternity to eternity. And to this say: Amen.*

The prayer begins by addressing God as 'our Father,' stating the hope that God's name would be 'hallowed,' that people everywhere would recognise and acknowledge God's goodness and holiness. This line is followed by a statement of further aspirations, that God's kingdom would come on earth and that he would be obeyed, with his purposes fulfilled. 'Thy will be done' is a prayer which lifts up all kinds of concerns to God, asking, for example, for peace where there is war or justice where oppression prevails.

The prayer then goes on to express concerns for the material needs of the followers of Jesus, echoing Proverbs 30:8, 'give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need.' Once again, there seems to be a Jewish dimension emerging from this prayer. 'Give us this day our daily bread' is a request which brings to mind the ultimate expression of God's provision, the daily supply of manna to the children

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, 1992, 195

<sup>2</sup> RT France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 243

of Israel (see Exodus 16). In a time and place when very few people know what it is to face genuine hunger or need for food, this line of the prayer may lack urgency or immediacy, but for Jesus' first listeners, and those in other parts of our world today, finding food, drink and shelter is a daily and uncertain struggle.

There is then a request for God's forgiveness, but one which comes with a challenge, the implication that just as we seek the mercy of God we ought to extend forgiveness to others. There is a reminder here that we do not say this prayer in a vacuum, cut off from the challenging personal relationships which impact each of our lives. To do so would be nothing less than hypocrisy. It is telling that Jesus singles on this one aspect of the prayer as deserving of an extra line of commentary, which Matthew records for us in verses 14 and 15.

The prayer finishes with two further requests, for protection from 'temptation' or 'testing,' and also for deliverance from the 'evil one.' Both these lines provide us with reminders of how we must be constantly aware of the need for God's help and protection in the face of the devil's desire to lead us astray.

### **For discussion**

1. Given that Jesus has warned about the dangers of repetitive prayers which 'heap up empty phrases,' why does he then offer us this prayer? Do you think he intended us to pray these *exact* words, or is this just a template, a list of the sort of things we need to regularly pray for?
2. Tom Wright has commented that, 'There is, to be sure, an appropriate place for penitence, both for communities and individuals. But the normal Christian approach to the Creator God is the unfettered and delighted "Father."' <sup>3</sup> Do you agree?
3. What images come to mind for you when you pray for God's kingdom to come?
4. Richard Foster has written that, 'We pray for daily bread by taking to God those trifles that make up the bulk of our days. Are we unable to find a babysitter to care for the children while we are at work? Well then, we pray for daily babysitters. Do we need a little space to think things out? Then we pray for daily solitude and rest... Are we struggling with a relationship at work or at home? We ask for patience and wisdom and compassion – daily, hourly. This is how we pray for daily bread.' <sup>4</sup> Do you find this interpretation a helpful one?
5. In what ways are you challenged by this prayer's suggestion that forgiveness and protection are requests we must constantly bring to God?

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Longenecker (Editor), *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, 2002, 149

<sup>4</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, 1992, 196