

Sermon: Concerning Prayer

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Matthew 6:5-8**

Today's Gospel reading is really a set-up to start a discussion about prayer. The wider context puts the reading right in the middle of what we now call Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which may be significant. Matthew wanted his congregation to hear these teachings together as a group. As it turns out, Jesus has a lot to say about prayer, and he leads by example.

Prayer in the first century was part of life. Judaism included daily morning and evening services. Prayers often took the form of a blessing, within a basic liturgical formula. A familiar blessing might be something like this, which is still used today:

“Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe,
bringing forth bread from the earth.”

All blessings began with “Praised are You Adonai,” and then added the blessing. In our Communion liturgy, for example, when Jesus took the cup after supper, he blessed God first, saying, “Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.” Luke doesn't include this in his Gospel because it was assumed that it would be said because everyone said it. Jesus then added some new words.

Needless to say, everyone prayed every day, and everyone knew how to pray.

[If we look at the handouts,] what we call The Lord's Prayer appears in the Gospels only in Matthew and Luke, and in a first-century Christian instruction manual called The Didache.

In Matthew, the prayer is an unprompted teaching. Only in Luke do we hear the disciples say, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” But, as they already knew their daily prayers, they must have been asking for something more, and that might have been for additional petitions that they could tack onto the end of their prayers and blessings, for example, “Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, give us this day our daily bread.” We just don't know. We *do* know that, in Luke, Jesus was ‘praying in a certain place,’ and it was there, wherever it was, that he taught this prayer.

And what he taught was essentially a series of petitions – the first group addressed to God, the second to human needs. It might be easier to pick them out if we read a literal translation of Matthew’s Greek:

Father of *us*, the one in the heavens,
Let it be revered the name of you.
Let come the kingdom of you.
Let be done the will of you, as in heaven also on earth.
The bread of us daily give to us today.
And forgive us the debts of us, as also we have forgiven the debtors of us.
And do not bring us into temptation but rescue us from the evil one.
(Matthew 6:9-15)

Matthew says ‘debts;’ Luke says ‘sins.’ They’re talking about the same thing: sin was seen as a form of indebtedness to others.

In both versions, the first word is ‘Father’ and that helps to emphasize God’s authority and the honor and obedience that we owe to God. Calling God *Father* also signifies God’s paternal love, care, and protection for us. It also makes God the ultimate head of a family, clan, or tribe and, as such, it is with humility that we should approach God as we pray. It’s part and parcel of ‘walking humbly’ with God, as the prophet Micah proclaimed (Micah 6:8).

The themes of forgiveness and reconciliation in these petitions also echo through the ancient Jewish festival of Yom Kippur, which is the one day set aside both for reconciliation between people and for asking for God’s forgiveness.

Note that reconciliation between people and reconciliation with God were two separate actions, the first being necessary to gain the second.¹

The verses following the Beatitudes lead us to the Lord’s prayer. In these verses, Jesus taught that one should keep good relations with one’s neighbor; settle quarrels with enemies; give charity to gain atonement; and pray in seclusion, and while you pray, reflect on the state of your conscience. These would be familiar actions to Matthew’s congregation, and it shows how closely aligned the early church was to its Jewish roots. It could be that way today too, if we read the Gospels as Jewish Scripture.

We pray, “Thy will be done.” We hear this in Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane, where he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”

Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “You can’t stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that *you* may not come into the time of trial.” Again, he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, *your will be done*” (Matthew 26:39-42).

NB: Peter did not remain awake, did not pray, nor did he escape his time of trial.

Praying and doing God’s will is baked into everything Jesus did in his ministry and it is something that he passed along to us in his teachings.

Which is where we often run into trouble.

Many people confess that they don’t know where to start when they pray. Jesus’ disciples didn’t say, “Teach us *how* to pray,” because they knew that. They wanted to be taught *to* pray, and that’s where a lot of people find themselves.

Sometimes, organizing a special prayer space in your home becomes a stumbling block to praying. We’re pretty good at dragging our feet at times like this. Speaking directly to God can be daunting, but God wants to hear what we have to say.

Actually, what we call the Lord’s Prayer today – in Latin, the *Pater Noster* – should really be called the Disciple’s Prayer, because it’s the prayer disciples would say.

Either way, in verse six, Jesus said, “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” That’s part of how to pray – do it in secret; God knows what you need before you ask. The other part is, go into your room, shut the door, and pray. Start talking: “Father of *us*, the one in the heavens, help me; thank you. Amen.” Be brief; be honest; pray to God alone, in secret; persevere.

A fifth-century monk named John Cassian considered the *Pater Noster* to be *the* model Christian prayer. And so, it is. Christians are known by this prayer.

This prayer was so potent, it was not said aloud in the presence of pagans and the unbaptized until after the fifth century. It was said in secret and in a low voice. It only began to appear in prayer books in the ninth century.

One Dominican monk called it ‘that wonderful summary of all that we can ask of God.’ Jesus knew this, and he thought so highly of his disciples and of us that he took the time to teach it. And somehow, we all know it by heart.

Amen.

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¹ Ford, Josephine Massyngberde. 1967. "Yom Kippur and the Matthean Form of the Pater Noster." *Worship* 41 (10): 609–19.