

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 6:1, 5-15
“Where We Learn To Pray”

March 22, 2015
(5th Sunday In Lent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIIE. MATTHEW 6:5-15
"WHERE WE LEARN TO PRAY"

Right Deeds & Attitudes, Shame/Honor Culture

E1) 6:1 GENERAL PRINCIPLE: KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON GOD (M). //5:17-20, Dt. 6:4, Thesis

Jesus Offers A Secret Relationship With God

1 "Beware of *practicing your piety* before men (others) in order to be seen by them; **Warning Against Show, 5:48**
 for then you will have no reward from your **Father** who is in heaven. **5:16, True Goal, Reason: Loss Of Reward**
doing righteousness = lived faith, //23:5, Rom. 2:28-29, Full Compensation
What Makes The Our Father Christian Is Not The Content But The Author

E2) 6:2-18 THREE EXAMPLES SECRET DISCIPLINES: GIVING, PRAYING, AND FASTING.

Hypocrisy = Gap Between Outer & Inner Reality

b) 6:5-15 Praying In Secret: Not Like The Hypocrites (Long Unit).

Jesus Affirms Public Prayers In 21:3

1) vv.5-6 Secret Prayer (M). //Tobit 12:8-10, Not A Criticism Of Public Prayer But Showy Prayer

In The Context Of 3 Practices/Disciplines: Alms (vv.2-4), Prayer, Fasting (vv.16-8)

Jewish Issue

5(-) a1 "And when (not if!) you pray, **-Example, Realistic Way To Live Out Our Faith, Not Perfection**
 2 you must not be like the hypocrites (*play actors: masks*); **Goal Is Not Privatized Piety, But Right Motive**
 for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, **Time Of Prayer, 3pm, Ps. 55:17**
 3 that they may be seen by men (others). **Public Prayer Not Prohibited, Prayer Is Act Of Love To God**
 4 Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. **Warning: Jewish Ostentation (1)**

How Not To + How To (Twice), They Got What They Wanted!

6(+) a'1 But when you pray, **Honest Prayer Must Be Vertical**
 2 go to your room and shut the door **Hyperbole, Private Prayer, Mk. 1:35**
 3 and pray to your **Father** who is **in secret**; **2 Kgs. 4:33-34, Dan. 6:11**
 4 and your **Father** who sees **in secret** will reward you. **Melkita Ex. 15:25, Philo Life 35,**
"You call in secret, but I answer you in public."

2) vv.7-15 Concise And Confident Kingdom Prayer (M + Q + Mk.). Polytheism = Many Titles

Shift Syntax, Few Words, Right Theology, Healing Relationships

Gentile Issue

7(-) a. And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; **Foil, No Flattery, Warning: Pagan Babbling (2)**
for they think that they will be heard for their many words. **Basis, Attempt At Control, Golden Ass 11:2**
 8 Do not be like them, **No Manipulation, Elijah 1 Kgs. 18:26-29 (-), 36-38 (+), Acts 19:36**
for your **Father** knows what you need before you ask him. **Ps. 139:3-4, Basis = Character, Is. 65:24**

Pagans Long On Excess Invocations, Short On Petition

9(+) b. "Pray (recite) then like this: **// *Kaddish, Eighteen Benedictions, //Lk. 11:2-4, Did. 8:2-3, 3x Pattern**
Father (Love + Power + Will), Prayer As Recitation: 3x Daily//The Amidah

Present (1) Our **Father** (*Abba*), who art in heaven, **INVITATION, COMMUNAL ADDRESS, Ps. 89:26**
Mt. 11:25-26, Jn. 10:30, Confident Trust Through Jesus. Gal. 3:26

Pure (2) A1) Hallowed be thy name. (p.v. by God) **3 // THOU PETITIONS/ACTIONS**
TO GOD IN HEAVEN Ezek. 36:22

10 Powerful (3) A2) Thy kingdom come,* **Ache/Yearn, Person + Work, Great Hope, Is. 52:7-10, Rev. 21-22**
Until Then, Three Things We Need: Life, Healing, Protection

Permanent (4) A3) Thy will be done,* **Prayer For Immediate Arrival, Not Gradual Improvement**
 on earth as it is in heaven. **(M), 2 Realms Rejoined vs. Plato's Immortal Soul**
Desires Reordered, To Vertical, Horizontal Is Added

11 Provides (5) B1) Give us this day our "daily" bread; (debated, *epiousios*), **3 // US PETITIONS 8:11-12**
ON A CONTESTED EARTH

12 Pardons (6) B2) And forgive us our debts, **18:21ff., Something Owed, Receive Grace, we/us/our = 8 Plurals!**
 As we also have forgiven our debtors; **2 Axes, God Defines Needs! Sir. 28:2, Amidah 6**
Jesus Fed/Forgave/Freed, We Pray In Reverse (Wright)

13 Protects (7) B3) And lead us not into temptation (*fiery trial, testing*), **4:1, 24:4-26, b. Ber. 60b, Jam. 1:13**
 but deliver us from evil **Entity, Unholy Pressures → Apostasy, Present & Future (24:4-26)**
 (or, **the Evil One**). **= Substantive Adjective, Unholy! Jn. 17:15, 1 Cor. 10:13, 1 Pt. 5:8**
1 Chron. 29:11-13*, 6:1-18 = Not Only Private Piety But Pure Motive

14 a' (-) **For**, if you forgive men (others) their trespasses, **Basis, 18:23-25, Tobit 12:8-10, Comment On The Difficult, //v.12**
 your heavenly **Father** will also forgive you; **//Mk. 11:25-26, New Capacity, Forgiveness Never Earned**

15 (+) but if you do not forgive men (others) their trespasses, **Father (6x), Block Generosity //Sirach 28:1-2**
 neither will your heavenly **Father** forgive your trespasses. **In The Future, Needs Free Flow, Warning**
Honor/Shame Culture, Honor Virtue Over Honor Precedence = Counter-Cultural

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 6:5-15

With 6:5-15 we come to a long unit on prayer sandwiched between two shorter units on alms (vv.2-4) and fasting (vv.16-18). The sixfold use of *Father* ties the central unit together (v. 6 [2x], vv. 7, 9, 14, 15). The caution of v.1 that piety is private and not for show applies to all three disciplines. Their proper function is to do them with and for God in loving obedience and that the reward, whatever it is and whenever it comes, is about the relationship we enjoy. We nurture a *secret relationship* with God who *is in secret* and who *sees in secret*. That we keep this audience primary does not mean we do not practice the disciplines as a community, only that we are aware of the temptation to impress one another with our spirituality because of the status it brings. To play to the wrong audience is to be a play-actor or hypocrite.

The 8-part, 2-stanza pattern noted in vv.2-4, 16-18 is repeated in vv.5-6. Because it was Jewish custom to recite standard prayers upon rising, at 3:00pm at the time of the temple sacrifice, and again at evening (Ps. 55:17), the super-pious (e.g. scribes and Pharisees) would pre-position themselves in public for maximum exposure when the mid-afternoon prayers were recited in order to be admired. But such affirmation is flattery and has nothing to do with seeking God. To the negative example (v.5) a positive one is proposed (v.6) in which the place of prayer shifts from the synagogue or street corner to the home and the only inside room with a door, a storage closet. "Hide yourself alone with God," is Jesus' counsel, then watch for God's actions. So, having dealt with a Jewish abuse of prayer (vv.5-6), Jesus then turns to critique the prayer practices of pagan polytheists who babble on to address this god and that goddess in hope of flattering one or more of them to pay attention (vv.7-8) and hear their case. Such prayer was typically long on invocation and short on petition, just the opposite of the form Jesus is about to give. Monotheistic prayer is much simpler, and with the divine name revealed, the Jews- while offering praise- did not have to enter the prayer lottery. The God of the Jews and Jesus is omniscient, *sees in secret*, and knows our needs before we ask. Jews and pagans sin differently, the second in ignorance, the first in audience. Disciples also sin, as when they refuse to pass on the mercy Jesus announced and purchased for them (vv.14-15). It is before God and in prayer that the worst in us is exposed, but that too is mercy

It appears vv.5-6 forms a sub-unit as do vv.7-15. A Gentile (vv.7-8) and Christian error (vv.14-15) frame the prayer the Lord gave (vv.9-13). These errors find their correction in prayer to the one true God, *our Father who art in heaven*, and in his forgiving character which is to us and through us. The worldview of Jesus is that of creation in two parts: heaven and earth. God's perfect dwelling space is above, our spoiled habitat below where sin, lack, and evil are present. But the two parts, an invisible heaven and a visible earth, are not distanced from one another as in deism with its clockmaker deity or merged into one another as in pantheism where- since God is everything- everything (including us) is divine. The two parts of the binary creation are distinct but related; they overlap and interlock in surprising ways, and the ultimate solution is for God's realm to descend to transform the cosmos, which is the substance of the first three petitions (vv.9b-10). For God to defend his holy character on a contested earth is the same thing as bringing his rule to bear to the end that his will is fully effected. When heaven invades, earth is healed because only one will, God's, is effective. What is previewed in Jesus will one day be total. Until that climactic event, disciples survive on contested territory, and the prayer does not leave the definition of needs to our whim. We need bread and all that goes with it to survive and work. To follow Jesus does not mean we do not sin, only that we know the medicine to take and share. Note that two metaphors are used for sin: debts (v.12), trespasses (vv.14-15). We owe and cannot pay; we have crossed lines that cannot be uncrossed. And since we are frail and have a powerful foe, the Evil One, we need God's protection. It's a tough neighborhood, but this is the world the Son freely entered. Live in hope, and keep praying!

WHERE WE LEARN TO PRAY

Jesus said, "Pray then like this, 'Our Father, who art in the heavens'...."

MATTHEW 6:9

Prayer requires a worthy model and a reliable word track.

Since their invention a century ago in the early days of flight, autopilots have helped to make air travel safer and more efficient. At first it was all mechanical: set the trim, watch the gages. The trend took a big leap with the introduction of computerized *fly-by-wire* jets in the '70's. But experts now worry it's gone too far. So many tasks have been shifted to computers pilots are losing their edge. Without hands-on flying they develop what's called *skill fade* or *skills decay*.

Computers now handle most flight operations between takeoff and touchdown, so frequent practice is exactly what commercial pilots are not getting. Even a slight decay in manual flying skills risks disaster. Automation-related pilot errors have been implicated in several disasters, including the 2009 crashes of Continental Flight 3407 in Buffalo, Air France Flight 447 in the Atlantic, and the botched landing of Asiana Flight 214 in San Francisco in 2013. An FAA report conclude pilots have become "accustomed to *watching* things happen, and reacting, instead of being proactive," and they're urging airlines to require more time flying by hand.¹ Flying the airplane is not the same thing as watching gages while a computer makes a million decisions a second about every variable. It creates the illusion over time that all I have to do is observe rather than actively interact. Passivity creeps in.

The *use it or lose it* principle applies to muscles and brain cells, to flight skills, to the practices of following Jesus as hands-on disciples. *Skill fade* is not just a hazard for pilots. *Prayer fade* happens when we leave it to the experts who are fluent and don't pray during the week. God recedes from daily consciousness. Or how about *evangelism fade* when we never share our faith naturally in conversation with others? No one comes to faith in Christ, and- after all- isn't that the pastor's job? Or

¹ Adapted from Nicholas Carr, "Automation Makes Us Dumb," *The Wall Street Journal* (11-21-14).

service fade when we never help. Or *Bible reading fade* when we rely on the pastor’s message or popular devotional books for something pre-digested rather than reading the Book itself and asking, What is God saying? Or *giving fade* when we don’t give on the same schedule we’re paid? What we practice is what we keep

Delegation is about expertise and efficiency, but at some point it corrodes basic skills. We find ourselves watching someone else do the Christian life rather than following Jesus in the messiness of our own life. Our engagement is no longer primary but secondary, like pilot and autopilot. But Jesus’ call cannot be delegated. “Follow me,” he called out, “and in the process I will draw you into my work of catching people in the web of God’s new reality.² There will be other followers with us, but it’s about each of you *following me* in a primary relationship, about mentoring and skills transfer, about a new way to see, not about delegation to so-called *religious experts*.” One question I’m concerned about being asked is this: “Pastor Phil, why did you get between me and my people? Why did you do for them what they needed to learn to do themselves?” The only answers I can think of are, “It’s what I was paid to do, and it’s what they wanted, and it was just easier.” I doubt they will impress.³

At the center of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reviews and corrects three basic Jewish practices or disciplines that cannot be delegated because they are properly basic for all followers, and interestingly enough, engage us on all three axes: the neighbor, the self, and God. Alms giving with an eye to the poor is horizontal, between me and a person in need, and it asks the questions, Do I love my neighbor? and, Can I trust God for provision, not only *for me* but *through me*? Fasting is on an internal axis and asks, “Is God my most basic appetite?” and, “Am I willing to humble my soul and repent?” Prayer to the Father is a vertical axis, and it answers the questions, “Is my life a conversation with the true and living God of the Jews who showed up recently in Jesus?” and, “Am I willing to see my world through his eyes?” That it’s full of *us* and *our* language instead of *me* and *mine* reminds us it’s the prayer of a community, not just individuals. Someone put it this way:

“You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and once say ‘I.’
You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and once say ‘My.’

² 4:19.

³ On this issue, see Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning The Ministry To The People Of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for one another.
And when you ask for daily bread, you must include your brother.
For others are included ... in each and every plea,
From the beginning to the end of it, it doesn't once say 'Me.'"⁴

So in these three Jewish disciplines Jesus affirmed as properly basic, the whole self is engaged, and if practiced before the right audience - which is God in secret and not other people for the sake of image- they hold us open to the grace of becoming a new kind of people, of being transformed by love, as in what Scot McKnight calls *The Jesus Creed*: that we love the Lord our God with all that we are, and our neighbor as we love ourselves because it was Jesus who put the two together, as if to say, "God leads us to the neighbor, and the neighbor back to God."⁵ And when we do giving and praying and fasting with an eye to God, we become healthy and vital as a church.

People who have a ongoing secret relationship with God are nearly combustible when they come together. They're not looking to the pastor to fill an empty cup each week but give them a place to overflow in praise and testimony. There is, so far as I can tell, only one purpose for believing in Jesus (conversion) and for believing true things about him (good theology), and that is to actually follow him into the mysteries and delights and disciplines and battles of God's kingdom right where we are. It is in the following that we are offered fellowship and the deep trust of a long relationship. And no one can do that for you or in your place; you must actually fly the plane hands-on; after all, it's your life! We're suffering from *skill fade* aren't we? We do delegation instead of continual, primary engagement with everyone getting a piece of the action, everyone a servant and a minister, pastors as training officers instead of hired experts. So when you hear another plane went down, or that a church- even a whole denomination- crashed and burned, it might be good to ask, "Was it skills fade? Were they on autopilot too long?" Did they forget it was about following Jesus and practicing his disciplines? To show respect for him at a safe distance is one thing, but to follow him and takes the risks of obedience will change your life, and that's what I signed up for: to be changed!

A Brief History

⁴ Edited, PreachingToday.com search under *Lord's Prayer*.

⁵ Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004.

Matthew 6:1, 5-15 7

It's called *The Lord's Prayer* because Jesus gave it.⁶ Some call it *The Disciples' Prayer* since they received and passed it on with variations in two official versions.⁷ It was first spoken in Aramaic- Jesus' mother tongue, translated into Greek for the Gospels, then Latin for the Western Church, and eventually in English for us.⁸ It briefly summarizes Jesus' ministry and mission: his dear and strong Father above a spoiled creation and a rebellious people, a kingdom previewed in Jesus that would come down at the end of the age to finally set things right again, the need for bread, healed relationships and protection from powers of evil and destruction beyond our strength. It was adapted for disciples since Jesus had no reason to pray for the forgiveness of his sins; there were none.⁹ This prayer is a simple word track for learning to pray *Jesus style*, or- as we say- *in Jesus' name*, meaning what he would pray for, and when your needs and worries are set in the larger frame of this prayer, it's self-corrective and hard to go wrong or lose perspective.

It's a brief prayer, an address plus two balanced sets of three petitions- the first a threefold cry for God to act, the second a threefold cry for us to be sustained- and it ends on the sobering idea we need protection from wicked powers that mean us no good. We live at an intersection of many influences- The Father, the Son, the Holy

⁶ Recent treatments include J. Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992), 40-52; D. Garland, "The Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew," *Review & Expositor*, 89, No 2, Spring 1992, 215-228; O. Cullman, *Prayer In The New Testament*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1995), Chapter 6, "The Our Father," 37-67; W. R. Karris, *Prayer And The New Testament*, Chap. 1, "Prayer and the Historical Jesus," (New York: Crossroads, 2000); N.T. Wright, "The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer," in Richard Longnecker, editor, *Into God's Presence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 132-154; C. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), 109-119; J.D. Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010); S. McKnight, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 169-192; N.T. Wright, *Simple Good News* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2015), Chap. 8, "Praying the Good News," 153-171.

⁷ Matthew 6:9-13 // Lk. 11:2-4, also Didache 8:2-3 as a non-canonical source.

⁸ See Albert S. Cook, "The Evolution of the Lord's Prayer in English," *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1891), 59-66.

⁹ Heb. 4:15 is the consensus, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect *has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*" Jesus never disobeyed the Father or damaged another person.

Matthew 6:1, 5-15 8

Spirit, the Evil One, good and evil angels, a cosmos fallen into chaos, plus all the specifics of our heritage and inheritance and gender and social location- and so who shall we follow and what shall we hope for? It's a realistic prayer, even tough-minded; it opens with *our Father in heaven's glory*, ends with *the Evil One doing damage in our human neighborhood*, and cries out for an immediate change in ground-level government, "Thy kingdom come," and let us remind you, Lord, just what that looks like, "thy will be done, down below as now above. We yearn and ache for an old world made new where all gladly cooperate with you and where all who will not are removed."¹⁰ It's a battlefield prayer for those who stand with Jesus against all that is anti-God and anti-human. It's a cry for God to come down and fix things permanently, and to sustain us until that time with bread and forgiveness and spiritual defenses as we follow Jesus; it's a prayer for pilgrims on a long march through time towards a new world that already coming towards us. In the church's worship it's placed at the end of the Prayer Of Great Thanksgiving on communion Sundays. We lay out the full sweep of God's story from Creation to Consummation, and then- to cap it off- recite or sing the prayer Jesus gave with an added praise at the end, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and glory forever. Amen."¹¹

Some free churches do not use the Lord's Prayer in weekly worship because of fear it may become rote and meaningless, which it can if we quit paying attention to the One who gave it. But a greater danger is to so value the spontaneous and unrehearsed over the written as not to use the prayer that most clearly marks us as Jesus' apprentices.¹² It's not something we have to generate but something we enter

¹⁰ For fresh, faithful thinking on what God finally does with those who refuse to be image-bearers, see Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015), Chap. 3, "If God Is Love, Why Is There A Hell," 67-90. I love the Dallas Willard quip, "Hell is just the best God can do for some people."

¹¹ KJV. On the doxology, not in the early MSS of Matthew or Luke, see C. Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 89. It was Jewish custom to add a doxology after prayer; it was assumed and so eventually came into the textual tradition. See also Warren Carter, "Recalling the Lord's Prayer: The Authorial Audience and Matthew's Prayer as Familiar Liturgical Experience," *CBQ*, Vol. 57, 1995, 514-530. The New Testament was read in worship and influenced by it; liturgy and canon are companions.

¹² John Wesley's opinion on the perfect prayer is that it "... contains it contains all we can reasonably or innocently pray for. There is nothing which we have need to ask of God, nothing which we can ask without offending him, which is not included, either di-

that's already prepared. The One we follow did not leave us our whims and moods because he knows how unreliable they are; he wisely gave us a word track to recite and meditate upon, and in this prayer all the big topics are covered. Prayer is soul work, much like training at the gym, and we shouldn't be discouraged if it takes energy and effort to pray this old prayer with fresh meaning.¹³ I find it helpful to take fifteen minutes and pray slowly, letting the Spirit use each phrase as a magnet to bring things to mind and draw me in. At times I never get past the opening address; I'm flooded by images of what *Father* means, all the joy and hurt it stirs in my masculine soul. Getting stuck on one phrase is good, and I ask, "Is this where the Holy Spirit is shining light, hoping I notice and pause for a while? The same Spirit who inspired Jesus in the composition will guide you in the praying.

On Tuesday evening I came across several paraphrases of the Lord's Prayer. As I read, including a Native American example which began, "O Great Spirit, You are our Shepherd Chief in the most high place,"¹⁴ the old prayer took on fresh fascination, so much that I wrote one of my own:

"Father above,
may your name be loved
and your reign descend
to end

rectly or indirectly, in this comprehensive form. Secondly, that it contains all we can reasonably or innocently desire; whatever is for the glory of God, whatever is needful or profitable, not only for ourselves, but for every creature in heaven and earth. And, indeed, our prayers are the proper test of our desires; nothing being fit to have a place in our desires which is not fit to have a place in our prayers: What we may not pray for, neither should we desire. Thirdly, that it contains all our duty to God and man; whatsoever things are pure and holy, whatsoever God requires of the children of men, whatsoever is acceptable in his sight, whatsoever it is whereby we may profit our neighbour, being expressed or implied therein" ("Upon Our Lord's Sermon on The Mount, Discourse VI: Matthew 6:1-15," in Albert C. Outler, editor, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1, Sermons I:1-33 [Nashville, TN: Abington, 1984], 572-591).

¹³ For a fresh treatment with an eye to spiritual formation, see James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling In Love With The God Jesus Knows* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2009), Chapter 3, "God Is Trustworthy," 54-73.

¹⁴ www.8th-day.org/lords-prayer-translations-paraphrases.

and heal our rebel world.
Bread enough today for all,
each-other’s forgiveness for all our flaws;
our protector be, a shield against the enemy
and all that destroys
what you made good.
Yours is the rule and the right and the shining forever. Amen.”

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Address (v.9a)

Our Father, who art in heaven is where prayer starts, with speaking aloud to a God who is supremely personal, just as Jesus did and with his blessing. The transcendent God whose visible presence fills the invisible part of creation we call heaven is open to hear from us down below.¹⁵ Amazing! Our God is a great listener.

In a metaphorical sense George Washington is the *father* of our nation.¹⁶ His labors freed us from the yoke of Great Britain for a new experiment in democracy. Ancient Israel learned to call God *Father* after being rescued from Egypt through Moses. God was their liberator from bondage; they’d been rescued, reborn and renamed by a strong deity. “God gave us life,” they said, “so God is *our father*.”¹⁷

But this Jewish God, unlike other gods and goddesses in the ancient world, was not a man or woman writ large.¹⁸ There were to be no likenesses of this God because

¹⁵ This world view (in contrast to modern pantheism [e.g. ancient Stoicism] and modern deism [i.e. ancient Epicureanism]) is best stated by N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), Chapter 5, “God,” 55-69.

¹⁶ Analogy from Karris, *Prayer*, 1-2.

¹⁷ For Jewish, pagan, and Christian sources, see Talbert, *Reading....*, 110-112.

¹⁸ For the case against naming God as *Mother* because of a loss of transcendence and tendency to pantheism with the world viewed as an extension of God’s being and body, as with mother and newborn, see Elizabeth Achtemeier, “God the Father or God the Mother,” *Mission and Ministry*, Vol. 8, Fall 1990, 18-30; also her “Why God Is Not Mother,” *Christianity Today*, No. 9, Aug. 16, 1993, 16-23; Charles Talbert, *Reading the*

Matthew 6:1, 5-15 11

this God is Spirit, not a part of creation. We call God *Father* because Jesus did. It's an oft-forgotten truth that though God is *Father*, God is not male. The biblical God is beyond gender. All the goods we associate with the *father* and *mother* are found in God, and all the bad some associate with them is not there. This Father is strong and tender, protective and nurturing, challenging and consoling and just, and is not to be confused with creation. The Father is transcendent. There are only two realities: God, and everything else God made. Reality is binary. God is necessary; all else is contingent, meaning it doesn't have to be. Your Creator wants a relationship and is actively working to get your attention. A recent survey showed 17% of atheists and agnostics admit praying at least monthly.¹⁹ Why? I think I know.

At the psychological level the Lord's Prayer is the beginning of being reparented by God as an adopted child. When I say *Father* the image of my dad is there as a filter, most of it good, but some of it distorting and out of focus. Letting God sort the clutter so I see more clearly is part of prayer. Same with my mother. For the first years of life they were God to me, all-powerful, but over the years they shrank. To honor our parents is to let God work in us to receive the gifts they gave and let go of the rest in forgiveness and acceptance of our common, sinful humanity. *Father in heaven* is how Jesus taught us to begin, and if understood properly- and not as a cover for male privilege and bully power- there's no reason to change it.

In a 2012 interview Bruce Springsteen spoke about how his broken relationship with his father lives on in his ballads. A young Springsteen sang about a father who "walks these empty rooms / looking for something to blame / You inherit the sins / You inherit the flames." Springsteen said to the interviewer:

"My dad was very nonverbal; you couldn't really have a conversation with him. I had to make my peace with that, but I had to have a conversation with him, because I needed to have one. It ain't the best way, but that was the only way I could, so I did, and eventually he did respond. He might not have liked the songs, but I think he liked that they existed. It meant he mattered."

Sermon..., 112-115.

¹⁹ "Atheist Prayer: Religious Activity Not Uncommon Among Nonbelievers," *Huffington Post*, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/25/atheist-prayer_n_3498365.

Matthew 6:1, 5-15 12

“The past,” the interviewer wrote, “is anything but past. Springsteen admitted his yearning for what he calls "Daaaddy!" and when he sings grown men cry.²⁰ The heart-level ache of this legend is on target. There’s a father-hole at the center of every male and female soul no earthly man can fill because it’s reserved for One who far exceeds them. In his mother tongue Jesus said *Abba* to Joseph as a toddler; it was baby-talk for *dear Father*, but when carried into his adult prayers was a sign of complete trust and radical dependence. The qualifying phrase *who art in heaven* is a reminder this *Abba* is not limited in goodness or power or love like our earthly dads. Psychologically they may define him, but theologically he defines them, and God is always more of the best and of which the best were only a pale reflection and a partial pointer. Faith begins with Jesus leading me to address his Father as my own.

Michael Reeves notes that many who now reject God are reacting against a certain sort of God, what he calls *a loveless dictator in the sky*. He writes:

“When I ask atheist or agnostic students to describe the God they don't believe in, I’m usually treated to what sounds like a good description of Satan: a self-obsessed, merciless bully. And if God is not an ever-loving Father, eternally pouring out his Spirit of life and blessing on his Son, their descriptions are probably pretty accurate.” He then asks, “Is it possible many people are reacting against a certain sort of God: the concept of a loveless dictator-in-the-sky? Could such popular anti-theism be the rumblings of a deep hunger for a better God?”²¹

When people describe for me the God they don’t believe in, I say, “Good! I don’t believe in that God either. What if we looked again at the one Jesus called *Abba*/Father; if you like Jesus even a bit, you may like his backer!

Three *Thou* Petitions (vv.9b-10)

Our hope is *in this God*, the one-and-only, the one Jesus addressed as *Dear Father*.

²⁰ David Remnick, "We Are Alive: Bruce Springsteen at sixty-two," *The New Yorker* (7-30-12).

²¹ Edited, Michael Reeves, "Three Is the Loveliest Number," *Christianity Today*, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/december/three-is-loveliest-number.

Matthew 6:1, 5-15 13

It's not a lottery in which you babble lists of names hoping to get the right god or goddess to pay you some attention- as with polytheists and pagans then and now. We know the name of the only God there is and that all the rest are imposters or worse. So we ask this God to do what's needed: to stand up for his holy reputation, to bring the kingdom down to ground level, to carry out the divine will and scrub the world clean of rebellion. We are instructed to pray for one thing- the immediate end of the world as we know it- and to do it from three complimentary perspectives:

- 1) First the dignity of God's person: *Hallowed be thy name;*
- 2) then the inbreaking of God's rule and reign: *Thy kingdom come;*
- 3) then God's effective power: *Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

If I can say this without being misunderstood: Jesus gave us the right of formal complaint. Not whining but formal complaint, of laying before God our pain here below and asking God to act because he alone has wisdom and power to fix what needs fixing in our *comprehensive* environment. We can't fix it; you can! Got it?

Prayer is first about God's possibilities and only secondly about our needs, pressing as they are, which is why we often begin where the prayer ends with a cry for relief, "Help me, God. The pressure is about to take me down; my relationships are a mess; there's not enough to pay the mortgage and eat at the same time!"²² Not until we see God as Father, as the One who fills the heavens, as supremely holy, as the coming ruler, and as One with a definite plan for this world's healing as previewed in Jesus are we ready to address our needs. Prayer is not so much about me getting my way with God as God getting his way with me. Prayer is not a psychological technique for self-motivation;²³ it's risky speech to an invisible God. Prayer is speaking to the Father because the Son invites us to, and because we trust Jesus not to lie to us. Prayer takes the risk of seeing from God's perspective, which- when it happens- is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. If after I pray I see things differently, God has already changed my sight!

Grammatically speaking, the first three petitions are imperatives, and an

²² An apt pastoral observation from N.T. Wright, *Simply Good News*, 153-155.

²³ Jan Milic Lochman, "The Lord's Prayer in Our Time: Praying and Drumming," in *The Lord's Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, edited by Daniel Migliore (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1993), 5, Note 2.

Matthew 6:1, 5-15 14

imperative- as you know- is a command: *Do this*, or *Do that*. Since we cannot give God commands, Jesus puts in the passive for the sake of deference: *May this be done*, or *May that be done*. As Lori has learned: *May the trash be emptied* and *May your mother be called* and *May french fries not be eaten on the way home*, hoping her hubby will understand before the grammar changes. The passive voice is less direct; it softens an imperative to a strong wish- even a desperate one. So Jesus invites us to invite the Father to do what only God can do, which is defend his character, bring the kingdom, enforce the divine will, and do so immediately. We want God to drop the curtain on history! *Father, will you please be God and do what only you can do! Our world's a mess. Your name is defamed, your rule ignored, and everyone's doing their own thing. Leave the invisible upstairs and come downstairs in power!* C.S. Lewis was right: "There are only two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'"²⁴ This is prayer for God to finish what he started. There's a healthy impatience here because it hurts to live down here; we ache and yearn for a real fix. This world has a rendezvous with the kingdom of God, and it is the job of the church- the people who follow Jesus- to witness to that bright reality and to shout with uplifted hands for its arrival. We are the contradiction of the current world, not its feel-good chaplains.

Three Us Petitions (vv.11-13)

Over the years some have commented on the abrupt shift from the loftiness of the appeal to the *Father's name* and *kingdom* and *will* down to the earthiness of warm, great-smelling, thick-crust, Mediterranean bread just out of the oven, as if we'd reached the mystical heights of prayer, then said, "Oh, by the way, all this prayer makes me hungry. I think I'd like a pizza; make it a *supremo!*" When he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, the first thing Jesus said was *Give her something to eat*.²⁵ After the resurrection he cooked his buddies a breakfast of grilled fish on the shore.²⁶ The mystical and the mundane, the elevated and the common are one to him. Jesus believed what glorified God was good for people, that what was good for people glorified God, and that the two must be held together.²⁷ The jump from *Thy*

²⁴ PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 6:5-15.

²⁵ Mark 5:43.

²⁶ John 21:1-14.

²⁷ Charles Talbert in *Reading Luke* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1982), 34.

Matthew 6:1, 5-15 15

will be done to give us daily bread today makes sense because it's the Father's will his followers have daily food for that day's work. Peter and friends went from *earning their way to trusting their way*, and don't think that wasn't hard.

When we cross from the three *Thou* petitions to the three *Us* petitions, from the bright reality above to our difficult circumstances, issues change. Heaven is not under assault; we are. Heaven is not the realm of sin, evil, and death; earth is. No hunger upstairs, no unforgiveness, no temptation or evil. All the ugly stuff is downstairs. It's where problems are and help needed. God and the good angels and our blessed dead are fine; it's people at ground level who are hungry and sinning against one another and taking the devil's bait and getting beaten down by sickness and addictions. God is in his heaven, and all's *not well* with the earth.²⁸ We always pray out of need, out of lack, out of a mess, and Jesus invites us to ask without embarrassment. We're not intruding; God is waiting for us to be honest and gave us a word track to get started.²⁹ Praise and adoration open the perfect prayer, *hallowed be thy name*, but the second half is pure petition: children asking the Father to meet their needs while they seek to live faithfully on *battleground earth*. The proud and self-sufficient can't pray this prayer. If you can't ask God for needed things, you can't pray. Asking for all things good and necessary is blessed by Jesus. Start asking, and let God sort it out!

We're not angels. We're not pure spiritual intelligence but stardust and God's breath joined as living souls in gendered bodies. We're not sustained directly but through food and water. We don't come with batteries; we come with alimentary canals. We live not only *on* the earth but *off* it with a thin layer of topsoil beneath our feet and a layer of oxygen above our heads. We are biospheric! Erosion and farm policy and the ozone and water quality are implied in the petition for bread since ingredients must be grown and seed protected. While we call for the kingdom we must tend the earth. Daily bread is from God through farmers and bakers.

The second petition is humility, "And forgive us our sins, as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us." Not a single *I* or *me*; it's all *us* and *we*. And what

²⁸ The lines from *Pippa's Song* are, "God in his heaven, All's right with the world," *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1919).

²⁹ On bold petitionary prayer and the Lord's Prayer, see Richard Foster, *Prayer* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992), Chap. 16, "Petitionary Prayer," 179-190.

kind of community is this? An honest one, a community of sinners in perpetual need of receiving and passing on forgiveness and its freedoms. The petition is not just for individual sins, but also the ones we commit in groups for which no single person is responsible, “Forgive us our sins....” It’s what makes issues like racism so hard to deal with. It is an infection of the whole, not just of a part that can be isolated. It’s only a forgiven and free people who have the moral courage and ethical vocabulary to face the large sins we commit together. And if there’s a weighty pause in the Lord’s Prayer, it’s here. Jesus had the nasty habit of always linking our ability to receive from God with our willingness to pass the same onto others. Receiving pardon creates in us a capacity to pass it on, and if we don’t, it demonstrates we’ve not received it. If it doesn’t pass through, it never came in, and that’s a hard word.

In the Lord’s Prayer we ask for three things: *Father, feed us*- our bodies; *Father, forgive us on the way to our forgiving*- our relationships; and thirdly, *Father, defend us*- our ongoing battle with temptation and testing, sin and evil. The problem is not just around us or between us but *in us*. “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil and the Evil One” is where the prayer ends. This petition is misunderstood if read to imply God is the source of temptation. It is rather a prayer we not be overwhelmed or give in- in any ultimate sense- to the forces of darkness that assault us within and without, “O God, protect us from selling out. Don’t let us face more than we can stand.” The strength to stay true to God and others comes from God, and to take this petition on our lips is to confess we cannot do it alone. The doxology we add is not used by the Catholics since it’s not in the best early manuscripts; it was added because it was common Jewish practice. It was just too abrupt blunt to end the prayer with the Evil One, so a praise song was added!

CONCLUSION

This is not a prayer for heroes or bystanders but for disciples who know we will be defeated without the Father’s protection. The Lord’s Prayer is not self-therapy or a good luck charm. It’s not about getting more and more stuff. It’s about surviving on hostile ground and crying for God’s intervention in a broken world. For God to act, and- in the meantime- to give bread because we are creatures and forgiveness because we are sinners and protection - from the worst in ourselves and the assault of fallen angels- because we are so terribly vulnerable. This is our prayer. Do you see differently now?
