

Sermon Text: Matthew 6:9-15

Now, I’m not naming names, but one day a Methodist gentleman told his Baptist friend at a Rotary Club meeting that he had become a Sunday School teacher at Main Street Church. His friend, who had known him a long time, was astonished. He said, “A Sunday School teacher! Why, I bet you don’t even know the Lord’s Prayer!” Well, our new teacher said, “Well, everybody knows that, it goes, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.’” His Baptist friend shook his head in disbelief, and said, “You win! I had no idea you knew so much about the Bible.” See, that got everybody. Even people active in the church often have much to learn. The disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” The Lord’s Prayer is what he taught, and what we have as the model prayer to pray from the heart, to pray until we begin to understand that we belong no longer to ourselves or a nation or a party or tribe, but to our Father, who is in Heaven, and whose will is to be done on earth by us. It isn’t done very often at the present moment by anyone. We are to say it until we can pray it until we can live it as citizens of the Kingdom, the Kingdom that is coming, but not yet fully come. Just as there is more to the prayer than we can comprehend, there is more to God’s Kingdom than has been revealed. God’s Kingdom is not finished. It is still coming through the likes of you and me.

Now, to those who think they can worship God just fine at home even though they are healthy enough to gather and worship together, but they stay home, I remind you the Lord’s Prayer is not a private prayer! It is meant for us. It is meant for a gathered community. It is a prayer between two or three or more gathered in God’s name. Though you can pray it alone, it is obviously meant and constructed for corporate worship. When you say it or pray it, and there is a difference between saying it and praying it, you are merely practicing for the real thing, and that is praying it together here, between God and us and together as a congregation. Give us our daily bread. Deliver us from evil. Forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us. Some of you have noted in advance what I was going to preach about, and you looked up the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew and also in Luke. You saw that what Jesus taught was a little bit shorter than what we pray in church each Sunday. Now, the answer is a seminary moment. It’s something that I learned, and we hardly ever talk about, and that is in the very first century of Christianity, there was a teaching manual that was based on the memory of Jesus’ words. In Greek, it is called the *didache*. That’s one of those seminary words that we use, but it really just means “the teaching.” It’s not really that mysterious a word. It’s the teaching, and in it we find what was taught before we even agreed upon which books were inspired Scripture. Imagine that! Before we even agreed which books were inspired Scripture there was this teaching, and it said that the Lord’s Prayer, virtually identical to what we said this morning, was to be said three times a day. That was an echo of the Jewish tradition in that day that you were to pray three times a day, but to pray, as early Christians, the Lord’s Prayer. It is from this ancient teaching that the extra words on the tail end were added, a sort of a doxology on the end. “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.” You will notice that’s not in the Scripture. They were added in the 1st century. That addition is sometimes found in your Bibles in Matthew, but always with a footnote saying, “In the most ancient documents, it’s not there, but in the ancient church it was there.” It does not change anything of what Jesus taught. Just think of it as an extended amen. You may say it, or you may pray it three times a day if you wish, but I promise you this, it has

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more meaning and more power and echoes more what Jesus taught if you pray it from the heart together in worship. If you can tune in and remember to do that, and listen to the corporate body joined in saying the Lord’s Prayer together, I think you will hear what I mean.

A missionary was teaching a Hindu woman the Lord’s Prayer, who had converted to Christian faith, and when he got to the end of the very first clause, “Our father who art in Heaven,” she stopped him! She said, “If God is our father, that’s enough. I will worry no more.”

We take a breath, and we run through the prayer, and we sprint past the most important part, “Our father.” Not my father. It’s us. It’s our. It’s we. Even when we pray this prayer by ourselves, we are connecting with the church in our time and across the centuries, and I hear those around me, and I do hear the echoes of those recently gone on. Sometimes when I have visited in the hospital, and very often toward the end when there is an illness, we join in the Lord’s Prayer because sometimes when we become confused, when we become disoriented, when we become enfeebled, very little remains except what is ingrained in us, and what ought to be ingrained in every Christian is the Lord’s Prayer. Through it, we connect to something larger than ourselves, something deeper.

N. T. Wright in his book, The Lord and His Prayer, teaches, and we mostly have heard this in Sunday school and in our churches that, the word for father, which Jesus spoke in Aramaic, was Abba, and Abba was the familiar, radically familiar, word. It denotes intimacy and relationship way beyond the formal, and even way beyond the familiar. It is family. It means daddy. It means daddy! Wright pointed out that the first occurrence in the Hebrew Bible of the idea of God as father really came before Jesus. It came from Moses when Moses marched boldly before Pharaoh, and he says, “Thus says Yahweh. Israel is my son, my firstborn. Let my people go that they may serve me.” For Israel to call God father was to hold onto the hope of freedom.

The very first words of the Lord’s Prayer contain within it, not just intimacy, but also revolution. “I serve God, rather than Pharaoh, rather than anyone else. My Father.” If Israel belonged to God over against Pharaoh, then we belong to God, to God over against all the powers or claims of tribe or party or nation. We are to obey God, and to struggle with what that means. When we live out our faith here and now, wherever and whenever we live, child of God is our primary identity, not Southerner, no matter how that hurts your feelings, not Democrat, not Republican, not Methodist, not Baptist, not race, not sex, not tax bracket, but child of God. Our father, our daddy, who is above all of this and beyond all of this and after the end of all of this, and he has a separate will from ours. Those who would influence us to serve them, His will is so often contrary to theirs, and so our Heavenly Father has the will to lead us and to free us to serve in His coming Kingdom, not ourselves or not to serve others, but our Father, hallowed be His name.

We have all heard the joke. I know you have. I’ll give you the short version of the little boy who thought God’s name was Howard. You’ve heard it, right? You haven’t? All right. You should know it. Our Father who art in Heaven, Howard be thy name. That’s what he heard. That’s what he thought.

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No, it’s not Howard, it’s hallowed. In the Bible, the name of God is virtually indistinguishable from the person of God. Jesus in the Gospel of John is the word or the name or the essence of God made flesh and dwelt among us. When we pray that God’s name be hallowed or holy or sanctified or set apart, we are praying that God will let all the world see that He is the one true God. Our faith lived out, this prayer lived out can convince other people that God is real. I said this last week. In Matthew 5:16, I reminded you, it says, “Let your light shine before men so that they can see your good works and give glory to your father who is in Heaven.” As you serve God, you help convince others that God is real.

A Methodist pastor, Rex Bevin, tells of a woman in Africa, in Mozambique, who received the light of Christ in her life, and knew that she had to do something to serve His kingdom, but she was old and she was poor and she was blind and uneducated. She asked a French missionary to underline in her Bible in red John 3:16. She had a plan. So she would take that Bible, and sit in front of a boy’s school every afternoon in Mozambique, and when the school was out, she would ask a boy or two over and say, “Do you know French?” Some would proudly say, “Why yes!” She would say, “Would you please read these words underlined in red?” And they did. She would ask, “Do you know what these words mean?” and they would say, “No, I don’t.” Then she would tell them the story of Jesus. Eventually, 24 young men became Christian pastors due to this one elderly, poor, blind woman, whose prayer was to help the Kingdom Come. Thy Kingdom Come is the key to the way we pray this prayer, and it changes us and our ideas about who we are and what we should be about.

According to theologian Stanley Hauerwas, these three words teach us not of an early kingdom with borders and boundaries, but God’s kingdom. Come in Christ, but still coming through His Holy Spirit and through His church. Hauerwas says nationality doesn’t matter. Ethnicity doesn’t matter. Language doesn’t matter. Skin color doesn’t matter. Political affiliation doesn’t matter. Economic status does not matter. Liberal or conservative does not matter. Doctrinal perspective does not matter. What matters – the kingdom boundaries encompass all those held by the cords of grace, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and know their need of Him as a Savior. Thy Kingdom Come means open us to a future, which necessarily is changing. Of course, if God’s will is to be done as it is not now being done then change must happen. We are praying for God to change things. We are praying for God to change us.

You remember the imperative mood from grammar class? I didn’t either until I looked it up. Have you ever noticed that Jesus teaches us to essentially, grammatically demand our daily bread from God? Abba, daddy, give us enough bread for each day. Forgive us our sins. Lead us not into temptation or the time of trial. Deliver us from evil. These are all imperatives. We are taught that we may make demands of God in accordance with God’s will. We have claims for God to behave like God, and God revealed the way that He wishes to behave toward us in Jesus Christ. These are demands, not if it be your will, not pretty please give us bread. It’s not a request. It’s an imperative. Give. The prayer is simply, do it because you are who you are.

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Look at it this way. You don’t have to butter God up to pray for God to do what God has already said that God will do. Jesus taught us to pray boldly in this way in these words. Pray for God’s will as a child who knows that he or she is beloved.

I’ll give you an example. When my daughter, Christina, needs something that’s absolutely necessary – tuition or a prescription or a doctor bill or bookstore bill from the college, I’ll tell you what she does. She just presumes that I’m going to do what is best for her. She presumes quite a lot! She fills out the check, and she brings it to me, and she says, sign it! Now, she already knows my will is for her best. All she needs is my name to make it so.

I am not saying that prayer is a blank check. I am saying that this prayer teaches praying for God’s will, and its teaching is that enough, bread enough for you and for us, all of us, is God’s will. In God’s name and through God’s people, there is enough to cover basic needs. You know I’m thinking about that basic need, the bread enough for one day part of the prayer, the fact that the storage business is one of the fastest growing businesses in America shows that instead of sharing from our abundance, we are building or renting bigger barns. Let those who have ears, hear.

Changing subjects about forgiveness, do you remember the Rodney King arrest and the trial that followed and the riots that followed after that? Do you remember that? Two things about that whole incident speak volumes of the human condition and how far we are from God’s kingdom, God’s peace, God’s shalom. The first thing is that when Rodney King came on the camera and he pleaded, I thought sincerely, can’t we all just get along? People laughed. People laughed in derision. People mocked at the impossibility. People revealed that the kind of world they saw, they saw a world where the answer was obviously no. That phrase, can’t we all just get along, has become a standard bad joke among comedians and commentators. From partisan politics to race relations to the Middle East, people smirk and they say can’t we all just get along with the implied answer being no, of course not. Worldview today. After the trial in South Central Los Angeles, when it erupted in violence, you will remember that during that riot a truck driver named Reginald Denny was dragged from his truck and severely beaten, and he was saved from death only by the intervention of an A.M.E. pastor, some of you forget that part. After a long, difficult recovery, Denny met with his attackers, and he greeted each one of them, and he shook their hands, and there before the TV cameras, he forgave them, and after witnessing what had taken place, one reporter turned to the camera and commented, “It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage.” Do you get it? Do you get how far we are from God’s kingdom? When he said, it is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage; he was saying that to forgive is crazy. Only someone suffering from brain damage would forgive as he forgave. We live in a culture where forgiveness is outrageous, where might makes right, where everyone plays the role of victim, and where decades-long, even centuries-old injustices still fester. Yet we pray, not only asking God to forgive us our sins, but we make it contingent upon our willingness to forgive those who sin against us. We say to God forgive us only to the extent that we forgive others. That is a scary prospect! Are we brain damaged enough? Are we radical enough? Are we outside this world’s smarts enough and inside God’s kingdom enough to forgive as we have been forgiven in Jesus Christ?

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Now, the final line of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke is “Do not bring us to the time of trial.” Matthew says, “Do not lead us into temptation.” Thursday at Wesley Commons, I got a good question. Does God lead people into temptations? Scripture says no. Scripture says clearly no. James in the first chapter says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, I am tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil and He Himself tempts no one, but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” That’s where temptation comes from according to our Bible. There’s another verse, which people do not really believe. They don’t really believe when it says in Hebrews that Jesus was tempted. It’s right there, but people just don’t believe it. It says for we have, speaking of Jesus, we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have a high priest, who in every respect has been tempted as we are. Jesus, it says in Hebrews, in every respect is tempted as we are, and yet he is without sin. Now, if Jesus is tempted as I am, as you are, as we are, then Jesus was truly tempted, and we know it. To pretend that we are not tempted to anger or bitterness or hatred or lust or jealousy or covetousness or pride or judgment or greed, etc., to say that we are not is to be dishonest to God and to reject part of the one prayer that Jesus taught was necessary. If it’s a prayer, a few words, and it is, and if we believe that Jesus did not waste words on a non-existent problem, and I don’t, then we pray for strength and deliverance from temptation and during our certain times of trial because it is a fact we will be tempted, and we will have times of trial, and we do need God’s help when that happens.

We forget our history. The early Christians, in some countries, in some countries today, even today, face death because of their faith. The early Christians refused to worship the gods of other people, and they refused to fight the wars of the Caesars, and they were good citizens in whatever earthly way they could be, but only to the extent that it did not violate their faith in Christ. They were often arrested, and given the choice of renouncing Christ or being fed to the lions, of recanting their faith or being burned as a torch for the parties at Rome at night. When they prayed, “Do not bring us to the time of trial,” I think they were asking God for the strength to remain faithful and to resist the temptation to renounce Christ.

Now, we are usually tempted or tried by selfishness and affluence and desire. The early Christians and some today were tried or tempted to renounce their faith under penalty of death. We pray Lord deliver us from such evil. We have dual citizenship – this world is part, and God’s kingdom is the other. This prayer creates a crisis where we have to choose where our allegiance is. What you say you believe makes no difference unless you live it, and what you truly believe is best figured backwards from what you do in the world. This sounds wrong, but I think that a stranger following us around and watching and poring over our calendar and our encounters and our checkbook could tell the world better what you and I believe than we ourselves could. What we do reflects what we truly believe in our hearts. Anyone can say, “Father.” Anyone can say forgiveness and love and thy kingdom and thy will, but may your faith in Jesus and your prayer as Jesus taught you become who you are. They asked, “Lord, teach us to pray,” and Jesus taught them to pray, believing and expecting God’s will to be done, and that means things will change. Do more than say it! Pray it! Do more than pray it. Live it, and it will change you. Amen.