

WHEN YOU PRAY



Catalog No. 20181230
Matthew 6:5-13
Steve Holmlund
December 30, 2018

Matthew 6:5-13

We have one more week before we return to our series in Revelation. As mentioned, this is the week in our calendar when we usually have one of the elders who are not on staff to deliver the sermon, and it is my privilege this morning to do that. In thinking and praying about the topic for this morning, the Lord led me to prayer, and specifically, the Lord's Prayer.

Before going any further, I want to acknowledge my debt to Dr R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I found his insights on the Lord's Prayer in his book, *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down*, to be extremely helpful and rather than cite him at every turn, just realize that much of what I'm sharing this morning is found there. The book is not long and can be read in two or three hours. If you have a long commute, you'll get through the audio version in three or four days. I highly recommend it.

In his introduction, Dr Mohler references the writings of theologian Gary Millar, who suggests that slowly but surely the evangelical church is giving up on prayer.¹ First, for many of us, life is relatively easy, especially compared to other parts of the world and earlier times in history. We're just not desperate enough. If you're like me, you often don't pray until you've tried every other possible solution. This is a real challenge for us today in our affluent western world. Our wealth and our technology are what we turn to first. Prayer is for desperate people.

Second, Millar says we are distracted people, becoming ever more distracted.² We are becoming a people unable to focus long enough to pray. I have to agree with this assessment. I can trace the origin of distraction in my own life to about 40 years ago.

I grew up in southwestern New York State in the 60s and early 70s, and we had just four television channels, three out of Buffalo and one out of Erie, Pennsylvania. The antenna on our roof, and the direction we pointed it determined how clear the television picture was.

My three brothers and I would all take our positions in the living room and settle in to watch something like *Bugs Bunny* and *Roadrunner* cartoons. When one of us wanted to change the channel, the kind with an actual knob, the conversation inevitably went something like this: "Mark, it's your turn to change the channel." "No, it's not, I did it last time; it's Jeff's turn." Jeff: "If I change the channel, you'll take my spot." Jon: "I'm fine with this channel; you change it." And so, the laws of physics prevailed: all objects at rest remained at rest. The channel did not change.

And then, not too long after, one simple device came into our lives before smartphones, email and texting, before social media, before Pokémon Go and Words with Friends, before PCs and Macs, before video games and gaming consoles, before the Internet and browsers and hyperlinks, there was... the TV remote. In my view, this device looms large over our culture. It led the assault on our attention spans.

With the TV remote, you could now easily sample 100+ channels, without ever risking possession of the most comfortable chair in the room. And after you had cycled through all the channels, it was time to go through them all over again, always in the hope of finding something better to watch. The programmers noticed this and changed their approach, in hopes of being that "something better".

The rest is history. We are now at a point where our technology is reconfiguring our brains in its own image. There is always something new to jump to, something else to give our attention to. But only for ever-decreasing amounts of time. We are, to use computer terminology, completely interrupt-driven. As I've tried to make sense of our world from my own limited perspective, I've concluded this: we live in the Age of Distraction. And distraction is the enemy of prayer.

And so, as we say goodbye to 2018 and welcome 2019, I hope that we can develop the desire, discipline, and focus to pray. Some of you already have this, but I suspect you are in the minority. I know this is a struggle in my own life. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus Himself taught us how to pray.

Setting and context

The Lord's Prayer is at the center of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is teaching the multitudes. The immediate context is found in Matthew 6 verse 1. Jesus warns against practicing our righteousness, our giving and praying so that we are noticed by others. Verses 2 through 4 address our giving; verses 5 through 8, our praying. Let's look at verses 5 through 8:

Matthews 6: 5-8:

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 7 “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

The first thing to notice here is that Jesus says, “when you pray”. He does not say “if you pray”. Prayer is assumed. It is not optional. This is what followers of Jesus do, even if you lack desperation, even if you are too distracted, and even if you are both.

Next, we see two warnings. One, as with our giving, don't pray in such a way that you are “seen by others”. We might think of this as a prohibition on someone leading a congregation in prayer, as I will do in a few minutes, or on praying together in a group. But I don't think that's what in view here, necessarily. Instead, those who pray publicly are not to do so to impress others. This is, in fact, a difficult temptation even when you are mindful of it. We all want to look good. I want to look good. If we are not careful, pure motives can be very hard to come by. That is why the Lord gives us this warning.

Second, we don't pray to impress our Father. Jesus says we are not to heap up empty phrases. Quantity does not equal quality. I know I struggle with this in my own prayers. It is not that it is wrong to pray at length about one or more concerns. Rather, I find myself easily losing focus and concentration and mindlessly repeating the same prayer over and over, thinking this repetition will be more persuasive. Or, that if I don't put in sufficient time for a particular request, it won't be heard or taken as seriously. So, for now, at least, I need to shorten my

prayers, especially when my mind begins to wander. Our Father knows what we need before we even ask.

How then are we to pray? First, get to a place where you aren't trying to impress others. In group settings, avoid words that you only use at church or that you really don't understand. Take care not to go into an automatic prayer mode. Be more intentional about what you say.

For our own personal prayers, Jesus's command is straightforward. Go into a private room by yourself and shut the door. Shut out all distractions and temptations to impress others. Leave your smartphone and your smartwatch and your smart earbuds and your Wi-Fi-enabled coffee mug behind and take only a hard copy Bible. Now more than ever, we need a quiet, solitary place to pray.

Second, rejoice in the fact that Jesus has left us a model prayer to pray, short and simple. The prayer itself takes only a few seconds to recite. In the church I grew up in, it was part of the liturgy of the worship service, and each Sunday the congregation would repeat it in unison at the conclusion of the prayer for the offering. The difficulty with that regular repetition was that it became too familiar and automatic to recite with the proper mental focus and attention. This was complicated by the awkwardness of many people trying to say the same thing together. Though I didn't treat the prayer as a magical incantation, I didn't engage with it on any meaningful level either. It was essentially background noise in my Sunday experience.

But despite its brevity and simplicity, the Lord's Prayer is deeply profound and, as the title of Dr Mohler's book suggests, revolutionary. It is a concise, memorable summary of the most important truths of Scripture. Dr Bruce Waltke, who I can't fail to cite at least once per sermon, understands its first two verses to encapsulate the central message of the Scriptures (Waltke 144).

Yet, although it is brief and simple, the Lord's Prayer requires our focus and energy. Praying it is simple but not without effort or concentration. Therefore, I would like us to look at each line in a little more depth this morning, again, guided by many of Dr Mohler's insights. We will then conclude by praying through it and then reciting it together.

Matthew 6:9a:

(Jesus says) “Pray then like this:

Our Father in heaven,"

We quickly pass over the very first word of the prayer, “Our”. Notice that Jesus does not say “My Father”. He says, “Our Father”. In fact, all the pronouns in the prayer are plural, not singular, pronouns. Although we rightly emphasize the individual decision each of us must make to follow Jesus, we need to remember that we are not saved in isolation. We are saved into the universal Church, the body of Christ, which spans all times and distances. We are not self-made Christians, and we don’t pray that way.

We pray to our *Father*. Again, we must pause and think deeply about this word. He is not some distant, impersonal force as depicted in our current movies. He is personal and loving. He desires to know us and be known by him. He desires our nearness to him. And so he sent his only son to be with us and to redeem us. Because of Christ’s work on our behalf, we are adopted by the Almighty Creator as his sons and daughters. We are no longer slaves but fellow heirs—heirs who will reign with the King. And it is by grace and mercy, not by any right that belongs to us, that we address him as our Father. We must always remember this.

Yet though he is near, our Father is also “in heaven”. That is, he is separate and distinct from all creation and therefore, in complete control of it. Nothing happens that he does not ultimately permit. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways higher than our ways.

If you’ve ever been to the Morrison Planetarium at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, you may have seen “Fragile Planet”, a spectacular simulation on a 75-foot screen that takes you from earth to the moon, then Mars, and finally beyond our galaxy. The sheer size, scope, and beauty of the universe is literally breathtaking. Although I don’t believe it was the authors’ intent, I found this simulation to be one of the most powerful and compelling witnesses for the existence of God. How could all of this come into being without cause? I left an institution devoted to naturalism awestruck by the sheer power and majesty of a Creator who could speak the universe into existence.

And so these first four words are filled with praise. Our Father has adopted us by his grace as his sons and daughters to be the stewards of his magnificent creation and to reign with him over it. He has revealed himself to us in creation, the Scriptures and ultimately in Jesus so that we might be filled with awe and wonder as we worship him.

Matthew 6:9b

"hallowed be your name."

Many of us misunderstand this phrase because we don’t really know what the word “hallowed” means. I’m not even sure if it’s two syllables or three. Hallowed or hallow-ed. And because we don’t know what hallowed means, we don’t understand that this is actually an appeal, a petition, not a continuation of the opening line of praise. We’re asking our Father to do something. What are we asking?

Our only contact with the word hallowed is Halloween, which doesn’t help most of us. Hallowed is an archaic word that has yet to be replaced by a more modern one. It means to “make holy” or “consider as holy”. We are asking our Father to make his name holy, special, distinct, and above all other names. We are asking him to demonstrate his glory for all to see visibly. This request echoes God’s own concern for his name voiced repeatedly in the writings of the psalms and the prophets.

Though Jesus said that if necessary, the stones would cry out, God’s name is hallowed primarily by the sanctification of the church, and by the ongoing salvation of more and more people. When we pray this, we are asking that he would make us his faithful representatives here on earth and that he would continue to draw the lost to himself. All so that the greatness of his name would be properly understood by all.

Matthew 6:10:

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

This petition is why Dr. Mohler titled his book *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down*. This is why Dr. Waltke and other theologians see these opening lines of the prayer as the center of all the Bible. We are asking God to continue what he has been doing ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden; ever since he made his promises to Abraham. This is where our study in Revelation will lead us. We are asking our Father to defeat evil and renew us and his fallen creation. This is what Jesus perfectly demonstrated for us, living a life in perfect submission to his Father. In another garden, he said, not my will but thy will be done. And as we live in between the advents of Christ, we pray this daily so that our wills are submitted to his, so that his kingdom will advance here on earth.

This is the importance of regular prayer. We must constantly re-align our focus and ask that God's will be done. It's a dangerous thing to ask for because it threatens our routines, our comforts, our selfish conceits. It tears down the perceived control we pretend to exercise over our lives. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, it exposes the life we've settled for as making mud pies in a slum.

Matthew 6:11:

"Give us this day our daily bread,"

We began the Lord's Prayer with an outward focus on God, our Father. But our physical needs are not unimportant to him. If we are hungry, we can pray for food. If we are unemployed, we can pray for work. If we are lonely, for companionship. If we are sick, for healing. If estranged, for restoration. If tired, for rest. Give us what we need today. This petition is striking in its simplicity.

Yet it can be very difficult for us to pray. It's an admission that we are dependent on God. We'd much prefer to be dependent on ourselves. He's asking us to take it one day at a time. We'd rather have the next ten thousand days covered. He's talking about our needs. We've long since moved on to our wants.

The fact of the matter is that we often don't have a clear understanding of our true needs. We're consumed by our selfish wants. It's not a good combination because we end up awash in material possessions yet unsatisfied and unfulfilled. The next purchase always promises to satisfy, yet never does.

Let us return to this simple request for our daily bread. And implicit in that request is also one for an understanding of what it is that we truly need. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John. 6:35). As we pray for our physical needs, let us also pray to be filled each day with the spirit of Jesus. Let us pray for his grace, strength, and wisdom to be enough to get us through each day.

Matthew 6:12

"and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

We move now from our physical needs to our spiritual needs. Our real problem is a refusal to offer our Creator the obedience and worship that he rightfully deserves. We have utterly failed, and there is nothing we

can do on our own to make things whole. We need to be forgiven. Otherwise, there is no hope. The wages of sin is death. But again, because of Christ's sacrifice, our sins are indeed forgiven. As we frequently sing, "now my debt is paid, it is paid in full, by the precious blood that my Jesus spilled..."⁴

As we follow Jesus, we regularly confess our sins and ask daily for God's forgiveness. And as we mature in Christ, we increasingly understand how large the debt was that was paid by him for us. So too, then, does our capacity to forgive others increase. Because we have been forgiven so much, we are able to forgive those who, relatively speaking, owe us very little. Again, the pronoun here is a plural one. God's people are a forgiving people.

We know from other Scriptures that we cannot earn our salvation. We are not forgiven because we forgive others. But this petition, verses 14 and 15 that follow, and the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 make it clear that forgiving each other is not optional. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive."⁵ It is not easy. But if we are unable to forgive, we need to question if we truly understand the size of the debt we no longer owe.

Matthew 6:13

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The wording here can be confusing because it sounds like God potentially will tempt us and that we are asking him not to. But James 1:13 explicitly says that God cannot be tempted and does not tempt anyone. What then does "lead us not into temptation" actually mean?

I think the answer lies in recognizing what Jesus himself endured. Matthew chapter 4 begins with Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The Spirit was not doing the tempting. That is the work of Satan. But the Spirit was leading Jesus to face a series of trials and tests. And as he faced each test, the devil tempted him to depart from God's will and take matters into his own hands.

The same thing happens to us. As we face life's trials and are tested by God, we almost always are brought to a place where we feel something is lacking. Then the temptation comes. James says we are to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials because that will produce endurance that makes us mature (James 1:2-4).

But in the midst of those trials, he goes on to say that “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (James 1:14).

And so our appeal to God is that as we face our trials and testing, we will not give in. That is what “lead us not into temptation” means. It is a recognition of our utter dependence on our Father. We need to be delivered daily from an enemy who is very real. Because we are powerless in our own strength to fight these spiritual battles.

"For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen."

Modern translations, like the English Standard Version (ESV), no longer include these words because they are not found in the earliest manuscripts that we possess and are most likely a later addition. But this doxology, or expression of praise, remains an appropriate response for God's people to the Lord's Prayer and connects us with those who have also recited these words over the centuries.

There is much, much more that could be said, but I wanted to leave time for us to pray through the Lord's Prayer together.

Are you as distracted as I am? Is the only thing you've been desperate for in the last year a pumpkin spice latte? Is regular prayer a struggle for you? Perhaps this model will help you. Again, the Lord's Prayer is short and concise, yet theologically, it's a gold mine. Even beginning with 5 to 10 minutes of focused prayer each day, and perhaps at the end, is a huge step from not praying at all. As we pray in faith daily, the Spirit will mature our habits and desires and align our requests with our Father's will. And as Dan Westman mentioned a couple of weeks ago, take time in your prayers to listen to him speak to you.

I will read each line of the prayer individually, make a brief summary statement for guidance in case that is helpful, and then give us time to pray silently. We'll conclude by praying together.

Our Father in heaven,

Give thanks that we have been adopted by such a great and glorious God and can call him Father. Praise him for who he is, what he has made, and what he has done.

hallowed be your name.

Ask God to make his name great through his people and to draw many more to himself. Pray specifically for our faithfulness here at PBC and for the salvation of those close to you.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Bring all that is broken about our world to our Father and ask him to fix it. Submit your own agendas to his will and ask him to use you, and all of us, for his glory.

Give us this day our daily bread,

Bring all your cares and concerns, physical and spiritual, to our Father. Ask him to show us what we really need and to provide for us.

and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Consider how large the debt was that you owed that has been forgiven. Confess your sins and ask God to make you and us forgiving people.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Pray about the trials and tests in your life and the temptations you are facing. Recognize that the evil one desires to devour us. Ask the Lord to deliver us all.

For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Conclude with praise to our Father.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.**

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

**Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For yours is the kingdom, and the power,

and the glory forever. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down* (Nashville: TN: Nelson Books, 2018)

² Ibid.

³ (Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, Kindle edition)

⁴ Brooke Ligertwood, Matt Crocker, *Man of Sorrows*, performed by Hillsong Worship, *Glorious Ruins* (2013; Easter single free download hillsong.com, 2013).