

LORD, Teach Us to Pray – Part 1

Introduction

Jesus is on the move again. He is determined to go to Jerusalem where He must suffer many things at the hands of evil men and be put to death (Lk. 9:22, 51). He is going there to complete the new and final “exodus” for His people, by which they will be fully liberated from their bondage to sin and death (cf. Lk. 9:31). He has invited his closest companions to join Him, where they too are called to suffer many things – to take up their cross -- with Him (Lk. 9:23-24). Along the way to Jerusalem, Jesus will not waste any moment he gets to spend with His friends. He uses their precious time together to teach them many new things about what it means (and will mean) to follow Him.

Most recently Jesus taught His disciples how to become fully human (Lk. 10:24-42). What does that mean? We were created to be the images of God, to reflect His love and goodness back to Him and to our neighbors. However, in our fall in sin, our image bearing became distorted – the reflectors no longer shined as bright and they reflected more of the world in opposition to God than His glory.

But God sent His Son into the world to essentially set our lives back on track – to make us once again the reflectors of His glory so that we could once again enjoy Him forever. No one else could do this for us but Jesus, for He is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), “the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb. 1:3). That means that God’s character is most fully “fleshed out” in Jesus. By being united to Him in the Spirit we begin to be transformed into the glorious image of Jesus, for which we have been predestined. Paul says:

Romans 8:29-30 ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

By being joined to the one who is the perfect image of God we - His disciples - will become fully human – in union with Him – the way branches are joined to the vine (cf. John 15:5).

John 15:4-5 ⁴ "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Jesus is teaching how to be fully formed human beings – as we were originally created to be - by abiding in Him who is the perfect image bearer of God. But what does a “fully formed” human being look like?

Jesus gave His disciples two pictures (1) in the story of the Good Samaritan loving His neighbor (10:30-36; cf. v. 27) and (2) in the tender moment of young Mary – choosing the good portion - learning as a disciple at Jesus’ feet (10:38-42).

But if Jesus is calling us, as His disciples, to live like this – (1) to not think of our own needs first but to treat others as more important than ourselves (cf. Phil. 2:3) and (2) rather than try to manipulate God into loving us more or accept us, we instead just sit before Him and marvel in awe and love for our Savior, Redeemer, and LORD – **who among us can reach such peaks of true – God-imagined – humanity?**

We have all seen little children trying on their parents clothing. Little girls walking around in mom’s dresses and shoes, wishing one day she too can grow up and be a mommy. Little boys wearing dad’s suit and tie, hoping one day to be just like him. The clothing is much too big for now but just give them a few years and they will grow up into them. So Jesus is giving us a way of life that is far too big for us now. He – as the fully formed, mature man (cf. Eph. 4:13) - is the ultimate lover of neighbor and lover of God. He is showing us what it looks like when we as humans are fully grown-up into the image we are called to bear. In fact, when we are fully human we won't be thinking of ourselves at all, whether good or bad. We will be marveling at and enjoying how much God loves us and wondering how we can best make Ms. Brown’s day, who just recently came down with a cold, a little easier. To love the LORD, your God with all your heart, soul, strength, mind and to love your neighbor as yourself – that is the life that Jesus has come to perfect in you and me.

Jesus Gives Us the Prayer

But this quality of life is not going to be easy in a world that crucifies the Messiah sent from God. So Jesus gives His friends one of the greatest gifts He could possibly give to them – He teaches them how to pray – **the LORD’s Prayer**. We might even say the LORD’s Prayer is one of the greatest benefits of the gospel, or as Tertullian described it, “the very essence of the gospel.”

There is only one place in all the Gospels where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them and it is found here in **Luke 11:1** where the disciples watch Jesus praying. Think of what it must have been like to go up to Jesus personally, face-to-face, and ask Him to teach you something. Think of all the centuries of knowledge we have gained about Jesus since He walked among us. If you could sit down with Jesus today and ask Him to teach you something, what would that be?

When He finished praying (because according to Jewish practice you don't interrupt someone in prayer to God; cf. *Mishnah Berurah*, Siman 104), one of them asked Jesus to teach them how to pray even as John taught His disciples how to pray (11:1). We might ask why the disciples wanted Jesus to teach them how to pray. After all, they already had a long tradition of God teaching His people how to pray, along with the priests in the temple and the scribes and elders in the synagogues, scattered throughout Israel. For instance, there is a long tradition at the time of Jesus of the Jewish people praying the *Shema* – “Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deut. 6:4), in the morning and the evening and usually followed by the *Shmoneh Esrei* (*Amidah*), or 18 (later 19) Benedictions, which includes prayers for:

- (1) Hallowing or Sanctification of God's name;
- (2) the coming of God to restore His Kingdom on earth and send the promised descendent of King David, the Messiah, to sit on God's throne;
- (3) the forgiveness of sins;
- (4) repentance and the strength live a life based on Torah;
- and (5) thanksgivings and praises for God's kingdom, power, and glory.

The great longing of the Jewish people, expressed here in the heart of their prayer, was for God to return to be Israel's King. **Psalm 96** reflects this longing well:

Psalm 96:10-13 ¹⁰ Say among the nations, "Yahweh is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity." ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy ¹³ before Yahweh; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

Or, as Isaiah says:

Isaiah 52:7-10 ⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." [i.e., "Your God is king"]. ⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. ⁹ Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Ever since the Jewish people began to return from exile, which they believed even in Jesus' day to be ongoing – i.e., the return from exile and the return of God's glorious presence in the temple was still not yet complete – was the return of God to be Israel's King – to establish His Kingdom where justice and righteousness would reign throughout all the earth.

As we turn to Jesus' teaching on prayer, we can see that this is the same passionate longing - for God to be King - that is found at the heart of Jesus' instruction in prayer. When one reads the prayer Jesus taught to His disciples, recorded here and a fuller version in **Matthew 6:9-13**, along the daily prayers of the Jewish people, we can conclude **that Jesus' prayer was thoroughly Jewish**, with a few caveats we will address. Jesus' story is not divorced from Israel's story but is rather the completion, the fulfillment of the hope of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in Jesus.

So, once again, we must ask why the disciples wanted Jesus to teach them how to pray, if they already had a very full litany of prayers which they had most likely prayed in the morning and evening of their whole life?

We might get something close to a definitive answer by noticing specifically what this disciple was asking Jesus - to teach them how to pray, "as John taught his disciples" (**11:1**). According to this disciple of Jesus, John had taught his students his own personal way of praying to God. This appears to be a way that students would show their solidarity or union with their rabbi by addressing God in a similar way as their master. Jesus' disciples now seek the same from their rabbi as a way of uniting with Him, maybe even a way of taking up their cross with Him.

So Jesus responds by giving them a pattern or model upon which they could shape their prayers around. It is not clear whether Jesus is merely giving the disciples the concerns which should be reflected in their own prayers, sort of like scaffolding upon which they could hang or wrap around their own prayers - or whether He expects these actual words to be included in all our prayers to God. Luke simply reports that Jesus said, "Why you pray, say" (**11:2**). Though the church has traditionally taught the former, one of the incredible blessings of Jesus' gift here to the church is that He has provided a standardized form of prayer that has been prayed by His followers across the globe for almost 2 millennia. I've always appreciated the unity of many different faiths (like Judaism) who despite the differences among them have a long tradition of daily praying the same prayers together around the world. In praying the LORD's Prayer we not only show our solidarity with Jesus but to His worldwide family - our brothers and sisters - around the world and throughout the centuries. Praying the "Our Father" can therefore become a way of expressing the unity Jesus prayed for for us in a body that is so sadly fragmented today (**cf. John 17:20-21**).

When you first look at Jesus' teaching on prayer there are a few things that you readily take note of. (1) Rather than giving a long diatribe on the practice of prayer, much like what you would read in the Jewish Mishnah, Jesus simply gives a prayer, as if to say the best way to learn how to pray to God is to take what Jesus gives you here and get on with it. There really is nothing more to add by way of some week-in and week-out instruction on how to do it; just take up the direction Jesus gives you and start talking to God.

(2) Along with that, what so many fellow believers have deeply appreciated throughout the centuries of the church about Jesus' teaching on prayer is the brevity, simplicity, and directness of Jesus' instruction. This is true even when one adds the differences recorded in Matthew's gospel:

When you compare the two records of the prayer, you will notice that Matthew's begins with the larger address adding "Our" and "who art in heaven" (**Matt. 6:9**) whereas Luke merely has the more direct, "Father" (**Lk. 11:2**). Further, Luke does not include the petition "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," which is most likely an expansion of the second petition for the coming of God's kingdom (**Matt. 6:10; Lk. 11:2**). Luke also omits the second half of the last petition "but deliver us from evil" (**Matt. 6:13; Lk. 11:4**). Luke also does not include the conclusion of the LORD's prayer we are so accustomed to pray, "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (**Matt. 6:13; Lk. 11:4**), which most likely was not original with Jesus either but was added later by those who copied the Gospels (see Metzger). Finally, Matthew's records Jesus saying "debts" and Luke's says the more classically religious, "sins" (**Matt. 6:12; Lk. 11:4**).

Most scholars argue that Matthew's recording is either the fuller prayer that Jesus actually taught and Luke must have shortened or these may have simply been two different recordings of two forms of prayer that Jesus taught.

Either way, the simplicity and directness of the prayer is breathtaking, when one thinks of how we as humans might stand before God Almighty, LORD of the Universe, and address Him with our petitions. A similar surprising facet of Jesus' teaching is His almost casual, conversational manner of teaching us how to approach God, as our Father. Jesus prayed in the language in which He also spoke, Aramaic, which was the common language of the Jewish people in His time. This means that when Jesus taught His disciples to pray to God, He taught them to address God the way He addressed God as "Abba," (**cf. Mk. 14:36**). Jesus shocks us by His teaching that we can in Him approach the very throne of God Almighty in our time of need and address Him as "Our Abba" (**cf. Heb. 4:14-16; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6**)! In fact, according to the apostle Paul, we could almost summarize the whole purpose of the plan of God in sending His Son into the world for this very reason – so that we might be enabled, by Him and in the Spirit to call upon God as "Abba!":

Galatians 4:4-7 ⁴ But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵ so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. ⁶ Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Amen! -SDG-