

Sermon on the Mount 3

Your Will be Done on earth as it is in heaven:

2. Practicing Righteousness (6:1-18)

⁶ “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

We need to see that in all that we do it is the work of the Father from beginning to end. In giving, it is from God through us. In all works of charity, it begins with the new heart that God puts in us. And in all that we do it is God who produces the outcome. This is because He has worked in our hearts to do what He wants us to do in order to secure His outcome. This is life in the Kingdom of God. What we do may not be logical to others or it may not produce the result it is designed to achieve, but God works things in His way. That is why we need to see beyond our actions to the God who is working within us.

This morning, we move on to the theme of prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. The prayer that Jesus taught us here, commonly known as the Lord’s Prayer, is often taken as a model prayer and repeated during services and gatherings. Yes, this is a model prayer as Jesus said, ‘Pray then in this way’ (v. 9). But this is more than a model prayer. The prayer is also a statement of the way of life in the Kingdom of God. It is also a prayer to the Triune God as we shall see later.

I am aware that many of us have our own thoughts regarding prayer. Some of those may be biblical and some may have come from human ways of thinking, but we need to see that again in the light of what Jesus is teaching here.

As always, we need to set this in the context of what Jesus has been teaching. Why is the Lord’s Prayer put in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount? Obviously, its context must be what Jesus had taught in the Sermon. We need to review that before going on.

Firstly, Jesus wants us to move from the culture of fairness or ‘an eye for an eye’ framework, i.e. the contractual framework, to a covenantal framework where fairness is not the issue. What then is the issue? It is the covenant love of God – a relational framework where there is acceptance of one another and forgiveness is inbuilt into the covenant relationship. It is no longer a question of whether I gain or lose out of the relationship. The question then is within the covenant relationship, how do I express myself?

Secondly, Jesus wants us to move from thinking in terms of ‘cause and effect’, i.e. thinking from action to outcome. We need to think in terms of the outcome that the Father has ordained. We saw that in the Beatitudes where we are not asked to work for the outcome. The outcome is stated. Also, in this prayer, it is not praying for an outcome of our choosing. We are to remain in the communion of the Son and the Father, in which communion is the security of the outcome.

Thirdly, the relational framework starts with a change in the heart which is the work of the Spirit of God. It is from the heart that all actions flow. That again is the work of God. Our righteousness is not in the actions but in the heart. He changes our hearts so that there is the integrity of the self, the oneness of the heart, mind and body. It is not spelling out the requirements of the law and then doing our best to fulfil that. That is why the Lord’s Prayer starts with the address to the Father. It is relational.

Jesus gives this warning before we pray. It is not a display of ourselves, but the deepening of our relationship with the Father.

⁵“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. ⁶But 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.

That is not to say that we cannot pray in public. There is a corporate nature of prayer, i.e. we pray as a body of God’s people with one purpose and one heart, and that is to acknowledge the God that we worship. Prayer is part of public worship. Someone leads us into presence of God and all of us say amen to that at the end.

Jesus also gives a second warning. We don’t need to be too wordy.

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. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus also warns against empty phrases and many words. Our contractual minds think that the more we pray, the more effective the result. So, we set up prayer wheels and record the hours of prayer thinking that the more we pray the more God will work. It is the cause and effect mode of thinking. When things do not go well in our lives or in the church, we have the simple cause that we do not pray enough. Well that may be so, but Jesus said, ‘Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him’ (v. 8).

Does our God need us to awaken Him to our needs? If so what kind of a god is he? Does our God need our constant repetition in order for Him to respond to us? No, that is not so. As Isaiah said,

²⁴Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear. (Is. 65:24)

God answers our prayers not because we pray. That would be a contractual way of thinking. He answers because it is in His will to do so. That is not to say that we do not need to pray. God said the converse in the psalms.

¹⁵Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” (Ps. 50:15)

God is saying, ‘Talk to me’. It is the communion of souls just like we talk to each other, whether we do it through SMS or email. It is still a form of communication. It has its place, but there is nothing like getting together and talking over a cup of tea or coffee or having a meal together, and just chatting. We often do that because we have business to talk over, but it is so much better when we have no agenda, but simply chatting and opening our hearts and soul to each other. That is relational and our modern structured and goal-oriented society has lost much of that. We will say more about that later when we look into the content of the Lord’s Prayer.

I include a few quotations from Calvin on prayer.

On the necessity of prayer.

Surely, with good reason the Heavenly Father affirms that the only stronghold of safety is in calling upon his name [cf. Joel 2:32]. By so doing we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sin, unto grace; and, in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us. Hence comes an extraordinary peace and repose to our consciences. For having disclosed to the Lord the necessity that was pressing upon us, we even rest fully in the thought that none of our ills is hid from him who, we are convinced, has both the will and the power to take the best care of us. (Calvin: Institutes III.xx.2)

Why do we need to pray?

... to what end the Lord instructed his people to pray, for he ordained it not so much for his own sake as for ours. Now he wills – as it is right – that his due be rendered to him, in recognition that everything men desire and account conducive to their own profit comes from him, and in the attestation of this by prayers.

Therefore, even though, while we grow dull and stupid toward our miseries, he watches and keeps guard on our behalf, and sometimes even helps us unasked, still it is very important to call upon him: First, that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor. (Calvin: Institutes III.xx.3)

Lastly, the plea for forgiveness of sins is the most important part of prayer.

To sum up: the beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt. Nor should anyone, however holy he may be, hope that he will obtain anything from God until he is freely reconciled to him: (Calvin: Institutes III.xx.9)

The Lord's Prayer

I need to point out a difference in the different translations regarding the Lord's Prayer. In the King James or Authorised version, at the end of the prayer, there is the insertion of the words, 'For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.' The NASB includes these words within brackets.

Now these words 'For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen', are not found in the NIV and the newer translation. The reason is that in the 1600s, the translators of the KJV used a manuscript (Massoretic) that had been corrupted, meaning it has many copying errors. Those words were probably inserted by those copying the text and they are very meaningful and appropriate. The biblical scholars have been able to get back to more ancient and more accurate texts and those words were not there. That is why the more modern translations have left them out. However, we have got used to those words and we continue to use them. They are beautiful and consistent with the thrust of scripture. That is why we continue to say them.

Following the address to the Father, we have three petitions to the nature of God (His name, Kingdom and will) and then three petitions to our own needs (give, forgive and deliver).

The Address - Our Father in heaven

In the prayer, Jesus taught firstly an acknowledgment of the Father 'Our Father in heaven'. Prayer is for those who know the Father. Until we come to God as Father, we will only be acknowledging some super being out there. The way to know the Father is through Jesus Christ who through the cross has brought us to the Father.

This is perhaps the most important acknowledgment in prayer and that is to know God as Father. So often we think we just need to pray to a god who will answer our prayers. We think of God as an almighty being and indeed He is. However, He is more than just an almighty being. He is our Father. This sets prayer in a relational context. Prayer is not just merely requests or thanks. It is talking and communicating with one whom we call Father.

Prayer, as we all know, is talking to God. When we talk to somebody, we acknowledge the person first. The way we acknowledge God is to call Him Father and He is our Father. We address God in the context of the corporate community in which we live. So, He is our Father. It signals an intimate relationship. He is not simply the Almighty or superlative Being. He is Father. Why is He Father? Because we come from Him. He is the Father who creates. He is also the God who will bring His creation to His desired outcome. He did it firstly in creation by the Triune Godhead. He did it through Jesus in redemption and His Spirit continues that work in our lives today. God is moving us all to fulfil His purpose for all creation.

One of the things I learnt is that our earthly father is not the model from which we understand our heavenly Father. Our heavenly Father is not like any earthly fathers that we know, no matter how good or exemplary they may be. This is a principle in trying to understand the things of God. We often use models or patterns that we know in working out the knowledge of God. You can't. There may be some similar characteristics but we can't use that as our starting point. Earthly models are defective. God is the perfect Father.

Many people are angry with God because they have a tyrannical father or a father who had abused them. This is not only so with fathers, but with mothers or siblings as well. In other words, when we have nasty experiences in the past, we often blame that onto God. We then form an image of an angry and vindictive image of God, the Father. We all grow up and live in the grace of God. However, we go about with our human explanations and framework, and expect God to fit in somewhere into our scheme. No, we need to transform our thinking and enter into God's framework of things. That is what knowing the heavenly Father is all about. It is giving up the earthly framework that we know to embrace the Father of all creation as revealed to us in the bible.

The way to know God as Father is to know the Son. We can only know the Father if we know the Son, i.e. Jesus Christ, because He takes us to the Father. We often tell ourselves that we are the sons of God or the children of God. We are not the children of God in our own right. We are the children of God in so far as we are in the Son, Jesus Christ. We are not to understand Jesus' sonship in terms of earthly categories, like father and mother and kiddies. Jesus' sonship is a reflection of what the Father is and He is in union with the Father in a perfect way. Jesus expresses the will and purpose of the Father, as He said in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Not my will but thine be done'. It is the closest and most intimate of all relationships and that is what being children of God entails.

Knowing and calling God as Father says two things. One is that we are His dependent children and secondly, we are in a family of brothers and sisters. It is relational.

To teach our dependence on God is a difficult thing to do because we see ourselves as independent beings. We have a will and we can do things to accomplish our desired result. Right from young our upbringing is towards an independence where we do not need to depend on anyone else but ourselves. I am not arguing against that, but simply to say that we need to acknowledge the mindset that we have. We see ourselves as an independent being and God is there to assist us in what we have planned to do with ourselves. If we are the children of God, then we need to pray as Jesus did, 'Not my will but thine be done'. That is not to say that we cannot have a will, but that as children of God, our will has merged with the will of God in a transformation by the Spirit of God. We need to think in terms of union of wills rather than working out a compromise of our wills. In this someone has to change and that is us. We do not achieve that by our volition, but by the transforming power of the Spirit of God.

Secondly, as we call God Father, we have come into a family of His people. Of course, there will be some who maintain a contractual relationship within a family. Jesus has warned that in the last days, there will be conflict by fathers against sons and brother against brother. That is the loss of covenant relationship. That is the loss of family relationship. That is not to acknowledge that we have a common Father. Prayer is for those who know the Father.

The Petitions

In the prayer that Jesus taught us, there are six petitions after the address to the Father. They are,

1. hallowed be your name.
2. Your kingdom come.
3. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
4. give us this day our daily bread,

5. forgive us our trespasses, and
6. lead us not into temptation,

The first three petitions in the prayer have to do with our acknowledgment of God. The next three petitions have to do with ourselves. Each of these petitions is a huge topic in itself. Much has been written and much more will be written on these issues in the future. For our purposes here, we will be brief and will touch on the gist of each of these.

1. hallowed be your name

God is holy. His name is holy. We are not to defile His name or use it in vain. This has been given to us in the commandments by Moses. The name of the person identifies the person and all that the person is. None of us would want to see our name identified with characteristics that we are not, whether that be something degrading or lifted up.

Our Father is holy, so we too are holy. However, this holiness is not something that is imparted to us as if we can possess it. Neither can we work to obtain it. That is not to say that we live our lives anyway we like and have no regard for the ethical. Holiness is the nature of God and we are holy only as we are in Him. God's holiness is ethical, but it is firstly relational. It is conferred on us through Christ. What this means is that holiness is not a thing that we achieve in our own right by our actions. Saints in the past had withdrawn from the world to attain to holiness. They have withdrawn from marriage and recreation, etc. in order to attain to holiness. They never will. It is not imparted or given by God as if we can be holy in our own right. It is conferred as we are united with the Father through the son, Jesus Christ and effected by the Spirit of God.

Holiness implies the presence of God and not our works. This is best seen in Moses encounter with God at the burning bush. Moses was told to 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground' (Ex. 3:5). Why was the ground holy? It was because of God's presence. After that event, the ground was no longer holy because God was no longer present. So, holiness is not something that we can possess outside of the presence of God.

When we acknowledge the holiness of God, we are acknowledging our relationship with Him and what He has done to effect that. We are not just saying that God is holy, but we are saying that because He is holy, He has redeemed His wayward creation, i.e. us, through the sacrifice of His Son and conferred on us that holiness. How great and majestic is that holiness.

2. Your kingdom come

The Sermon on the Mount is not about people coming into the Kingdom of God. It is also not teaching on how to enter the Kingdom. It is about people who are in the Kingdom of God. It is teaching on Kingdom living, i.e. for those who are in the Kingdom. Take the first and the last of the beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

If we want to understand this as condition for entering the Kingdom, then we must go and seek persecution. That would be bizarre and certainly not what Jesus is teaching. Jesus' teaching is about the Kingdom of God and the rule of God. It is not about us and what we do in a primary way. When our focus is primarily about what we do, then we have missed the point. The point is what God is doing. The Kingdom of God is about the King.

The Kingdom of God is not a territory or an area of jurisdiction. It is the coming of Jesus. The Kingdom is Jesus. He is the King. In acknowledging the Kingdom of God we are also acknowledging the King.

It infers submission and obedience to the King Jesus. We do not decide to enter into the Kingdom. We are brought into the Kingdom through the cross of Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom of God is simply the rule of God. He rules regardless whether we are submissive to Him or not. Antagonism to the rule of God is present and will continue until the time when Jesus comes again. All rebellion to His Kingdom will be dealt with at that time. Until then, we live with the constant irritation to the people of God and often from the people of God.

We often say that we extend the Kingdom of by our ministry or works. That is not so. If that is true then it would say that God's Kingdom is deficient and we are then His Kingdom builders. Yes, we work or minister within the Kingdom of God, but that is by participating in the work that God is doing. God will bring His Kingdom to His desired fulfillment in due course. We do not know when. He is King and He is constantly working even though we are not aware of it. He will fulfill His purpose whether we participate or not. Of course, there will be consequences for not participating. Jonah chose not to participate in the call of God. Eventually he did and Nineveh repented. God wants His purpose fulfilled through human instrumentality because He has created them for this purpose.

The acknowledgment of God's Kingdom is to acknowledge that He will fulfill His purpose on earth. It takes us away from our outcome orientation as if we have a formula to bring about anything we desire. I do not say that we do not do the work of God's Kingdom, but that work is in participation with the will of God and to this we will now address.

3. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

These are perhaps the most difficult words for us to say. It demands submission to the Creator Father. It demands a denial of self. It demands an acknowledgment of the other person. It would be sheer hypocrisy to pray this prayer and then go out to insist on our own will upon others.

In so many of our relationships, there are contests of wills. Just look at the husband-wife relationship or the parent-child relationships. It is the will of one against the other. Oftentimes compromises are made to maintain the relationship. That is not the ideal situation. In so many of our disputes or struggles, how many times do we ask the question, 'What is the will of the Lord in this matter?' We don't. If we do, we may say, 'Let's pray about it' as a delaying tactic until we marshal our arguments or troops for a more decisive vote.

The work of God in us is to bring us into one with Him, into a union of wills, where what we will is the will of God. We may not be there in a perfect way, but at least we know where we are heading. The prayer is an acknowledgment that we are one with God in this. In all our interactions or struggles, the one issue is not what the best outcome is or what the best approach is, but what the will of the Lord is. Unless we are focused in this way, then we will be groping about in the dark only to run and knock over one another. When we are focused on the will of God, then we are not only one with God, but also one with each other.

Take the other story of Jacob moving his family into Egypt. It was met with disaster. The brothers tried to kill Joseph and eventually sold him to slave traders. The brothers did an unethical thing. Is that the will of God? God turned evil into good. Joseph said what was meant as evil by human, God turned that into good. Joseph saved the known world then from the famine which had the potential to destroy millions. He saved the chosen people of God in the process. That was the will of God.

I am not saying that we throw ethics out of the window. What I am trying to do is to underline the fact that perfection is not something we can achieve, however hard we try. The only way we can achieve perfection is to spell out every detail of what one needs to do in a situation and stick to it rigidly like the Pharisees. Of course, unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, we cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven. We live in dependence on the creator and so we pray, 'thy will be done'.

Give us this day our daily bread

We may theologise on the bread as the living bread, Jesus Christ. While that is true, I don't think that this is what Jesus is referring to here. This is the bread or rice on the table for our daily needs. It is a reference to the manna that God gave to the Israelites in the wilderness.

This appears a meaningless prayer to many of us. How many of us pray this and really mean it? We may perhaps pray, 'Give us this day the abundance of our superannuation return'. This may perhaps have more meaning to people today. It will certainly strike a chord with us.

It is all that God gives to us each day for our needs. It is His blessing to us. The blessing of God is for the community in which we live. It is service to the community and the daily bread is the support to us for rendering this service. So now, as I pray this, it is more than just the daily bread. It is also a thank you to God for the blessing that He has given me. It is acknowledging Him for the calling to serve the community in which He has placed me. This is God's blessing to His creation.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors

This may appear as a conditional statement, i.e. a contractual one. No, it is not. We cannot learn to forgive until we have experienced the forgiveness that comes from the cross of Jesus. We forgive because we have been forgiven. To forgive another is not an easy thing to do. It does not come naturally to people. We harbour the anger and the hatred because we have been hurt. That is a heavy burden to live with. Someone had said this and I do not know where this comes from. Hatred hurts the hater more than the hated. I know that it does not come from the bible, but it is an application of biblical truth.

You may remember the story in Pilgrim's Progress. Pilgrim was carrying this burden on his back and part of the burden is hatred. When he came to the cross, the burden came off his back and what a relief it was. I do not say that forgiveness is easy after that, but each time, we can draw from that experience. This is the redemptive blessing from God.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one

The translation, 'Lead us not into temptation' is a bit misleading. God does not lead us into temptation as if He puts something in front of us to see if we fall for it. God does not tempt us that way. Rather we should try to understand the second half first. God delivers us from the evil one. Satan and evil will be there to trap us. It is part of the rebellion within the Kingdom of God. We will face that all the time. What we are praying for is that in God's grace, He will give us the strength to face the temptation of the evil one and not fall for it.

We are led into temptations by the deceit of our hearts. Don't blame God for that. The way we can avoid falling into temptation is by following closely the Spirit of God. Put in another way, if the Spirit dwells in us and we are listening to the prompting of the Spirit with us, we will not go the way of temptation, because the Spirit does not lead us that way.

So, to pray that God will not lead us into temptation is to pray that He will take hold of us so closely that we would not stray into those areas. It is a prayer that God will so strengthen us that we will not be tempted by the evil around us. It is by His power that He sustains us and delivers us from the evil one.

Yes, we will continue to be tempted by money and the desires of the flesh. These things are with us and will be with us. But if we are dead with Christ on the cross and dead to this world then this is the strength of the Lord to withstand these pressures on us.

It has to be noted again that we cannot withstand the evil with our own strength. It is only as we are in Christ and in the Spirit that we have this strength. It is like holiness. It cannot be achieved apart from our union with God through Christ and the Spirit. You may say that this is a Trinitarian holiness. This is the sustaining blessing of God.

Postscript

Why is the Lord's Prayer set in the Sermon on the Mount and in particular in this section just after almsgiving?

The Sermon on the Mount is not about what we can do to enter the Kingdom of God. It is about the life that should be lived in the Kingdom. It is about covenantal relationship and what God has done for us. Thus, the prayer is not about asking God to give us what we need, and worse still to pray as if God does not know our needs. Prayer is the acknowledgment of who God is and what He is doing. To pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread' is not a request for daily bread, but an acknowledgment of all that God has blessed us with in creating us so that we are able to go about not only for our livelihood, but more importantly in relating with Him. To pray for forgiveness is the acknowledgment of the gracious love of the Father and how could we live if we continue to harbour hatred. To pray for deliverance from the evil is essential as we are daily impacted by the deceit of the evil one. How many times the Lord has delivered us from the evil one, we will never know.

I conclude with a Trinitarian structure of the Lord's Prayer. It should really be called The Trinitarian Prayer.

A Structure of the Lord's Prayer

It is quite obvious that the Kingdom and forgiveness belong to the realm of the Son, and the will and deliverance belong to the realm of the Spirit. And then it is through the Son (Kingdom) and the Spirit (power), that the glory returns to the Father. Though the concluding doxology was added on later, it makes perfect sense to put it there.

Prayer addressed to the Father from His dependent children		
Hallowed be Thy name	The creator God	Give us this day our daily bread
Thy Kingdom come	The redemptive God	Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven	The sustaining God	Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and glory for ever. Amen.		