

Sunday February 18, 2024
Lesson 12: Pray Like This
Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13

Context:

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. We continue our final unit titled “Faithful Prayer.” In lessons with faithful prayer, we will both learn what prayer is and how this discipline applies to our walk with Christ. Today’s lesson will be to focus on the Lord’s Prayer to better understand Jesus’ priorities for kingdom living.

Our lesson comes from the gospel of Matthew, one of the biographies of Jesus in the New Testament. Throughout this gospel, Jesus is a teacher, the new Moses coming to give people an understanding of the law and instruction on daily living. Last week we started with a part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and we continue there as Jesus gives instruction on private prayer. After instructing those listening on how to pray privately, Jesus gives them instructions on how to pray. What he gives them is known as the Lord’s Prayer, a prayer to be used in corporate worship as well as private prayer.

There are several interesting components to the Lord’s Prayer which invite us to examine the original audience of Jesus as well as his priorities for those who claim to follow him. The most noticeable characteristic of the Lord’s Prayer to many scholars and early adherents of the faith would have been its Jewishness as every phrase has ties to Jewish literature and theology.¹ What is interesting is there are Christian elements missing such as a prayer for the return of Jesus the Messiah or supplication for the church.² Yet this also fits with the broader theme of Matthew writing to an audience of Jewish Christians who were trying to articulate their faith with ties to both worlds.

There are two major sections to the prayer which go back and forth. For every section with “you,” there is a corresponding “we” petition.³ Most of the lines are self-explanatory and give direction and understanding to how those who follow Jesus are to believe as well as respond to God. The opening petition after “Our Father,” reflects the Jewish title not just given to a biological father, but to a respected older man within a community.⁴ The petition “hallowed be thy name,” is perhaps the most mysterious to modern readers yet speaks to a focus on acknowledging the sovereignty of God.⁵ This ties to the following line of God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. There is praise for the bread God gives and there is also a plea for forgiveness from God alongside an acknowledgment of forgiving others. The final plea is for those who follow God to be delivered from evil.

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 66.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 68.

This prayer gives the disciples a way to pray and emphasizes all things lead back to God. Jesus brought the kingdom with him as he preached and taught. Yet Jesus also gave an invitation with this prayer. Only God can truly sanctify God's name, yet God's name is hallowed as we witness to his nature by caring for the poor, forgiving those who have trespassed against us, and resisting temptation.⁶ The prayer is a plea for God to intervene through us and for us to be an effective witness to God's kingdom.

Application

Of all the prayers I pray with people, none perhaps comes quicker to the lips of all ages than the Lord's Prayer. A senior adult with Dementia or Alzheimer's Disease may not remember their names or the names of their relatives, but when you invite them to pray as Jesus prayed, the words flow right out, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." They go through the whole prayer and for but a brief moment, you can see them as they were from the years where they knew their name and so much more.

I've always been thankful the Holy Spirit gives us these kinds of moments in the face of diseases and changing life dynamics. It is a reminder of how while many things change, prayer and God does not change. God is always at work in our lives from the time we are born until the time we die.

Yet Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer for other reasons as well. Beyond being able to recite the prayer whether we are in corporate worship or uttering the words in the midst of receiving Holy Communion with the homebound, the Lord's Prayer gives us a pattern for daily living. Each line affirms how God would have us both believe and act as individuals who follow Jesus. If we take the prayer seriously, we might even have our toes stepped upon as the Lord gives us certain things to consider as well as act upon.

Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer give us what we might call "rules for the kingdom." Now we might struggle if we are in the United States of America using this term "kingdom." We live in a democracy, where everyone gets a vote and a say. Rules are made by consensus of the people and we enjoy having three different branches to hold each other to account. There is balance as there is no supreme monarch to lord over us what we can and cannot do.

For Christians though, we do belong to a kingdom. We belong to the kingdom of God, and we are citizens of heaven, those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. This means, regardless of what others might do and say in our republics and democracies, we are held to a different standard by the one we follow.

Kingdom living steps on our toes. For one thing, the one who is over everything is God who rules over the heavens and the earth. We may indeed follow the laws of the nations where we live and yet God has different things God expects of us as subjects. For one thing, this is the same God who created the heavens and the earth and it is God's name to be praised, not other individuals or mini gods we worship.

Another thing is God is the one over the kingdom; not us. God invites all and when it comes to God's will there is always the question of whether our actions are for our glory or God's glory. Do our actions help ourselves and bring division, or do they bring goodness to all and hope to many? This might make us think better of actions and consider if something is our will or the will of God.

⁶ Ibid., 71.

Something else which is part of kingdom rules is being grateful for the bread on our table and not overreaching for more. And then there is the act of forgiveness where we ask God to forgive us as we acknowledge giving our forgiveness for those who trespass against us. In God's kingdom, grudges and vindictiveness are against the rule. Those who nurse or act on them end up not furthering the kingdom. If anything, they split the kingdom up and cause heartache both to people they say they love as well as themselves.

And finally in kingdom rules, we ask God to lead us away from temptation and deliver us from evil. We name how the culprit isn't some little figure in a red suit with a pitchfork to make us do something. It is we who make the choice to participate in evil. In kingdom rule, we admit we cannot do it by ourselves. We name we need God to reign over our lives.

It's a risky prayer, isn't it? Kingdom living means we throw away to a degree the American self-sufficiency we've been taught and ask for God to be the sovereign one in our lives. We acknowledge the way we do things isn't always the right way to do things. We need the Lord.

Thus, Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer to remind us he has the way for us. It may be hard, and it may be difficult. Yet Jesus comes to walk with us and boldly declare as his disciples who we are as his children. Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer not to shame or attack us. Instead, he gives us the prayer so we might connect piety with daily life and see how his kingdom offers us true grace, love, and goodness.

When did you learn the Lord's Prayer? Why do you think the Lord's Prayer is so important for the Christian journey today? How do rules of God's kingdom differ from the rules of the world? Why is it important to occasionally study the words of the Lord's Prayer? Which one of these lines of the Lord's Prayer is speaking to you today?