

### Praying the Lord's Prayer

According to my records, this is the 471<sup>st</sup> sermon I've preached at Salina Mennonite Church. I'm confident that there's only one person who has been present for all 471 of those sermons. (I'll let you figure out who that would be.) But I'm sure many of you have heard me preach more than 400 times.

I wonder what scripture, phrase, or concept you think I've said or spoken about most often from this pulpit. The phrase is likely *Thanks be to God*. I end many of my sermons that way. I used to pray words from Psalm 19 at the beginning of every sermon. *Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*<sup>1</sup> (I'm not sure when or why I stopped praying that out loud. It's the prayer I carry in my heart every time I preach.)

I would venture that the scripture I've quoted most often is found in Matthew 22. When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus replies, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*<sup>2</sup> In Mark 12, Jesus adds *with all your strength* to the description of how to love God and ends by saying, *There is no commandment greater than these.*<sup>3</sup> Loving God with everything you are and loving your neighbor as yourself are concepts I hope you've heard from me over and over and over again.

A word I've used multiple times is *shalom*. The Hebrew word *shalom* means *peace*. It signifies all of life being complete, healthy, and whole. Shalom is a broad vision for what God intends our world to be. It isn't just the absence of war or violence. Rather peace has multiple aspects: peace with God, self, others, and creation.

Salvation is about shalom. God's goal throughout the Bible and into our contemporary world, isn't only a narrow salvation of individuals for a future heaven. Jesus didn't come into the world simply to save souls but to illustrate and offer a deep salvation that transforms people and all of creation into restored, right relationships.

I think Jesus' two greatest commandments and the concept of shalom are the essence of the gospel. I hope you've heard them from me many, many times. And we'll hear about them multiple times this summer because our theme is *Seeking Peace Together*.<sup>4</sup> Our scripture readings during the next three months will help us think about, seek, and experience peace with God, peace within, peace with others, and peace with creation. These are familiar concepts that can be difficult to experience. It's good for us to hear about them repeatedly and to seek them together.

This week's passage from the Gospel of Matthew is part of Jesus' teaching about faithful prayer. It is a fitting place to begin our journey of seeking peace together. Prayer is the foundation of our peace—our peace with God, of course, and also our peace within ourselves, with other people, and with creation. In a world filled with stress, unrest, and violence, we can't hope to be agents of peace without a deep and abiding connection to God. This connection is formed and nurtured through prayer.

One day Jesus' disciples came to him and asked, *Lord, teach us to pray.*<sup>5</sup> As part of the Jewish religious tradition, they had already been steeped in prayer from childhood, both at home and in the temple. Surely, they already knew how to pray, and yet they also knew they needed to learn more. Just as other rabbis at that time taught their disciples to pray,<sup>6</sup> Jesus responded by teaching his disciples this prayer:

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 19:14

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:37-40

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:29-31

<sup>4</sup> This sermon draws from the Week One Prepare Essay and Sermon Notes written by Joanna Harader, *Current: Seeking Peace Together*, a digital curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#)

<sup>5</sup> Luke 11:1

<sup>6</sup> The remainder of the sermon draws heavily from *Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal* by April Yamasaki, Herald Press, 2013, pp. 103-110.

*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*<sup>7</sup>

We say this prayer together every week. The words we use aren't exactly the same as in any particular Bible translation, but they're closer to the King James Version than to any other. (We'll look at several other translations during this sermon.) Sunday morning guests may experience some uncertainty about which words to use: *which art* or *who art*; *thy* or *your*; *debts and debtors* or *trespasses and those who trespass* or *sins and sinners*. Do we stop after *deliver us from evil* or do we end with *For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever*? (The ending words are in some Greek manuscripts but not in others. That's why some translations include them, and others do not.) Guests may hesitate, but for regular attenders, the words and rhythm of the prayer have become so much a part of us that we can easily finish the prayer without thinking.

In the Sermon on the Mount, just before Jesus teaches his disciples this prayer, he warns them to avoid heaping up *empty phrases* or, as the King James Version puts it, to avoid *vain repetitions*.<sup>8</sup> It's possible for the Lord's Prayer to become that – to become nothing more than an empty ritual, repeated over and over without real meaning, without reflection or sincerity. I wonder how you experience it each week.

In the early church, the Lord's Prayer was a carefully guarded secret, reserved only for those who were baptized. The prayer Jesus gave to his disciples expressed what it meant for them to be part of God's kingdom. In the ancient household, the father and patriarch always had the last word. In contrast, the Lord's Prayer is addressed to God, a higher authority. In ancient Roman culture, Caesar was king. In contrast, the prayer Jesus taught looks toward another kingdom, with another King who rules over the earth and heaven. This prayer was at odds with its surrounding culture, and in the ancient world, that meant it could be dangerous to pray it.

Today, the Lord's Prayer is just as radical. In a North American culture that tends to focus on the individual and to privatize religion, the Lord's Prayer insists on *our* Father, not *my* Father, and addresses the physical and spiritual needs that we have in common with all people. In our human culture, which is all too familiar with politics and power struggles, with broken relationships and abuse, this prayer appeals to a perfect Father and King who is compassionate, faithful, protective, and eternal. In the ancient world and today, the Lord's Prayer was and is countercultural.

*Our Father who is in heaven,  
uphold the holiness of your name.  
Bring in your kingdom  
so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven.  
Give us the bread we need for today.  
Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you,  
just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.  
And don't lead us into temptation,  
but rescue us from the evil one.*<sup>9</sup>

Has this prayer lost its impact and intensity? Has familiarity robbed it of its meaning and power? When we pray, are we simply babbling or rambling? Not necessarily, not all repetition is useless or vain. Repeating the same words numerous times isn't always heaping up empty phrases.

At our Holy Week services this year, we sang several songs from the Taizé community. On Maundy Thursday we sang the same words multiple times: *Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone, O*

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:9-13, *King James Version*

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6:7-8

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 6:9-13, *Common English Bible*

*Lord, are holy. Come and fill our hearts with your peace, alleluia.*<sup>10</sup> Each time we sang, the instrumental accompaniment was a bit different, weaving over and under and through the words: *Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone, O Lord, are holy. Come and fill our hearts with your peace, alleluia.* At times all of us sang; other times some of us listened. Sometimes we sang louder; sometimes we sang softly. *Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone, O Lord, are holy. Come and fill our hearts with your peace, alleluia.*

Yes, it was repetition, but it certainly was not an empty ritual as we sang our prayer to God, expressed our longing for God, and were drawn into worship. One of the reasons the repetition in Taizé music is so powerful is that it reflects God's grace – there's always another chance to *get it right*. The eventual comfort with the repetition allows a person to experience the words and music deep in their being and, perhaps, to take risks and sing something different on top of the repeated chant.

So it is with praying the Lord's Prayer. If we pray it once or occasionally, we may feel we know it. But as we pray it again and again, turning the phrases over and over until they become the cry of our hearts, we gain a deeper appreciation for God's grace and take a leap of faith. God's forgiveness always gives us another chance to *get it right*. We gain a deeper appreciation for God's power that allows us to take new risks.

*Our Father in heaven, may your name always be kept holy.  
May your kingdom come and what you want be done, here on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us the food we need for each day.  
Forgive us for our sins, just as we have forgiven those who sinned against us.  
And do not cause us to be tempted, but save us from the Evil One.  
[The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.]*<sup>11</sup>

Repetition can also help to develop us as people of prayer when we find prayer difficult. When feeling unfocused and not sure what or how to pray, we can always pray this prayer. In times of great need and distress, when we're so angry or so depressed or so upset that we can't pray, times when we really need to pray the most but find ourselves avoiding prayer, we can still pray the prayer Jesus taught. At those times when prayer seems to make no sense at all, repeating the Lord's Prayer can carry us into God's presence.

It's not exactly clear that Jesus intended the Lord's Prayer to be repeated word for word each time. To his disciples, he said simply, *Pray then in this way*,<sup>12</sup> which could mean that this prayer was meant to be an example, an outline, a model for prayer. After all, the Lord's Prayer appears in Scripture as part of Jesus' teaching about persistence in prayer, answers to prayer, praying in faith, praying in humility, praying and fasting, praying and hypocrisy, praying and forgiveness.<sup>13</sup> As part of this broader teaching, we might understand the Lord's Prayer as a guide to prayer, a model prayer that shows us how to pray.

*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 do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*<sup>14</sup>

The Lord's Prayer begins with *Our Father in heaven*. It's not just *my* Father, but *our* Father. It's not a narrow me-myself-and-I approach to God, but a broad, corporate address that's carried through the rest of the prayer as it speaks of *our* daily bread, *our* debts, delivering *us* from the evil one. The entire prayer includes other people before our common creator. God is not a remote being who set the world in motion and then

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<sup>10</sup> *Confitemini Domino (Come and Fill Our Hearts)*, Jacques Berthier, ©0982, 0991, 2011 Les Presses de Taizé (admin. GIA Publications, Inc.); reprinted under OneLicense.net A-724774

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:9-13, *New Century Version*

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 6:9

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 6:1-18; Luke 11:5-13

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 6:9-13, *New Revised Standard Version*.

disappeared. God is a good parent who has a close relationship with their children. There is a sense of intimacy, and yet a sense of reverence toward our heavenly parent.

By the way, while the Bible includes masculine, feminine, and non-gendered images of God, it's difficult to pray this prayer without using the word *father*. On the Bible Gateway website which includes more than 60 English translations, every one of them uses the word *father* to begin the prayer.<sup>15</sup> One Bible I have on my shelf that doesn't use it loses much of the communal nature of the prayer.

*Abba God in heaven, hallowed be your name!*

*May your reign come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven:  
give us today the bread of Tomorrow.*

*And forgive us our debts, as we hereby forgive those who are indebted to us.*

*Don't put us to the test, but free us from evil.*<sup>16</sup>

The Lord's Prayer can serve as a reality check for the rest of our prayer life. If we pray only for ourselves with no thought of others, then our prayers fall short of Jesus' teaching, because the prayer he taught includes other people. If we pray to God only in formal terms with formal language, we miss the intimacy of the Lord's Prayer with God as loving parent. If we pray to God only in familiar terms as our friend and good buddy, we again miss the fullness of Jesus' teaching, for there is also a sense of God's otherness, of God's holiness.

After addressing God in heaven," the prayer continues with seven requests: *Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done. Give us our daily bread. Forgive us our debts. Do not bring us into trial. Deliver us from the evil one.* At first glance, these seven requests might seem separate, like individual pearls strung together on the same string but otherwise unrelated. On closer inspection, they fall quite naturally into two groups. The first three requests focus our attention on God: hallowed be *your* name, may *your* kingdom come, may *your* will be done. The last four requests are more about us as human beings: give *us* our daily bread, forgive *us*, do not bring *us* into trial, deliver *us* from the evil one.

We might think of the first part of the prayer centered on God, with the last part focusing more on human concerns, both on our physical needs for sustenance and on our spiritual needs for forgiveness and deliverance from evil. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus doesn't separate the concerns of God and the concerns of people. He doesn't separate our physical needs from our spiritual needs. He doesn't separate the global need for God's will on earth and the more personal need for food. All these concerns belong together.

If we pray only for ourselves and never for the glory of God, then according to Jesus' teaching our prayers are incomplete. If we pray only for physical needs and neglect the spiritual ones, or pray only for spiritual needs and neglect the physical ones, then our prayers are missing their other half. If we ignore the concerns of the world, then our prayers are simply too small. But if we pray as Jesus taught us, our prayers engage our whole selves and our whole community and world. Our prayers are enlarged and reshaped, and in turn enlarge and reshape us.

All our prayers – personal and communal, spontaneous or written in advance, ancient or new – can move us toward peace with God. As Jesus suggests with the prayer he taught, prayer shouldn't be done for status or show; rather, prayer should be pursued as a means of being in relationship with God. Be assured that God welcomes and blesses all the ways that you reach out in prayer with all your heart, with all our soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. God blesses all the ways you use prayer to help you love your neighbor as yourself. God blesses all the ways we use prayer to seek peace together.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>15</sup> [Matthew 6:9 - Bible Gateway](#)

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 6:9-13, *The Inclusive Bible*