

## Matthew 6:9-15

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*'Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.'* 1Peter 5:7

**CONTEXT & THEME:** *'This then is how you should pray...'*

Jesus condemned showy, hypocritical prayers which are aimed at impressing men or meaningless babbling that supposes God will eventually answer because of sheer weight of words. By contrast he teaches that true prayer is grounded in a knowledge of God as Father. He then gives us a model of the kind of prayer which God delights to answer. This is not the *only* model prayer in the Bible. But it is the most foundational...

Note that Jesus says in verse 9 that this is *how* you should pray, not *what* you should pray. In other words, we are not to repeat these words as a mantra. Instead they are a model, showing us how to shape our prayers in a way that is pleasing and honouring to God. There would be a certain irony if we responded to this text by praying the Lord's prayer as a mantra each day. Vain repetition was the characteristic of pagan prayer in v.7!

Note too that God's knowledge of all we need (v.8) does not make prayer pointless, but rather fuels real prayer. It is worth praying to this God, because he knows better than we do what we truly need and how best to answer our requests.

The prayer is structured neatly in 2 sets of 3 requests. The first set focusses on God and the second on ourselves.

### 1. *'Our Father in heaven'*

This would have been breath-taking to a first century Jew; it should be to us too. Jesus is saying God is as accessible to us in prayer as the most loving parent is to their precious child. This is what he achieved for us in his death and resurrection (see John 20:17; 1John 3:1). The intimacy of *'Our Father'* is immediately balanced with a reminder of his sovereignty and majesty as the one who dwells far above us (in every sense of the word). We must never let our confidence in our access to God stray into irreverence. His fatherly welcome does not mean that he is less awesome and transcendent than we thought. He remains the majestic, terrifying God of Exodus and Isaiah. That is what makes *'our Father'* such a stunning privilege. The early church used to pray *'Grant that we may dare to call on thee as Father...'*

It's easy to miss that the first word of the prayer is corporate: not *'My'*, but *'Our'*. We do have a personal relationship with God, but it is as part of a family. That is part of the privilege! Note too that the later petitions are also corporate. I am not asking God just for *'my'* daily bread, but for *'ours'*. We are encouraged to have broader concerns than just me and my little world.

*'You sum up the whole of the New Testament religion if you describe it as a knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's*

*child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.'* JI Packer

## 2. 'Hallowed be your name'

The first concern in prayer is not me and my needs – not even the forgiveness of my sins. It is that God's name (that is his person and character) are treated with the respect and honour he deserves. Indeed, God's character and concerns are the sole focus on the entire first half of the prayer. True prayer begins with worship. To hallow is to treat something with reverence and honour. This petition rules out a casual use of the Lord's name on our lips: '*for God's sake*' is not a phrase a Christian should ever use. More than that, it is a longing that the creation would live out its true purpose of reflecting the glory of God.

In practical terms this looks like beginning ones prayers by praising God for what we have learned about his character as we have read his word (one reason it's sensible to read your Bible before praying – though of course we should also pray for God's help before we read the Bible!)

## 3. 'Your kingdom come'

God rules the whole world, but his kingdom in the NT usually refers to the spread of the rule of Jesus as more people bow to him as Lord and Saviour. The kingdom has already arrived with the coming of Jesus, but it is not seen yet in its full glory – we see the sapling already planted, but we long for the day the full, magnificent tree is fully grown. This prayer is answered in Revelation 11:15: '*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.*' This is a prayer for evangelism, for the spread of the gospel.

Additionally, our greatest hope is for the return of the Lord Jesus to establish of his kingdom in full. Our very best day in the fallen creation cannot match what is to come. So we pray '*Come Lord Jesus!*' (the final prayer of the Bible, Rev 22:20).

## 4. 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'

Jesus prayed in the garden '*not my will, but yours be done*' (Matt 26:39). We pray this prayer for our world as we long for God's wise and good laws to be followed so people might flourish. We pray this too for ourselves. As we do so, we are committing to two things: i. to learning and understanding more deeply what God's will is. In this sense his '*will*' is not about guidance for which job I take, but his moral will – obedience to his commands. As well as learning his will, we are committing ii. to living it out obediently.

## 5. 'Give us this day our daily bread'

The focus now shifts from God to our needs. This petition reminds us that ultimately all that we have and enjoy comes from God (Jas 1:17; 1Cor 4:7). It is so easy to forget that in the affluent west, so praying this prayer each day is particularly important for us. Two things about the content of this request: i. it is for daily provision. We want long-term security in this world; Jesus calls us to develop a daily dependence on God, matching that of the Israelites with manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16). ii. it is for bread, not cake... God is abundantly good, but he encourages us to pray for what we really need in this life, not for all we could possibly want.

It is not wrong to pray for 'cake' but what is the focus and emphasis of our prayers?

6. *'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.'*

Given the parallel in verse 14, it is clear that spiritual debts are in view in the plea of verse 12. The parable in Matt 18:23-35 expands on this idea. The point is not of course that we earn our forgiveness from God by forgiving others. The point is that those who have truly turned to God and received his forgiveness will inevitably be marked by a willingness to forgive others. An unforgiving spirit shows we have not received forgiveness ourselves.

7. *'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one'*

The final petition recognises that we are fallible and easily give in to temptation. Indwelling sin remains deeply powerful in the life of God's children (Romans 7:14-25). Therefore we must seek God's protection. We are not to think that God might lead us into temptation. It's just an emphatic way of saying *'lead us in the very opposite way from temptation's path.'* We pray to the shepherd king to lead us (Psalm 23) confident with Paul that *'the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.'*

\*the common liturgical form of the prayer has the familiar concluding doxology *'For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.'* It is possible that this later addition was drawn from the prayer in 1Chronicles 29:10-13.

## APPLICATION

Pray. Like this. Daily.

Richard Coekin's book *Our Father* is a very helpful and readable exposition of the Lord's prayer, showing in practical detail what it looks like to pray the various petitions contained in it.

## QUESTIONS

- What kind of things do we pray for most often?
- Read Matthew 6:9-15. What kind of things does Jesus say we should pray for?

We will discuss the prayer phrase by phrase aiming to finish at 8.30pm. At that point there will be brief interview on prayer, followed by time back in groups to pray.

### *'Our Father in heaven'*

- What has Jesus been teaching about prayer in 6:5-8?
- What is the significance of the words *'Our'* *'Father'* and *'in heaven'*?
- How does this show a different understanding of prayer to that of the hypocrites and pagans in 6:1-8?

### *'Hallowed be your name'*

- What does it mean to pray this?
- What does it look like to *not* revere God's name?
- How can we hallow/honour God's name as we pray?

- Do we spend time in our prayers praising God for who he is? If not, why not?

## *'Your kingdom come'*

- Is God's kingdom geographical or spiritual?
- In what sense is God's kingdom not yet here?
- When will his kingdom come? (*as people become Christians; when Jesus returns*)
- What things do you long for in life so much that you'd be tempted to want Jesus to delay coming back until you've/we've had a chance to experience them?

## *'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'*

- What is the driving force of Jesus' teaching here?
- Why is it a mistake to think this is primarily a prayer that I would know what job to take etc?
  - What kind of things should we praying for ourselves in the light of this petition?

## *'Give us this day our daily bread'*

- What easily neglected truth do we remind ourselves of when we pray this each day?
- Why is it significant that this is a prayer for bread and not cake?
  - Is it wrong to pray for things that aren't strictly necessary but that are good gifts of God? When might it be wrong to pray for these things?

## *'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...'*

- Read v.14-15 after v.12. How does this help us understand what he means by 'debts'?
- Given that the NT is clear that salvation is not earned (Eph 2:8-9), what do you think Jesus' point is here?
  - What should we say to those who have been deeply wronged and are struggling to forgive?

## *'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one'*

- Put this prayer into your own words.
- Why do we need to pray this daily?
  - Why is this a better prayer than '*help us be strong in the face of temptation*'?