

*The Lord and His Prayer*  
FIRST THINGS FIRST

Deuteronomy 6: 10-19      Matthew 6: 9-10 (Luke 11: 1-2)

Years ago, because of all the tornados in the area, a developer in Tulsa, Oklahoma offered an optional tornado-safe room in the new homes he was selling. Nine of the first ten buyers opted to pay the extra \$2,500 for the room, which can also be used as a closet, bathroom, or vault when not needed for safety. The tenth couple was 75 years old and opted for a hot tub instead. Presumably, at their age, safety wasn't nearly as important as a special creature comfort.

It shows how our personal context sets our priorities. We see things through the lens of our current situation in life. That often makes perfect sense. As I look at the last 20% or so of my life, my personal context is a lot different from 20 years ago at mid-life. My priorities are vastly different now. Money and financial security are far less important than using my remaining time wisely and doing the things that are important to me. With my 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday coming this week, my personal priorities have become emphatic.

In our faith life, we are supposed to have firm priorities for how we live our lives in service and witness to Jesus and his Kingdom. Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, used to say that the three most important things in his life were God, his family, and McDonald's. Then when he got to the office, the order was reversed. That is the challenge, of course. It's fine to have a strong faith commitment on Sunday morning, but if that commitment drops into a different set of priorities out there in "the real world" outside the sanctuary, then we shouldn't bother talking about a faith *commitment*. In that case, it's really faith *convenience* since it becomes very inconvenient very quickly upon leaving the grounds.

The Lord's Prayer is what we say together each and every Sunday. Scripture tells us that Jesus taught his disciples this prayer. In it, we find priorities of Jesus' ministry that every disciple is called upon to pray for and to embrace as contemporary witnesses to his Kingdom and its promise of new life for all.

To recognize the kingdom and its promise requires a willingness to engage a new pattern in life, to follow a new way that reveals, challenges, and bears mystery for each pilgrim on its road.

Too often we can be like the Hebrews in Deuteronomy entering the Promised Land. The gift of this land is described as though they're moving into a fully and freely furnished house. But God wants them to know that it was not by any act or worth of their own, but by the sovereign power of God that they have come to possess these things. There's an admonition not to forget the Lord their God, to serve him only, to let oaths and obligations be defined by your faithful relationship to God, and have nothing to do with other pretender powers, 'for the Lord our God is a jealous God.' We need to have a pattern – a roadmap – that truly orients our attentions to God.

In the Deuteronomy passage, God has provided for God's people more than what they'd hoped. It wasn't just any land, but a land primed for prosperity, bearing assets and attributes that would be blessings for their communities. It has the ring of Paradise, the Garden of Eden where God had also provided in rich abundance for God's people.

There are caveats to the blessing of the Promised Land, just as there were caveats to the blessing of the Garden of Eden. They focus on being faithful to God and to God alone. *Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods ... for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God ... Do not put the Lord your God to the test.* I think we get the idea; there is one God and there is no compromising that principle.

In closing this reading, another set of instructions is given: *Be sure to keep the commands of the Lord your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors....*

Of course, these instructions go hand-in-glove with the first ones emphasizing the sovereignty of God alone as the supreme priority in the lives of God's people. Not only is singularity of faith involved, but also obedience the Torah-Law which is God's pattern of priorities in living faithfully to God. And if there is ever any doubt about how to interpret or understand the Torah-Law, it is simply said: *Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight.* If you can't live your lives according to the sacred pattern provided, choosing instead to live your life however you want, then you can hardly say that you are serving God alone. You fall back into the mindset of the Garden of Eden and believe that you can supplant your ways for God's ways, and in effect "become like God."

Just before our selection in Deuteronomy 6 is the *shema* which says: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* If you ever attend a synagogue service, you will hear in Hebrew *Shema Israel ...* When Jesus was questioned about the greatest commandment of the Torah-Law, this was his first response – the *shema* – followed by the Leviticus passage about loving your neighbor.

Just as the *shema* is pivotal in Judaism, so the Lord's Prayer (or Our Father) is pivotal for Christians. One problem with its weekly rote recital is that we breeze through it without understanding what we're saying. Let's consider the opening clauses of the prayer and see what they're all about; it isn't likely what you think.

First, we should acknowledge that the Lord's Prayer appears in different forms in both Matthew and Luke. Matthew's version is closest to what we pray (not that it's better or more accurate) whereas Luke's is so sparingly simple that it actually may **not** be helpful in a common worship setting. However, it could be preferable for private prayer and personal devotions

In Matthew, the Lord's Prayer continues Jesus' teaching just prior. In that lesson, he instructed them not to pray like hypocrites, but to pray with sincerity and integrity.

Now he will tell them how you do it.

In Luke, the Lord's Prayer is how Jesus responds to a disciple's request: "*Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.*" John the Baptist's disciples were known for spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting. This suggests that there was a specific prayer that John taught his people to pray, unique to John's community. It further indicates that Jesus's disciples were well aware of what the practices were in John's community, like they had spent some time with John themselves. We would love to know what that prayer was, but we have no idea. Regardless, the Jesus' people want a unique prayer like John's, but from Jesus about his ministry.

Jesus' personal address to God as *Abba* or Papa or Dada is quite an intimate expression, unusual in that pure, simple form we find in Luke. Matthew elaborates, making it *Father in heaven*.

The use of "father" was an image common in the secular world where political leaders, princes, masters and others would expect the title of being called "father." As "fathers," these powerful secular figures want to be seen as providers for the "children" who should see themselves as dependent (and hence obedient) in their weakness. We will see a sharp contrast between the sacred Father and the secular "fathers" of worldly power in a moment.

This Father's name is identified as holy or sacred (KJV: *Hallowed* is arcane). This Father is above all others, and even his name is to be revered and set apart. Literally it says; *Let your name be holy*. That lifts the verse from a mere statement – *your name is holy* – to a petition – *let your name be holy*. To expand that a bit to get the full intent, it would be fair to say; '**Let** your name be revered as holy **above all names.**'

Then there is a second petition – *let your kingdom come*. It's a petition for God's sovereign realm to become established in the world. The coming of the Kingdom is believed to bring to fulfillment God's desire to reconcile heaven and earth, to unite what was separated by sin. The world, as Jesus and his people saw it, is controlled by worldly Powers which the Kingdom would eradicate with God's rule of love, justice and peace.

Matthew adds a third petition – *let your will be done*. The one praying is professing here that God is indeed sovereign, and with a note of humility and submission, admits that **God's** will is what must be fulfilled, not ours. This will occur in **God's** way in **God's** time. This petition asks God to **bring it on!** – fulfill the present age and bring new beginnings and new life in the Kingdom here and now.

So in Matthew, we have three petitions: *let your name be holy; let your kingdom come; let your will be done*. These three petitions form the core of sacred direction for God's people. In these three petitions, the prayer asks for the true and sacred to be established, for Kingdom power to overcome the evil, sinful and corrupt worldly Powers. This will result in God's will being done, God's will for goodness and righteousness, justice and peace, unity and community, and new life for all as God had always intended.

Please hear the truly revolutionary expressions. There is a sharp, threatening political statement for the world and its Powers to hear. Jesus' prayer affirms that the government and rule that we see and know as powerful, mighty and established is something that we pray **to end**. No matter the *form* of government or *whose* government or *what* nation or how *righteous, just* and *good* it may claim to be, the one praying the Lord's Prayer attests to God's ultimate purpose being achieved when every government in and of the world is **overthrown** and God's just rule, power, and authority is established forever. Yes, even our American democracy – a teetering fragile experiment of less than 250 years – is among those governmental systems that we pray to be overthrown. Now **that** gets you into trouble with the Powers-That-Be, no matter where or when you live!

And to those super-Christian folks who believe establishing a “Christian nation” in the United States is the answer, I say: “Pray it again, Sam.” That approach has been tried before; in the Dark Ages by the Roman Catholic Church, and even in Calvin's utopian experiment at Geneva. They were corrupt, miserable failures. Theocracy – rule by the religious – **never** works, not in Iran, not in ancient Israel, not in the USA. Instead, the super-Christian should pray the Lord's Prayer anticipating the revolution that will bring God's sovereign reign, and nothing less.

The opening words of Jesus' prayer are not glossy words to say before we get to bread, forgiveness, and temptation. Those first petitions attune us to another pattern from our commonplace, urging us to follow a different path, being set apart as people faithful to the sacred, not to the secular or the customary or the worldly.

These three petitions conclude, literally translated from the Greek; *as in heaven, so on earth*. The sacred pattern is eternal with God. Uniting heaven and earth has been the goal of the entire history of God's salvation from the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the Heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation to today. The restoration of God's presence, rule, and will is what we pray for, to overcome the rejection of God's presence, rule, and will by humanity in its never-ending sinfulness, in its continuous compulsion to believe that it knows better than God, that it can create its own Paradise without God.

So, we seek to reset our pattern each week as we say together the Lord's Prayer. Often unwittingly I imagine, we invite the radical and audacious to be fulfilled. The life of faith is meant to be radical and audacious, a call to follow the Lord who advances the Kingdom of God alone. More next week.