

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer
Part Seven: *"Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread"*

Matthew 6:11

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The Fifth Petition: *"Hawvlan lachma d'sunqanan yaomana /
Give us this day our daily bread."* (Matthew 6:11)



"Give us this day our daily bread": Schmidt's Pastry Cottage volunteer Tyler Bodell hands out two loaves of bread to an area resident at Cyprus High School in Magna during a Free Bread Project giveaway on Sunday. By Deseret News Photographers@DNewsPhoto May 17, 2020

<https://www.deseret.com/utah/2020/5/17/21261534/give-us-this-day-our-daily-bread-bakery-gives-away-bread-to-residents-in-magna-area>

There is a beautiful Celtic Prayer by David Adam that goes like this:

*“Be gentle when you touch bread.
Let it not lie, uncared for,
Unwanted.
So often bread is taken for granted.
There is such beauty in bread—
Beauty of surf and soil,
Beauty of patient toil.
Wind and rain have caressed it,
Christ often blessed it.
Be gentle when you touch bread.”*

(David Adam in *The Open Gate*, cited p. 221 in *Spiritual Literacy*)

Bread. Yes, there is such beauty in it. Pope Francis, in his recent book on the Lord’s Prayer, writes that *“At home as children, when a piece of bread fell, my family taught us to pick it up right away and kiss it. Bread was never thrown away. Bread is a symbol of the unity of humanity; it is a symbol of God’s love for you, the God who feeds you.”*¹ “Abba! Father! Give us this day our daily bread,” we pray. Images related to the beauty of patient toil and the gentleness of touch of baking bread come to mind when I think of all the many delicious loaves that Ann Thornton has made for countless people in our congregation and community over her long life, including me during my recent convalescence after my surgery. I think of all the children in our church she taught to make bread to give to others—adding the yeast to flour, watching it rise, forming it into loaves, enjoying the wafts of its delicious odor when the oven doors were finally opened, waiting for them to cool before taking them out to loved ones. Better yet: cutting a slice while it was still warm and putting butter on it. I remember people rushing over to get it at our Soup and Bread fundraisers!

“Give us this day our daily bread.” A fascinating but important footnote to understanding this passage is that in the Greek translation we find the word *“epiousios,”* which is translated into English with the word “daily.” William Barclay tells us that *“The extraordinary fact was that, until a short time ago, there was no other known occurrence of this word in the whole of Greek literature. [The theologian] Origen knew this, and indeed held that Matthew had invented the word. It was therefore not possible to be sure*

¹ Pope Francis, *Our Father: Reflections on the Lord’s Prayer* (NY: Image, 2017), pp. 74-75.

what it precisely meant."² People had all kinds of theories about what "epiousios" bread meant. Did it refer to some kind of special bread used in ritual settings? Was it merely a symbol for something spiritual like that all the hungers of our soul be met, like our need for meaning and belonging? No one knew and it provided a great puzzle Biblical scholars loved trying to solve. *"But not very long ago a papyrus fragment turned up with this word on it; and the papyrus fragment was actually a woman's shopping list! And against an item on it was the word **epiousios**. It was a note to remind her to buy supplies of a certain food for the coming day."*³ So we should initially not spiritualize the bread being talked about in this petition as something other worldly. We should think of real, actual bread that one needs to eat every day. And not some gourmet bread you get at a fancy bakery. But the least expensive kind of white bread you might buy at Dollar General. Jesus taught this prayer to people who lived at a very basic subsistence level, for whom stomach pangs of hunger were real, and where they often did not know where they would get bread for the next day. This prayer is not just about "soul salvation, it is whole salvation, the salvation of body, mind and spirit."⁴ God created and cares for our bodies. God knows that we need bread, which can be understood as a stand-in for food.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus knew that when he taught his disciples to pray this petition, they would immediately have been reminded of the story in Exodus 16:1-21 when their Hebrew ancestors were starving in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. God sent them manna, the bread rained down from heaven, but there was one important condition attached to it. They were commanded to only take enough for that one day. Otherwise, it would go bad. They were not to hoard it. It was a lesson in trust. This prayer reminds us to live one day at a time and to try not to be anxious about the future. We are not to pray for bread to last us for a month. We are only to pray for bread to get us through the next 24 hours.

Bread is a central substance in most societies. From the many varieties in our supermarkets today that range from white, to whole wheat, to whole grain, to rye, to sour dough, to pumpnickel, to Italian or French, or Keto. From the chapati or naan of India, to the tortillas of Latin and South America, to the challah the Jewish people eat on Sabbath, to the baguettes of France. In Jesus' time, bread was the basic food supporting life.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 217.

³ Barclay, 217.

⁴ Barclay, 217.

Jesus and his tribe would have shared many stories from their long tradition related to bread, going all the way back to the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden. As they were leaving its gates, God told Adam that henceforth he would have to work hard: ***“¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”*** (Genesis 3:17-19). This is a reminder that the bread that we need to survive and for our daily sustenance is the result of hard work and effort. Perhaps we might be puzzled, then, when our petition in the Lord’s Prayer begins with the words “give us.” God, give us! God cast Adam and Eve out of the garden and told them it was their responsibility to grow their own food so that they might eat bread. So why the words “give us”?

William Barclay shares a story about *“a man who had an allotment; he had with great toil reclaimed a piece of ground, clearing away the stones, eradicating the rank growth of weeds, enriching and feeding the ground, until it produced the loveliest flowers and vegetables. One evening he was showing a pious friend around his allotment. The friend said, ‘It’s wonderful what God can do with a bit of ground like this, isn’t it?’ ‘Yes’ said the man who had put in such toil, ‘but you should have seen this bit of ground when God had it to himself!’ God’s bounty and man’s toil must combine. Prayer, like faith, without works is dead. When we pray this petition we are recognizing two basic truths—that without God we can do nothing, and that without our effort and co-operation God can do nothing for us.”*⁵ Or, as another story suggests: *“A group of students were spending a week at a Trappist monastery. At the evening meal, enjoying in silence the wonderful, delicious bread, one of the students blurted out, ‘Hey, did we make this bread or did somebody give it to us?’ One of the monks answered, ‘Yes.’”*⁶ Give us this day our daily bread is a joint divine-human effort.

Jesus also would have heard the story at his local synagogue in Nazareth about his ancestor Abraham sitting in the entrance to his tent out in the hot desert by the oaks of Mamre. It says in Genesis 18 that Abraham: ***“² looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, ‘My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.”***

⁵ Barkley, pp. 218-9.

⁶ William H. Willimon & Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer & the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 74.

So they said, “Do as you have said.”⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make [bread] cakes.” Here bread is a symbol of fellowship and hospitality. Have you ever noticed that in good restaurants we are first served bread as a way to welcome us? Here Abraham also began by offering not just any kind of bread but bread made from “choice” or the finest flour. He wanted them to have only the best.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” When we gather around tables for meals with our family and friends, we are called upon to give thanks to God for the bread we are about to eat. Jesus would have participated in the Jewish tradition in which meals still begin with this grace: *“Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.”* We Christians offer up similar prayers, like this one I remember always hearing at the home of a childhood friend: *“God is great. God is good. Let us thank God for our food. By His hands we must be led, Give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen.”*

Jesus continued this tradition of thanking God for bread when he fed the large crowds who had gathered around him, hanging on his every word, hungering for a better life. Jesus feeding the multitudes is such an important story that it is the only one, aside from the resurrection, that is found (in 6 episodes) in all four gospels. Jesus was concerned about their hunger, saying *“I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.”* (Matt 15:32) In Mark’s version, the crowds gather around Jesus, they are hungry, and there is nothing to eat except two fish and a few loaves of bread. The disciples ask them to sit down in groups of fifties or a hundred. And then it says that: *“⁴¹Taking the five loaves and the two fish, [Jesus] looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴²And all ate and were filled ...”* (Mark 6:41-42)

How our God loves to feed us! Jesus was all about bread. He was born in Bethlehem, which means “house of bread.” He taught in parables that abounded in imagery related to wheat seeds being scattered, yeast being used for leavening, women baking bread. His parable of the Great Banquet was one in which everyone was invited. While his cousin John the Baptist was known for his austerity and fasting, Jesus was known as a glutton who even ate with sinners. Jesus loved to share meals with people. Every week we gather to remember Jesus’ final meal with his disciples where he broke bread, that came

to represent his body, being given over for us. In the Gospel of Luke, we read that after taking the cup ***“he took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’”*** (Lk 22:19)

After his resurrection, Jesus was recognized by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus only when they invited him to their home for a meal. It says in Luke’s Gospel that: ***³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him ...”*** (Lk 24:30-31). In John’s Gospel, Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection as well. His disciples Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee and two others went out fishing on the Sea of Tiberias. They stayed out all night and did not catch anything. Early in the morning they saw someone standing on the shore, who told them to throw out their net on the right side of their boat. When they did so the net overflowed with fish. It was then that they recognized that it was Jesus. He told them to come, bring some fish, and have breakfast with him. When they got on shore they saw ***“a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.”*** (Jn 21:9) The scriptures say that ***“¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.”*** (Jn 21:13-14)

Bread appears not just at the end of the resurrected Jesus’ ministry to his disciples before his Ascension into heaven. It appears right at the beginning of his ministry too. We remember that right after Jesus was baptized by his cousin John the Baptist, he went off into the desert wilderness where his readiness for the tasks before him would be tested. In Matthew, it states: ***“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ ⁴ But he answered, ‘It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*** (Mt. 4:1-4).

Here it is helpful to go back to the original Aramaic language in which Jesus taught his disciples to pray “give us this day our daily bread (*lachma*).” *Lachma* is both “bread” and “understanding” or “wisdom.” This is the kind of bread that Jesus referred to as “every word that comes from the mouth of God.” To get through life we need not only actual material bread but we also need the kind of spiritual wisdom that comes from being followers of Jesus. After Jesus had fed the crowds, the disciples wanted more

information about how he had performed this miracle. He admonished them gently saying that they were focusing on the wrong things: “²⁷ *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. ... “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.* ³³ *For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”* ³⁴ *They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”* ³⁵ *Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* (John 6:27,32-35)

We follow the one who identified himself as the Bread of Life. He is the only one that will truly satisfy our hungry hearts. He gives meaning to our lives. He taught us to pray “Abba! Father! Give us this day our daily bread.” Notice that he did not say to pray “give me this day my daily bread.” He says give US this day OUR daily bread. And it is here that bread moves beyond being an individual material need to being a shared need that takes others into account. As Nikolai Berdyaev puts it: “*The question of bread for myself is a material question, but the question of bread for my neighbor is a spiritual question.*” So this prayer ultimately is not about filling our own individual stomachs. It is a prayer for our neighbors and world. This line in the Lord’s Prayer calls upon us to feed one another, knowing that there is enough food in the world for everyone. It rather is a matter of distribution and people’s and nations’ willingness to share.

When we gather on Sundays and join our voices together of one accord and pray “give us this day our daily bread,” we are saying a prayer on behalf of the world filled with hungry people. There is food insecurity in our very own community with people relying on donations from Need Line, the Blessing Boxes, the Back Pack program, Soup for the Soul, Murray Kids Care for Hunger in Calloway County, and the generosity of others. This year, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, where people lined up for miles to get food from Food Banks, 42 million people still are food insecure. To help put this into perspective: 1 in every 8 adults and 1 in every 6 children are not sure where their next meal may come from. The United Nations reports that 41 million people in 43 countries are “teetering on the very edge of famine,” up from 27 million two years ago. Famine is beyond food-insecurity. People are literally starving to death in Ethiopia (where Dan McKeel’s grandson was born), Madagascar, South Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. When we pray “give us this day our daily bread,” this petition should be a bold and heartfelt plea to feed the hungry with actual physical bread, which is a command coming from the one who identifies himself as the Bread of Life, the one who gives spiritual

bread, or meaning and purpose to our lives. And what did Jesus, the Bread of Life, ask us to do during our lives here on earth? The answer to that is very clear. We will not be asked whether we memorized Bible verses, had the right doctrines, or belonged to the right church. Jesus wants to know how we will answer the following questions: did you give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked? Did you welcome the stranger, take care of the sick and visit those in prison? (Matt 25:34-40)

“A rabbi asked God to give him a glimpse of what heaven and hell would be like. God agreed to this request, and asked the prophet Elijah to be the rabbi’s guide on this adventure.

Elijah first led the rabbi into a large room. In the middle of the room was a fire with a big cooking pot bubbling away on it. And in the pot was a delicious stew.

All around the cooking pot sat a crowd of people. They each had a long-handled spoon, which they were dipping into the delicious stew.

But the people looked pale and thin and wretched. There was an icy stillness in the room. The handles of the spoons were so long that no one was able to get the lovely food into their mouth.

When the two visitors were back outside again, the rabbi asked Elijah what strange place this was. ‘That was hell,’ Elijah explained.

Then Elijah led the rabbi to a second room which looked exactly like the first. In the middle, a fire was blazing and a cooking pot was bubbling away, full of the same delicious aromatic stew. People sat around the fire, with the same long-handled spoons in their hands, but they were enjoying lively, animated conversations with each other.

And the difference? Well, the people in the second room were not trying to feed themselves with the long-handled spoons. They were using the spoons to feed each other. ‘Ah, heaven,’ said the rabbi.”⁷

Are you taking seriously the petition in the Lord’s Prayer that says “give us this day our daily bread” by doing your part in reaching out those in need right here in our own community? I hope so because, as Jesus tells us: **“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”** (Matt 25: 40).

⁷ “The Long-Handled Spoons,” in Margaret Silf, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World*, (Oxford: Lion, 2003), p. 57.