

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer

Part One: "Lord, teach us to pray ..."

Based on Luke 11: 1-4

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June 27, 2021



The Lord's Prayer (Le Pater Noster), by [James Tissot](#). [Brooklyn Museum](#)

The Lord's Prayer (New Revised Standard Version) ~ Luke 11:1-4

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."² He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ *Give us each day our daily bread.*

⁴ *And forgive us our sins,*

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Jesus went off again by himself after visiting with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the village of Bethany. His disciples didn't know where he had gone. His disappearance was similar to other times though. He often would *“withdraw to deserted places to pray”* (Lk 5:16). They remembered when *“he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God”* (Lk 6:13, 9:18). He needed a time out to be with God now. He had just had a few long days with the crowds swarming around him, bringing their sick loved ones and begging him to heal them, as he also sent off seventy of his disciples as his representatives to every town and village he wanted to go to continue his ministry. But people weren't only wanting healing. They wanted to know what he thought about things. Much of his time was taken up with teaching moments, especially about what the true understanding of the Jewish law was. He always seemed to steer away from a literal understanding of things to bringing it back to the attitudes of one's heart and how from that heart right and generous action flowed. For example, he had just shared with them the story of a despised outsider, a Samaritan, who had been the only one to reach out and take care of one of their own Jewish brothers who had been beaten and robbed on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. That story had pushed some buttons!

Those who previously had been followers of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, especially noticed Jesus' disappearance that day. John, who had been thrown into prison because Herod and his wife felt so threatened by him, had asked his followers to begin following Jesus. John, who ran a pretty tight ship with his disciples, had a strict way of doing things. John's disciples always knew where he was and what and where they would be going next. John was rigid, shunning the ways of the world. He followed a strict diet of locusts and honey, had taken a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:1–21) that forbid him from cutting his hair, and he wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. Perhaps John's followers were expected to do likewise. We know that John performed cleansing rituals related to water. What we learn from today's scripture is that John, importantly, had instructed his disciples in a particular way of prayer. In fact, it was the manner by which they prayed that distinguished and identified them as John's disciples.

Now, however, they were not following John but John's cousin Jesus. Jesus was such a spontaneous fun-loving soul, going where the spirit led him next, and always doing things that either pleasantly surprised and astonished some while upsetting and enraging others. He certainly did not lead a disciplined and aesthetic lifestyle! We find these words in Matthew's Gospel contrasting John the Baptist with his cousin Jesus:

“¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Matt 11:18-19). Jesus violated all kinds of Jewish laws. Like when he insisted on healing on the Sabbath. So where was Jesus now, John’s disciples wondered? They didn’t know what they were supposed to do next. And it seems that they wondered why he had not given them a kind of rule of life, specific spiritual practices to follow like their previous teacher, John, had. In the ambiguity of life, they needed the anchoring provided by certain practices.

And then they saw Jesus! Sitting alone, back against a tree to get some shade, a long distance beyond the gates of the village of Bethany where his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. They walked over to him and found him in a posture of meditation and prayer. They did not want to disturb his time of communion with God and waited until he finally had come out of his deep and focused prayer state. Jesus looked up to see his disciples and they immediately made this request: ***“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”*** (Lk 11:1) There was something about the way that he was praying that they wanted to model. Just as they had been given a specific way to pray by John, they wanted Jesus to give them a template for prayer. This obviously was extremely important to them. And Jesus, seemingly without giving it much thought at all, answered them as follows:

“When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.” “

Here we have Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. It is embedded within the Gospel that focuses more on prayer than any of the others. As R. Alan Culpepper reminds us: “Luke begins with prayer (1:13) and ends with prayer (24:53). Jesus receives the Spirit while praying (3:21-22). He prays regularly (5:16) and before crucial events: the call of the disciples (6:12-13), his fateful decision to go to Jerusalem (9:18), the transfiguration (9:28), and the Mount of Olives (22:40-42). Jesus dies praying (23:34,46), and the risen Lord prays with his disciples (24:30). Here Jesus instructs believers on how to pray (the Lord’s Prayer, 11.1-4) and assures us that God hears and answers our prayers (11: 5-13).

In Luke, Jesus is a person of prayer [and] ... the disciples' request, 'Lord, teach us to pray,' arises not out of an abstract interest but because they actually saw Jesus praying."¹

Here the disciples are not just asking about prayer in general but how to pray in a very specific way. Praying in a certain pattern would allow them to be identified as belonging to a certain religious group, as followers of Jesus. As we know, this prayer that Jesus taught them became known as the "Lord's Prayer." It was not just what distinguished them but it is also what distinguishes us. When we say the Lord's Prayer people immediately recognize that we are not Muslims, or Buddhists, or Hindus, but are Christians. However, those within Judaism might find similarities with their own tradition. After all, Jesus of Nazareth was first known as a Jewish spiritual master. So it makes sense that the prayer that he taught them had profoundly deep roots in the ancient Jewish tradition. Listen to this prayer contained in the Talmud (which reflects on earlier oral and written sources of the Torah and contains Jewish law and practical instructions for living), which is called the 'Kadish':

*"Our Parent which art in heaven, be gracious to us, O Lord, our God; hallowed be thy name, and let the remembrance of thee be glorified in heaven above and in the earth here below. Let thy kingdom reign over us now and forever. The holy men of old said, Remit and forgive unto all men whatsoever they have done against me. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil thing. For thine is the kingdom, and thou shalt reign in glory for ever and for evermore."*²

Do you see the many parallels between the Lord's Prayer and this prayer that is contained in the Talmud? Jesus, in teaching his disciples to pray, connects them with a longstanding spiritual tradition leading back to the prophets such as Isaiah, David, and also John the Baptist. As such, it moves from being an individual prayer to becoming a communal prayer as we imagine ourselves saying this prayer every Sunday during worship in solidarity with our ancestors going back to the ancient Jews, those from different branches of Christendom including the many thousands of denominations within Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, those who are already in heaven, and those who are to come. Through this prayer Jesus gave us the great gift of being in community with others as we stand before God.

¹ *Connections* Year C/Vol 3, p. 194.

² Translation by Rev. John Gregorie, cited in Paul W. Meier, *The Lord's Prayer: Finding New Meanings Within the Language Jesus Spoke*, pp. 7-8. From http://www.thenazareneway.com/lords_prayer.htm

As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—one of the very few groups that are non-creedal and minimally liturgical and do not have various creeds that we recite together when we gather for worship—the Lord’s Prayer functions not only as our only communal prayer but also is a stand-in for a creed, stating what we believe in, what we are to ask God for, and what we aspire to. In fact, it is one of the only places where Jesus, who normally tries to get across his teachings through stories and parables and real life examples, tells us in straight forward language who God is, what our priorities should be, what our value system is, and what we are to do in life. And in Luke’s rendering of the Lord’s Prayer, whose audience is the Gentile community, it gets down to this: we pray not to an abstract principle (as the Buddhists do) but to a God known to us by the Aramaic term “Abba,” whom we can relate to as an affectionate Daddy. We pray for God’s just and righteous realm to come to earth as we are called to align our minds, hearts, and wills with God’s so that we might be instruments in bringing forth a world based on mercy and justice. We pray for daily bread or just enough material things to get by with. We pray for healed relationships, knowing that because we are forgiven by God we are asked to pay that forgiveness forward by forgiving others. We pray for divine protection from that evil that we know is present on this earth. The prayer focuses on three essential needs of all human beings: our daily needs being met, forgiveness, and protection. Here we have in a nutshell the central themes in Jesus’ teachings and what is most important in life, which should be understood against the backdrop of Jesus’ statement that the church, above all, should be a house of prayer (Matt 21:13).

Note that Jesus allows us to pray to God in a straightforward manner, without even saying the word ‘please’ or buttering God up beforehand, almost to the extent that we sound overly entitled and spoiled as we turn to God and say: “Give us,” “forgive us,” “do not bring us.” Indeed, it is very much like the way we might talk to our earthly Abba, or Daddy, on one of our not better days.

This prayer, which summarizes our view of God, what we need, our value system, and our purpose in life, progresses through seven petitions, which we will unpack during this sermon series this summer. They are as follows:

The First Petition: Our Father, who art in heaven

The Second Petition: hallowed by thy Name

The Third Petition: Thy kingdom come

The Fourth Petition: Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven

The Fifth Petition: Give us this day our daily bread

The Sixth Petition: And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those that sin against us

The Seventh Petition: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

By way of introduction today, before we go on during this sermon series to unpack what are known as the ‘petitions’ within this prayer, I want to share just a few things to help orient us.

First, there are two versions of the Lord’s Prayer in the Bible. We have looked briefly at Luke’s version (11:1-4), which was written to the Gentile community. It is a shorter version than the longer one given in Matthew 6:9-13, which is part of Jesus’ teachings on the Sermon on the Mount and is addressed to the Jewish community. I’ve included both of them on your handout. We’ll be looking at both during this sermon series as well as the way that we say it in church on Sundays.

Second, what language was the Lord’s Prayer given in? While we might think that the Lord’s Prayer that we say together on Sunday is a simple repetition of what is in our English translation versions of the Bible, there is a long history behind it. I know most of us don’t give much thought to the original language they were given to the disciples that day when they asked *“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples”* (Lk 11:1). Of course, there are some who actually believe that the words came to the writers of the Gospels as a download in King James English with its Thys and Thous and trespasses. Jesus, of course, did not speak English. In fact, Jesus probably did not speak much Greek, which was the language the New Testament was written in. Jesus spoke a language closely linked to Hebrew, known as Aramaic. While Hebrew was the language spoken at the Temple, Aramaic was the common language used when Jesus spoke to his disciples. While it was supplanted in many places by Arabic with the rise of Islam, Aramaic continued to be spoken by people in the Middle East well into the 19th century and still is spoken by some today in Syria. It also still is the liturgical language used by the Eastern church for whom the Aramaic Bible, the Peshitta, is regarded as the most accurate and authoritative version.

During Jesus' time, there were seven distinct Aramaic dialects, one of which was Galilean Aramaic. This is likely what Jesus spoke and also how people were able to identify Peter as being a disciple of Jesus when Jesus was arrested, saying of him as he sat by the fire that ***“Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean”*** (Lk. 22:59). Even though the New Testament was published in Greek, there still are sprinklings of Aramaic throughout. Jesus was called ***Yeshua*** by his followers, which is Jesus in Aramaic and Hebrew. Jesus calls God ***“Abba,”*** the Aramaic word for father. Jesus raises Jairus' daughter by using the Aramaic words ***“Talitha Koum”*** or ***“Little girl, I say to you, get up!”*** (Mark 5:41). The word ***mammon*** is Aramaic in the phrase ***“You cannot serve God and mammon [wealth]”*** (Matt 6:24). Jesus called out to God from the cross in Aramaic, saying ***“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,”*** or ***“my God my God why you have forsaken me!”*** (Mark 15:34). There are other places where Aramaic is used as well.³

This spring I was invited to attend a continuing education event on Zoom with some people from all over the country on the Aramaic Jesus and the Lord's Prayer. It was a mind- and heart-opening experience for me as being exposed to this prayer in Aramaic led me to treasured insights I never would have received otherwise. I felt myself to have been transported into a whole new world as I stood with the disciples in the wilderness outside Bethany with Jesus as I listened to him teach me how to pray. Aramaic is a language quite unlike Greek (or say German), which are very precise, predictable, almost scientific languages. Aramaic is a language that is multi-layered, with words needing to be understood in three different ways: literally, metaphorically, and mystically. It also encompasses sounds that have mystical meanings and qualities that can even create a physical and vibrational shift in a person. Our friend and former congregant, the esteemed linguist Rev. Paul Meier, who has written a book called *The Lord's Prayer: Finding New Meanings Within the Language Jesus Spoke*, beautifully describes the difference between the more methodical Greek and the mystical Aramaic with these words: ***“Comparing Aramaic to Greek is like comparing a spirited Arabian horse bred to run like the wind with a magnificent Clydesdale bred for heavy work.”***⁴ I certainly have experienced exploring the Lord's Prayer by looking at key Aramaic words within it as running through the wind in a spirited way!

³ Paul W. Meier, *The Lord's Prayer: Finding New Meanings Within the Language Jesus Spoke* (Benton: Malcolm Creek, 2015), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Unfortunately, the Aramaic Jesus is one we no longer are familiar with. This is because the New Testament writings were put down in Greek. From there the Greek was translated into Latin in a version of the Bible known as the *Vulgate*. For some 1200 years Latin was the official language of the church. The laity would hear the mass in Latin but were not able to hear or read the Bible in their own language. We know that there were protests against this and a proliferation of translations of the Bible into other languages began in the 1400s. The Bible was first translated into English by John Wickliffe in 1382. He used the Greek and Latin as his basis and sadly, but not surprisingly, he was put to death for opening up the Bible to the English-speaking world. Were the church authorities afraid of what might happen if the actual words in the Bible got into the hands of the general population? By the time of Henry VIII there were a number of versions of the Lord's Prayer in English and this disturbed the King, who had broken from the Roman Catholic Church and established the Church of England. Since he wore both a political and ecclesiastical hat, in 1541, he ordered that one version of the Lord's Prayer be established so that everyone was saying the Lord's Prayer in the same way in worship. This, along with the King James Version of the Bible that was commissioned back in 1604, have been the major influences on the way that we say the Lord's Prayer in church on Sundays. As Paul Meier says: *"If you hear someone say, 'If it was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me,' you know they haven't heard about Henry VIII. And if you really want to say it the way Jesus taught it, you would have to learn Galilean Aramaic."*⁵

And that, my friends, is actually the goal of this sermon series this summer. To try and get beneath the English, the Latin, and the Greek to the original Aramaic version of the Lord's Prayer as, each Sunday, we consider one of its petitions and hopefully come to more fully love, appreciate, and understand this beautiful prayer that we recite every Sunday, which summarizes the purpose of our Christian lives. So, today, let us begin this sermon series by joining with the disciples of old as we also go to Jesus and say ***"Lord, teach us to pray ..."***

⁵ Meier, p. 7.