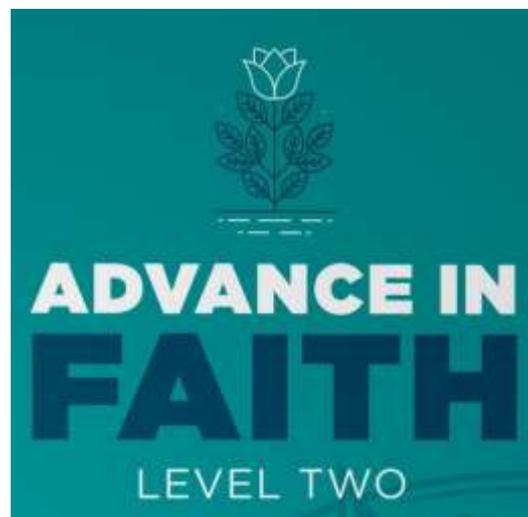


# The Lord's Prayer

## Week 1 — Our Father



## Introduction

Welcome to this series on The Lord's Prayer. We'll spend the next six Monday evenings in just 5 verses of Scripture (Matthew 6:9-13). We'll pray. We'll chat. We'll ask what these phrases would have meant for Jesus, and what they mean as we pray them.

As we meditate on the Lord's Prayer, millions of others are praying this prayer too: Baptists, Dutch Reformed, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Coptics. People are praying in Spanish, French, Latin, Indonesian, even Arabic. People pray this in cathedrals and in pubs, in parliament and on the streets, in homes and hospitals and jails. Political prisoners and martyrs have offered this prayer as their final words.

The Lord's Prayer is the cry of hearts reaching out to one sovereign ruler, uniting us across cultures, across traditions, across centuries.

My prayer is that you find these sessions enhance prayer in your life.

## How much do you pray?

Let's deal with the elephant in the room. Do you pray enough? This is one of the things Christians feel guilty about.

We all feel we ought to pray more. We imagine we might be more successful at getting what we want from God if we prayed earnestly enough, for long enough, if we conscripted enough people, or the right people (the prayer warriors who know the secrets to getting answers).

Actually, it's not just Christians who worry about this. People of other religions pray too. For example, Tibetan Buddhists place prayers in "prayer wheels" and keep them spinning to ensure they are heard. If you use the Internet, you may be aware of GIF files, a graphic that rotates through a series of images. The Dalai Lama has decreed that prayers that rotate in a GIF file are equivalent to spinning a prayer wheel, so you can put your prayer into a GIF and keep it spinning while you sleep.

How much prayer is enough? Should we pray for 5 minutes a day? 20 minutes? Perhaps an hour? Maybe 2.4 hours (a tithe of a day)?

Within 100 years of Jesus first teaching the Lord's Prayer, Christians tried to define what discipleship would look like in practice. In a document called *The Didache* ("the teaching of the twelve"), chapter 8, they instructed Christians to fast every Wednesday and Friday (verse 2), and to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day (verse 3).

So here's what we're going to do. We'll assign specific times for prayer so we can all pray together. You give me your mobile number, and I'll text you at prayer time, say 5 am, midday, and 9 pm each day.

Or maybe three times a day isn't enough? Did you know that Muslims pray five times a day? Should be do better? How about 6 times a day?

Even better, why don't we set up a prayer channel on Skype? We can all log in when the prayer time arrives. We can then look back over the logs to see who the spiritual people are. ☺

You're not keen on being tracked like that in the public square? Jesus wasn't either. He criticized those who loved to stand up and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that others could see them praying. He thought God wouldn't need to take any notice of them because they were praying for public recognition (Matthew 6:5).

Jesus wanted to set us free from the illusion that we have to pray for long times and keep repeating the prayer to convince God of our sincerity and make an impression on God (Matthew 6:7).

Relax! Prayer isn't arguing with God. It isn't trying to twist God's arm to get something. Prayer is not making God respond to something he didn't know.

Forget the guilt. Treat it as a privilege — access to the Sovereign who runs the universe. God already knows everything about you, and he wants the conversation with you.

The Lord's Prayer is not so much a command as an invitation: an invitation to share in the prayer-life of Jesus himself.<sup>1</sup>

## What is prayer?

Prayer is life in communion with God. It's living life in God's family.

Not everybody has a good home. If you do, it's an amazing place to be. You come home at the end of a day's work, greet your family, and share a meal with them. You enjoy the conversation and activities with them. Home is where you belong, where you find your identity. It's the place you go from again tomorrow to do the things that need to be done, and you return when the day's activities are done.

Prayer is our home space. If "home is where the heart is" then prayer is home, the place where we belong, with our Father. We find our identity in the Father. We chat with him about the family business.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, "The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer," in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, M.: Eerdmans, 2002), 132.

We listen and learn what he's doing. We discover our part in what he's doing. That's what gives us our purpose for the day. It gives us a reason to get up in the morning. And prayer is the home we return to when our activities are done.

Prayer is **life in communion with God**. It's living life in God's family. Praying is not so much something we *do* as something we *are*. We are praying, whatever we're doing. The conversation with God never stops. Even when we're talking with others, God is in the conversation. We "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

That's the best way to understand the Lord's Prayer. Jesus' prayer gave voice to his being: who he was, his values, his concerns, his perception of God, his trust in what God was doing.

Andrew Murray described it like this:

Christ teaches us to pray not only by example, by instruction, by command, by promises, but *by showing us HIMSELF, the ever-living Intercessor, as our Life.*<sup>2</sup>

When we pray, everything that we are is laid open before God. That's why it feels so vulnerable. With God, we can't pretend: our life and our words come together, openly, before God.

Jesus lived with that integrity: who he was and what he said were the same. His prayer voiced the meaning of his life. His life explained what he was praying for. The best way to understand the prayer is to look at Jesus' life, and the best way to understand Jesus' life is to hear his prayer. That's how we will seek to understand his prayer over the next six weeks.

Prayer immerses us in God. It fuses our spirit with God's. We find ourselves in God.

**Prayer is our partnership with God.** We can steer off the road on either side if we misunderstand that partnership:

- Prayer is not passive resignation: passing the buck to God and waiting for him to take over.
- Prayer is not a frantic attempt to twist God's arm, whipping ourselves into a frantic *haka* as if everything depends on us.

Rather, prayer is a relationship: we align ourselves with the God who acts in history. He draws us into partnership with him, acting for and through us, for the restoration of his creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Murray, Andrew. *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. Public Domain, 1895, ii. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/murray/prayer.ii.html> accessed 10 April, 2019. Emphasis original.

## Background of the Lord's prayer

Jesus did not invent his prayer in a social vacuum. The Old Testament contains many prayers, and there were others in Israel in Jesus' time.

A prayer called the *Kaddish* was used to close synagogue meetings:

Exalted and hallowed be his great name  
in the world which he created according to his will.  
May he let his kingdom rule  
in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime  
of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon.<sup>3</sup>

The Kaddish recognizes God as the sovereign who rules the world, and it asks for God to restore his kingly rule over the earth. God had established Israel as his representative kingdom among the nations (Exodus 19:5-6), but the nations had captured them so Israel was no longer a kingdom (2 Kings 25). God had promised that David's descendants would reign on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:16), but in Jesus' time it had been 600 years since a son of David represented God's kingdom.

The Kaddish recalled this desperate cry for restoration, the problem that remained unsolved at the end of the Old Testament.

### **Psalm 89 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;  
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known  
through all generations. ...

<sup>3</sup> You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,  
I have sworn to David my servant,

<sup>4</sup> 'I will establish your line forever  
and make your throne firm through all generations.' " ...

<sup>38</sup> But you have rejected, you have spurned,  
you have been very angry with your anointed one.

<sup>39</sup> You have renounced the covenant with your servant  
and have defiled his crown in the dust. ...

<sup>49</sup> Lord, where is your former great love,  
which in your faithfulness you swore to David?

It's natural that Jesus' prayer would focus on this problem, like the Kaddish. But the Lord's Prayer is more than a general wish for God to restore his world. Jesus expected God do to do this *now*—in his lifetime, through him.

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<sup>3</sup> Bock, Darrell L. *Luke Volume 2: 9:51-24:53* (BECNT), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996, 1052.

Jesus takes these hopes and focuses them into immediate, concrete expectancy—teaching his disciples to pray that God would finally and suddenly restore the world now, through him.

The Lord's Prayer is a kingdom prayer. What we pray for is what God intends, God's kingdom goals.

<b>What we pray</b>	<b>His kingdom goal (where this is headed)</b>
<i>Our Father in heaven,</i>	We begin by recognizing the authority of the sovereign who designed two realms (heaven and earth) with earth designed to function under heaven's authority.
<i>hallowed by your name,</i>	We pray that our sovereign's honour is upheld in the way his subjects treat him and each other, for the character of a ruler is revealed in the character of those he rules.
<i>Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.</i>	In his earthly realm, there's been a rebellion against his reign, so we pray for the restoration of his reign here. When his reign is restored, his subjects will carry out our sovereign's intentions on earth, in the same way that already happens in heaven.
<i>Give us this day our daily bread,</i>	We recognize our king as our provider. Relying on his fresh provision every day is the opposite of spending our lives building financial security for ourselves, hoarding resources with the result that others starve.
<i>Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.</i>	We request our sovereign to release us from obligations incurred by failing to live as his people. Only when he released us from past failure can we live as he intends.  We agree that we cannot be restored to live as he intends until we have also released each other from failed obligations.
<i>Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.</i>	We ask our king to lead his earthly realm out of the testing times we have experienced for so long, that is to deliver us from oppression under evil, i.e. back under his kingship.

It's not surprising that the Lord's Prayer is a kingdom prayer: the gospel that Jesus proclaimed was, "the good news of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23; 9:35).

In Matthew's Gospel, the Lord's Prayer is right at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), which is Jesus' kingdom manifesto, his teaching on what he expects life under his rule to be like. Jesus called us to pray, "Your kingdom come."

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus commissioned his disciples to proclaim and enact the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-2; 10:9), precisely what Jesus himself was doing (Luke 11:20). That's the setting in which the disciples ask, "Lord, each us to pray." So it's not surprising that Jesus taught them to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Luke 11:1-4).

In week 3, we'll talk more about what Jesus meant by "Your kingdom come." It's a request from human beings for God to reign over us.

## Our Father

Jesus begins by calling God "our Father." Is that difficult for you?

Not everyone grows up in a loving home, supported by the love of a father and a mother. For someone who has been abused as a child, the very thought of calling God "Father" may be repulsive. For others, "father" means someone who is distant, absent because of work or war or death or mental health or relationship breakdown.

Like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, we all grow up to discover that our parents are not as we imagined. If you had a difficult childhood, you need to know that God is not like your abusive or absent father. You're welcome to use another word to relate to God if it helps. God is not like Darth Vader.

It's not that God is like your father; it's that parental love is a partial reflection of God. God is the original; human parents derive their identity from God:

**Ephesians 3** <sup>14</sup> For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

God is the parent you always longed for, but never knew. He's always present, always aware of your struggle, always wanting the best for you. Unfailing steadfast love flows out of God's character.

And that's the place to start when we pray. Jesus' prayer begins not with us and our failures; it begins with God and his character.

In some church traditions, you're told to start with a "penitential prayer" (asking for forgiveness). The idea is that we can't come into God's presence unclean, so we must be cleansed of our sins each time before we can talk to God.

That's not what Jesus said. Yes, there is a place in Jesus' prayer to say, "Forgive us our debts" but it's not where he starts. He starts with

relationship—a recognition that God is in charge, and we approach him as his children. He starts with family relationship.

How do you start the conversation when you arrive home from work? Let's say you're married. Do you begin with, "O Loved one, I am not worthy to be called your spouse. I have done things I should not have done, and I have left undone things that I should have done. I ask your forgiveness so I may enter this home."

That might be the right approach if you've done something to seriously threaten the relationship, but it would be absurd to approach your partner like that every day. What Jesus suggests is more like approaching God with, "Dad, I'm home!"

That relationship to God as Father is so foundational that a little child can understand it. Because he is Father, we are God's children.

Like children, we know we're home. We know we're in our Father's care and protection. We know we belong in Father's family. We have a place at his table. We receive our identity from our Father.

### Our

This makes us brothers and sisters too, because he's *our* Father.

Here's an interesting difference in how we think of prayer compared to Jesus' approach. Many westerners think of prayer as time alone with God, just me and God. Jesus doesn't: for him it is a relational activity. There is not a "me" anywhere in the Lord's Prayer!

*Me and God* creates a cocoon that isolates me from others and, ironically, from Him. *Us and the Father* reinforces the indispensability of the community.<sup>4</sup>

Look at the pronouns Jesus uses. The first half is all about God:

- *Our* Father
- *Your* name
- *Your* kingdom
- *Your* will

The second half is about *we/us/our*: no *I/me/my* anywhere:

- Give *us our* daily bread
- Forgive *us our* debts, as *we* forgive *our* debtors
- Lead *us* ... deliver *us*.

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<sup>4</sup> Timms, David. *Living the Lord's Prayer*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008.

The worst way to think of prayer is conscripting God into my project. The Lord's Prayer refocuses me onto God's project:

The Lord's Prayer definitely guides us into a "reversal of power" and turns around the process of both our prayers and our lives. ...

The prayer has the capacity to remould our lives entirely.<sup>5</sup>

By the way, the "our" is not just the church: Jesus' vision is *the world* restored as God's kingdom (under his rule). When the church limits "our" to itself, we miss the expansiveness of Jesus' vision and prayer.

### **Father**

When Jesus referred to God as *our Father*, he was doing something that Jewish people rarely did. There are a few places in the OT where Israel's relationship with God compared to a Father/son relationship:

**Exodus 4**<sup>22</sup> Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn **son**,<sup>23</sup> ... "Let my **son** go ...'

**Hosea 11**<sup>1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my **son**.

**Deuteronomy 32**<sup>5</sup> They are corrupt and not his **children**; ...<sup>6</sup> Is he not your **Father**, your Creator, who made you and formed you?

There's a special case where the Davidic king is called God's "son." The core idea is that YHWH is the true and ultimate king in heaven, and he anoints the Davidic king to represent his rule on earth.

This is the promise God gave to David:

**2 Samuel 7**<sup>12</sup> When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. ...<sup>14</sup> I will be his **father**, and he will be my **son**.

When a new son of David was crowned, Psalm 2 declared that he had now been given the responsibility to represent his heavenly father's reign on the earth:

**Psalm 2**<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed ... [God responds:]

<sup>6</sup> "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain."

<sup>7</sup> I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, "You are my **son**; today I have become your **father**."

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<sup>5</sup> Timms, David. *Living the Lord's Prayer*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008.

When Jesus refers to God as “my Father” (e.g. Matthew 7:21; 8:21; 10:32-33; 11:27; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17; 18:10, 13, 19, 35; 20:23; 25:34; 26:29, 39, 42, 53) he is making a kingship claim, claiming to be the son of David who should be ruling on earth if things were running correctly (i.e. if the rulers of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome had not cut off the Davidic kingship). He is the anointed ruler (Messiah in Hebrew, Christ in Greek), the one chosen by God to represent the reign of his heavenly Father on earth.

By implication, this is what Israel should have been too: they were the nation called by God to represent his reign to the other nations, but that had fallen apart. Jesus is tapping into that understanding when he calls God “your Father” (e.g. Matthew 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 14-15, 18, 26, 32:7:1).

Nowhere else in the Gospels does Jesus bring these two ideas together to speak of “our Father” except in this prayer. It is only after the cross, after the resurrection that we come alive in God’s family. That’s when Jesus ascends to his Father, and makes us his brothers—incorporated into the family under one Father through him.

This is the message he gave Mary Magdalene to proclaim on the day of his resurrection:

**John 20**<sup>17</sup> Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the **Father**. Go instead to my **brothers** and tell them, ‘I am ascending to **my Father** and **your Father**, to my God and your God.’ ”

In praying, “Our Father,” we are anticipating that union between Jesus and us. Unashamedly he calls himself our brother, the brother who brings honour to Father’s name by restoring the Father’s children:

**Hebrews 2**<sup>11</sup> Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them **brothers** and sisters.<sup>12</sup> He says, “I will declare your name to my **brothers** and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.”<sup>13</sup> And again, “I will put my trust in him.” And again he says, “Here am I, and the **children** God has given me.”

That’s the story we’re referring to when we call God, “Our Father in heaven.” Through his Son, our Father draws us into intimate family relationship with him and with the brothers and sisters who belong in the same family, under the same Father.

## Conclusion

*Our Father*: intimacy with the transcendent one and with each other:

Something less familiar feels more appropriate (perhaps *God* or *Holy Divine One*), but the gospel calls us to a family reunion, not a meeting with the CEO. ... Is there a more powerful gospel word than *Father*?

The combination of the two terms binds us together as family and refuses to validate private faith. It acknowledges the new community—a family—to which we now belong. ... The image of family ... calls us to a much more relational way of life. ... *Our Father* snaps us out of complacency, privatism, and segregation.<sup>6</sup>

For 2000 years, the *Our Father* has been the primary prayer of the Christian faith. Jesus invites us into the relationship between the Father and the Son, the intimacy of one family under one Father.

## Group Prayer

Break into groups of 5 or 6 people. The goal of this time is to pray together, but start by chatting about what prayer is.

1. Begin by greeting each other as family: brothers and sisters. What does it mean to you to be close to God, included in his family, living at Father's table?
2. Discuss the kinds of things that prevent you praying. What things need to be resolved: attitudes? feelings? time pressure? What has helped you to address these things?
3. Consider prayer as *conversation with Father*. How does this help shape the way you pray, the way you approach God?
4. In what ways do you find it easier to pray alone, and in what ways is it better to pray together?

Take some time as a group to pray, focusing on God as *our Father*.

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<sup>6</sup> Timms, David. *Living the Lord's Prayer*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008.

## For further thought

What is prayer? Here are some thoughts from three authors:

- It is the rhythm of standing in the presence of the pain of the world, and kneeling in the presence of the creator of the world; of bringing those two things together in the name of Jesus and by the victory of the cross; of living in the tension of the double Advent, and of calling God 'Father'.<sup>7</sup>
- God's face is the essence of who He is. God's hand is the blessing of what He does. God's face represents His person and presence. God's hand expresses His provision for needs in our lives. I have learned that if all we ever do is seek God's hand, we may miss His face; but if we seek His face, He will be glad to open His hand and satisfy the deepest desires of our hearts.<sup>8</sup>
- The essence of the Christian gospel is that God is a relentlessly relational being who has chosen to *communicate with us in no less personal and relational way than by sending one of the members of the divine family to save us, Jesus his own beloved Son!* When God births new life (John's emphasis) or adopts us into his household (Paul's focus), we become his children and are no longer alone but are related to others in the family of God, the local and worldwide Church.<sup>9</sup>

On more on how the Lord's Prayer encapsulates Jesus' whole kingdom vision, see:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/2017/04/12/the-lords-prayer/>

## Recommended reading

For those who wish to read further:

- David Timms, *Living the Lord's Prayer*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008. (David is Karen Wilson's brother.)
- Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*. London: SPCK, 1996.
- Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen. *On the Lord's Prayer*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004. (What these early church fathers taught about the Lord's Prayer.)
- J. I. Packer, *Growing in Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994. (Part 3 is on the Lord's Prayer.)
- Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008. (Part 3 is on the Lord's Prayer.)

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (London: SPCK, 1996), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Henderson, *Transforming Prayer: How Everything Changes When You Seek God's Face* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House, 2011). Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, Trevor, "Author Interview: The Message of Sonship", 2011, accessed 26 June 2012.

<http://huiiothesian.wordpress.com/2011/07/22/author-interview-emthe-message-of-sonshipem-by-trevor-burke/>