

PRAYING THE LORD'S PRAYER

By Eva Peck

This article explores ways to better pray the Lord's Prayer. It first establishes certain givens for effective prayer in general. It then elaborates on the specific aspects of the Lord's Prayer one by one, showing how better understanding each of them can make praying the Lord's Prayer more meaningful.

General Principles for Effective Prayer

According to Michael Casey, the following principles are important for growth in prayer and prayerfulness, and hence will also enable one to better pray the Lord's Prayer.

Separation

Prayer thrives in the desert, rather than in the midst of a busy life full of alternative interests. There is therefore a need for *separation or detachment* from the world's values and pursuits. One needs to evaluate the beliefs and philosophy of society and develop one's own philosophy of life based on biblical principles. Christians are to consciously strive not to be conformed to the world's pattern of thought but rather to cultivate the mind of Christ (Rom 12:2-3; Eph. 4:22-24). This happens as one allows the gospel to shape one's thoughts and internally transform the heart.¹

It is also important to realize that the things of God, being transcendent, are not subject to the world's approaches of categorising, analysing, problem solving or methodological approach of any kind. Rather, life moves in mystery and growth in prayerfulness depends on God. Therefore, one should also distance oneself from both, the achievement mentality which sees prayer as a pursuit subject to will power, and the instant gratification mentality which

calls for immediate results. Emphasising will power and focusing on progress in prayer can lead to guilt if progress is perceived as unsatisfactory. Instead, one should submit to God's grace and accept God's providence. Further, prayer is a long-term goal and its chief aim is not to achieve a happy experience now. It is an ongoing process of transformation – the divinization of life through the Holy Spirit and as such is life-long.²

Solitude

In addition to separation and detachment, periods of *solitude* are needed. Solitude means simply being oneself. While the society emphasizes group processes, each person needs to isolate an area of life where they can be alone. The process of aloneness is what allows growth in such areas as: mastery over the instincts which can enslave (e.g. food, sexuality, drink, comfort, power, status); time control – avoiding being consumed by tasks, and instead responding to grace and allowing time for God to enter our lives and transform us; dismantling of dependencies in life, such as mutually exploitative relationships; and confronting and dealing with our own psychological make-up, such as values we have unconsciously absorbed.³

Another principle for growing in prayerfulness which solitude teaches is to cultivate a deep sense of the sacred. The loss of this is often at the root of sin. Reaffirming God's existence as mediated through all that exists will help to develop a reverence for, rather than exploitation of, being. In perceiving the transcendent principle of life – living in the context of something greater than what one controls – and appreciating the mystery of life, one will experience an awakening of the inner self which will lead to religious inspiration and intuition.⁴

Silence

Learning the art of *silence* is also conducive to growth in prayerfulness. Silence does not come easy in a world of endless noise and compulsive communication. The tongue tends to be the last bodily member to be tamed by the Holy Spirit and is capable of causing much harm (Jas 3:1-12). Empty, trivial conversation can degrade the profundity of our being as creatures made in the image of God. Too much speaking and too much listening to ourselves lead to delusion regarding our wisdom and capacity to help others. All speech involves conceptualization or categorization which can trivialize the great mysteries. Also, prayer can be disturbed by residual images and emotions from foregoing conversations. Therefore, control of the tongue, as well as a time of rest and healing, are needed between conversation and prayer in order to introduce a creative void where God can work. In prayer itself, as Jesus instructed in the Sermon on the Mount, avoid much speaking. According to Martin Luther, Christian prayer should consist of few words and many meanings. Physical silence produces a sense of calm over the whole organism and promotes growth in sensitivity to God's speaking and acting.⁵

Prayer is of the Heart

Another key to effective prayer and growth in prayerfulness is the understanding that prayer is of the heart, rather than resulting from thoughts about God, imaginative re-creations of biblical scenes, or words or rites without inner meaning. Heart is the organ and site of prayer and the centre of our being with which we need to establish contact. When we have done this, we find ourselves and our deepest layer of being – and there God will be found as well.⁶

In the search for prayer and the relation between a person and God, it is important to have a sound understanding of both God (theology) and humans (anthropology). True spirituality comes from the creative interaction between science and theology – psychology, anthropology, and Scripture are all needed. However, prayer and spirituality are more than consciousness. Equating being with consciousness in the West has led to losing touch with a higher reality and an overemphasis of one's own efforts, will power, techniques, methods, and planning. Consciousness represents only a part of human life which includes much more mystery, substance, and beauty than we are aware of. We are influenced by past consciousness, the subconscious, as well as deep down, not yet surfaced and perceived, latent potential. Prayer takes place not at the level of consciousness but rather deep in the subconscious, at the level of inspiration and creativity where contact is also made with something greater than ourselves. This too is where aesthetic beauty, dreaming, day-dreaming, intuition, hunches, art appreciation, and ESP are experienced.⁷

Importance of God's Word in Life Transformation

Prayer grows in a soil fertilized by God's Word. As the reading and meditation on the Scriptures, partaken of as our daily bread, touches the heart, an automatic reaction is a prayer response.⁸ Spiritual reading (*lectio divina*) as well as praying from the Psalms or other short biblical texts will lead to long-term transformation of life as the Sacred Word acts on the heart at the affective level.⁹ Prayer life, while separate from life as a whole, needs to be consistent with one's overall life philosophy and will be reflected in one's day-to-day actions. Faith, working from the inside out, will transform a person's life so that the image of God is apparent

to others. By saying yes to God and opening the gates of one's heart to God's action, a person will develop elements in their life that makes them holy.¹⁰

Need for a Healthy Fear of God

A healthy fear of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit – an expression of God's love residing in the heart. It is the beginning of wisdom and the first stage of renewal. Fear of God is not terror or being afraid of God, but reveals the ultimate danger in which we can live – the potential of choosing death over life, thus harming ourselves or others. Fear of the Lord brings us to the realization that we are powerless without God and in a desperate need of God's grace. It gives us understanding of God's will and openness to being corrected and changed. When we respond to God's Word and the inner nudging of the Spirit, we will grow in closeness to God through our prayer.¹¹

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer has been given to Christ's original disciples in response to their request for Jesus to teach them to pray (Lk 11:1). It can be seen as a summary of the gospel, the centre of the gospel proclamation, the foundation of our petitions and desires, and the crux of all scriptural prayers. It communicates the right order of priorities and teaches us how to ask for the new life in Christ. Through the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gives to us what he has received from the Father, thus becoming the master of our prayer. As the Incarnate Word, he understands and reveals to his human brethren the needs of the human heart and thus becomes the model of our prayers. Jesus, however, has not given us just the words for praying to the Father. The Holy Spirit is also involved, interceding for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8:27). Thus the Lord's Prayer in a mysterious way involves the Triune God.¹²

Dom Lehodey has addressed in a general way four basic *parts of prayer* – adoration, asking for forgiveness, thanksgiving, and petitions – stating that any one of these can be the focus of a particular prayer.¹³ He also describes two basic *types of prayer* as vocal prayer (using words and signs) and mental prayer (being interior and silent). The mental prayer, also referred to by Lehodey as meditation, consists of reflections, affections, petitions, and resolutions, though this order doesn't need to be followed. All of these principles can be applied in praying the Lord's Prayer.

As one reflects in the mind on the meaning of the various aspects of the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples, feelings and affections towards God will be stirred in the heart. The Lord's Prayer starts and ends with adoration. It includes petitions first for the things of God and secondly for human needs here and now. Request for forgiveness is a central petition. Resolutions have to do with actions towards aligning one's life with God's will. This ties in with the goal of mental prayer which is the pursuit of righteousness and holiness, or in other words, transformation and deeper conversion.¹⁴

The Lord's Prayer can be considered in three broad parts as follows: (1) addressing our Father in heaven; (2) seven petitions; and (3) concluding doxology. Each aspect of the prayer has much to reflect on in relation of our total life, including our identity in relation to God and the universe; our will in relation to God's will; salvation; our responsibility to God and others; and the way to be victorious. The individual aspects of the prayer are looked at below as praying the Lord's Prayer will become more meaningful when these aspects are better understood.

Approaching and Addressing God

Our Father who art in heaven

It is only through the precious sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that we are brought into the Father's presence (Heb. 1:3; 2:13), and through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to address God as our Father. Special grace enables us to know the Father – though it is not in the sense that we know our earthly parents. Rather, by praying to the Father we enter into his mystery as he is and as the Son has revealed him to us. Through the Holy Spirit, we have become children of God and enter into a relationship of *parrhesia* – trust, assurance, humble boldness, and certainty of being loved (cf. Eph 3:12; Heb 3:6; 4:16; 10:19; 1 Jn 2:28; 2:31).¹⁵

Much could be reflected on regarding this mystery – the wonder of having been reconciled, adopted, reborn, placed into the Body of Christ, and becoming the children of God and in a sense, other “Christs”. The Lord's Prayer also reveals us to ourselves. It also obliges us to grow into God's likeness (having been created in God's image) and to behave like children of God. At the same time, as we grasp God's goodness and incredible love, reciprocal love should grow in our hearts every time we pray the Lord's Prayer.¹⁶

Praying to “our” Father, we are in communion with the Father, his Son, Jesus Christ, in their one Holy Spirit, i.e. with the consubstantial and indivisible Trinity – another great mystery to ponder. “Our” implies others and it is the Church – those sharing in the same grace of reconciliation, rebirth and divine adoption – that we have communion with as our brothers and sisters in Christ. This common identity should unite all Christians and also extend the divine love received through the Holy Spirit towards all that Christ died for – those that do not yet know God. After all, God cares for all people and indeed for the whole creation.¹⁷

“In heaven” does not mean that God is far away or in another place because God is not limited by space. Rather, God is both transcendent and immanent, dwelling in the hearts of the just. At the same time, the Father’s house is our homeland towards which we are heading. We are in the world, but not of the world – seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus and having our citizenship in heaven (Jn 17:11-15; Eph. 1:3, 20; Phil. 3:20).¹⁸

The Seven Petitions

Having entered God’s presence, we are prompted by the Spirit of adoption in our hearts to make seven petitions. The first three are directed in love and faith toward God – acknowledging God’s glory and aligning with God’s sovereign plan. The remaining four collectively acknowledge our desperate human needs and commend them to God’s grace.¹⁹

Hallowed by thy name

Through this petition, which can also be understood as praise and thanksgiving, we are entering God’s plan of salvation at the completion of which humanity will be made “holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:4, 9).²⁰ We also express the desire that the lives of those who pray, as well as the lives of all humanity bring glory and honour to their Creator.²¹ Ancient Israel was commissioned to live holy lives, but instead their behaviour caused the neighbouring nations to profane God’s name (Ezek 20:9, 14, 22, 39).²²

Thy Kingdom come

The Greek word, *basileia*, translated kingdom in the New Testament, can mean “kingship” (abstract noun), “kingdom” (concrete noun), or “reign” (action noun). It is both

present and future. It was introduced by the Incarnate Word, is proclaimed to the world through the gospel, has come through Christ's death and resurrection, and continues to come through the church. It will come in glory when Christ returns and this is its main meaning in the Lord's Prayer.²³

The kingdom of God was the centre of Jesus' preaching and is at the centre of the Lord's Prayer, encouraging Christ's disciples to see it also as their priority and line up their desires and needs with it.²⁴

This part of the Lord's Prayer reminds us that this life is not our permanent state but only a preparation for the life to come. We need to keep an eye on God's promises and the coming resurrection, cultivating a growing desire for God's kingdom on earth and our glorification. Our future existence will be characterized by unity, harmony, and lack of pain. No longer being pulled in different directions, we will instead experience internal integration. Praying for God's kingdom and Jesus' return (the "Maranatha" prayer) helps us to overcome lethargy and depression as well as giving hope, zest for life, and motivation to move toward God and his reign.²⁵

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven

In the ultimate sense, God's will is the salvation by grace through Jesus Christ of all humanity. When this happens, with the reign of God over the earth, this petition will be fulfilled. In the meantime, the church is to participate in this plan, both collectively and individually.²⁶

Sometimes tension exists between God's kingdom and personal human will.²⁷ Even when converted, we experience struggle and even hostility in our hearts toward God and

God's will. We may resist rather than joyously respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings. This can make us feel like our prayer is accomplishing nothing, we have been abandoned by God, and our lives are empty and futile. We may then get discouraged and bored, stop praying, and do something "useful" rather than persevere and seek to do God's will in our lives.²⁸

Give us this day our daily bread

In this part, the Lord's Prayer includes a petition for our needs as well as those of others – it is a collective request. At its crux, all prayer is petitionary – its substance implies neediness and realizing that we cannot provide for ourselves, but that everything comes to us as a gift by divine grace. Intercessory prayer is an expression of solidarity with a needy world, church, and others. It should, to some degree, be an element in all our prayers.²⁹

The request for *giving* implies a trust of children who confidently come to their Father. The petition glorifies God by acknowledging his wonderful goodness and also expresses the notion of the covenant relationship that we are in with the Father.³⁰

In requesting *bread*, we acknowledge that the Father who gave us life also provides for all our needs, thus relieving us of unnecessary worries. The petition also implies our responsibility to be diligent, as well as to be concerned for those who suffer want. Christians should strive to pursue justice on as many levels as possible. The bread also has spiritual meaning as besides physical bread, humans need the Bread of Life, God's Word incarnate and there is on earth a famine of hearing the Word of God (Matt 4:4; Am 8:11). *This day* and *daily* implies unreserved trust for physical provision. It also points to present and future spiritual realities of the Bread of Life experienced daily in our lives, celebrated in the Eucharist, and fulfilled on the Day of the Lord in the kingdom of God.³¹

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

The basis of prayer is the recognition of personal sinfulness – being sinners in need of saving. We love God by accepting to be forgiven and saved. God loves us by being merciful and saving us. No matter how disgusted we may be with our life, we can always call out to God for mercy (cf. the publican's and Pharisee's prayers).³²

With forgiveness and justification comes the responsibility to change – be transformed. For prayer to become transforming, we must be willing to cooperate and avoid excuses to block our action or response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.³³

As a result of Christ's sacrifice, we can confidently ask for forgiveness (Col 1:14; Eph 1:7). Also the church's sacraments are signs of God's forgiveness (Mt 26:28; Jn 20:23). However, accepting this outpouring of mercy into our hearts is only possible if we have forgiven fellow humans. Without our forgiveness of others, our hearts remain closed and hard. Only through the Holy Spirit in our lives can we forgive others, including enemies, as Christ forgave us (Eph 4:32), as well as imitate the divine model in perfection, mercy, and love (Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36; Jn 13:34).³⁴

And lead us not into temptation

This petition is connected with the previous one, since it is yielding to temptation which results in sin. The meaning of the Greek is more along the lines of “do not allow us to enter into temptation” and “do not let us yield to temptation” as God tempts no one and rather wants to free us from evil. We are praying for being kept from going the way of sin, and for the Spirit to give us discernment of what is right and the strength to follow it. Discernment is needed for distinguishing between trials that are necessary for our inner growth and

temptations that lead to sin and death. There is also a difference between being tempted and consenting to temptation, as well as between a good pursuit and a temptation whose object appears to be good.³⁵

When we pray this aspect of the Lord's Prayer, we have decided in our heart to live and walk by the Spirit. God then gives us strength to do that, promising that we will not be tried beyond our ability to endure (1 Cor 10:13). In our battle against temptation and sin, victory is only possible through prayer. As Jesus overcame sin and the chief tempter, the devil, through prayer, so he unites us through this petition to his battle and his agony so we too can gain victory.³⁶

But deliver us from evil

This last petition is also found in Jesus' priestly prayer for his disciples shortly before his death (Jn 17:15). It is a prayer for the "communion of saints", those who are in the world but not of the world. The evil one is Satan the devil, God's constant adversary, murderer, deceiver, and liar through whom sin and death entered the world. Christ has already gained victory over him at the cross and when he returns to banish Satan for good, the creation will be liberated from sin and death. So praying for deliverance from the evil one also implies praying for Jesus' return, as well as for deliverance all the evils, present, past and future, that Satan has instigated.³⁷

Final Doxology

For thine is the kingdom and the glory for ever, Amen

The doxology, which is not found in the early manuscripts, sums up the first three petitions to the Father. Proclaimed as adoration and thanksgiving, it is the glorification of his name, coming of his reign, and the power of his saving will. While Satan, the ruler of this world, has attributed kingship, power and glory to himself, Jesus restores them to the Father till ultimately God will be all and in all. The “Amen” ratifies our agreement with the prayer our Lord taught.³⁸

In summary, the main goal of prayer is personal transformation. The following will promote growth in prayerfulness and godly living as well as enabling one to pray the Lord's Prayer, or any prayer, more effectively: Separation and detachment from the world's values and cultivating the mind of Christ; periods of solitude which will help in mastery over instincts, time, and unhealthy dependencies, as well as cultivating the sense of the sacred; times of silence to avoid harming others through careless words, trivializing the great mysteries and the profundity of being, as well as deluding ourselves regarding our abilities; feeding on God's Word, which when it penetrates to the heart, the site of prayer, will bring about transformation; and finally, a healthy fear of God, which will keep one on the right path, making choices for life rather than death.

When reflecting on the aspects of the Lord's Prayer, one will arrive at a deeper understanding of the gospel and personal salvation, as well as one's desperate neediness for God's grace in all aspects of one's life. This will then result in immense gratitude, love and praise for the incredibly loving and compassionate God who gave God's most precious for each of us individually as well as humanity collectively.

Bibliography

- Casey, Michael. "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series." Broken Bay Institute, Sydney, 1979.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd edition.* New York: Doubleday, 1995.
- Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New Revised Standard Version.* San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989.
- Lehodey, Dom Vitalis. *The Ways of Mental Prayer.* Dublin: Gill, 1949, Tan Reprint, 1999.
- Ramsey, Michael. *Be Still and Know.* Fontana, 1982, Cowley, 1992.

Endnotes

- ¹ Michael Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series" (Broken Bay Institute, Sydney, 1979), tape 1.
- ² Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 1.
- ³ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 1.
- ⁴ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 1 and 2.
- ⁵ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 2.
- ⁶ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 3.
- ⁷ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 3.
- ⁸ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 5.
- ⁹ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 6.
- ¹⁰ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 8.
- ¹¹ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 9.
- ¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd edition*, (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 727-728.
- ¹³ Dom Vitalis Lehodey, *The Ways of Mental Prayer* (Dublin: Gill, 1949, Tan Reprint, 1999), 2-4.
- ¹⁴ Lehodey, *The Ways of Mental Prayer*, 5-11, 14-25, 85, 127.
- ¹⁵ *Catechism*, 731-732.
- ¹⁶ *Catechism*, 732-734.
- ¹⁷ *Catechism*, 735-736.
- ¹⁸ *Catechism*, 736-737.
- ¹⁹ *Catechism*, 738.
- ²⁰ *Catechism*, 739.
- ²¹ Michael Ramsey, *Be Still and Know* (Fontana, 1982, Cowley, 1992), 29.
- ²² *Catechism* 740.
- ²³ *Catechism* 742.
- ²⁴ Ramsey, *Be Still and Know*, 20, 29-30.
- ²⁵ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 8.
- ²⁶ *Catechism*, 743-745.
- ²⁷ Ramsey, *Be Still and Know*, 33.
- ²⁸ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 9.
- ²⁹ Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 8.
- ³⁰ *Catechism*, 745.
- ³¹ *Catechism*, 746-748
- ³² Casey, "Growth in Prayerfulness - Tape series", tape 8.
- ³³ Casey, tape 9
- ³⁴ *Catechism*, 748-751.
- ³⁵ *Catechism*, 751.
- ³⁶ *Catechism*, 752.
- ³⁷ *Catechism*, 752-54.
- ³⁸ *Catechism*, 754-55.