

Viewing Our Work in the Light of the Lord's Prayer

by Irwin J. Habeck[‡]

Praying the Lord's Prayer like all praying is devotional, an intimate conversation between a child of God and his heavenly Father. It is not the performance of a pious routine nor a matter of keeping God posted on what is happening here below. What are we to say when we pray? The disciples once asked Jesus this very question and he replied by teaching them the Lord's Prayer. That prayer is an outline which we follow as we talk to our Father. Under this outline we can subsume all that there is to talk about. We may begin by speaking about matters which concern us directly. But we shall not end there. We have been entrusted with the public ministry. As we pray the Lord's Prayer the various petitions lead us to look upon this ministry from various angles. Our purpose in this article is to recall some of these angles, perhaps even to suggest some which had previously not entered our mind.

Our Father Who Art in Heaven

What a privilege for us to approach God with these words. We finite creatures approach the eternal God, we frail human beings approach the almighty God, we sinful and sinning creatures approach the holy God—we approach God and call him, not by names which befit his eternity or might or holiness, but by the name Father. How can that be? “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Ga 4:4,5). God had his Son who was the lord of the law become a servant under the law to render in our stead the perfect obedience which we, sinners that we are, could in no wise render. Even more, God charged his holy Son with our sins, “made him who had no sin to be sin for us,” as Paul puts it (2 Cor 5:21), and let him experience the full fury of the curse which sin had called down upon sinners so that through him we might be freed from guilt and punishment and have everlasting life instead. What grace! What amazing grace! It is this grace which makes us bold to approach God as our Father when we pray.

We do not pray in the first person singular, however, but in the first person plural. None of us is an only child of our heavenly Father. His children form a countless host as Revelation 7 reminds us (7:9). The people whom we serve also are part of his family. At times we are tempted to concentrate too intensively upon their humanness, their frailty, their seeming ingratitude. Now the Lord does not lead us to expect that our people are going to be perfect. Otherwise he would not have let his Word abound in exhortations calling upon us to show patience, longsuffering, forgiveness. Still they are our Father's children. The same blood which was shed to redeem us was shed also for them. The righteousness in which our Savior clothed us is the same as that with which he clothed them. Such reflections as we pray “our Father” will lead us to be happy for our people and to pray for them in love. Our horizon will expand even more when we come to the Second Petition.

Before we come to the end of the Lord's Prayer, we shall be asking big things of our Father. Too big? Sometimes it seems that we are afraid to ask too much because we do not want to put our Father on the spot. Jesus condescended to our weakness by teaching us when praying to describe our Father as the one who is in heaven. We earthly fathers are sorely limited, but not our heavenly Father. “The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all” (Ps 103:19). Paul writes: “Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20). With such a perspective we shall dare to be bold when we ask.

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Hallowed Be Thy Name

For what are we going to ask? Our first answer is all too apt to be, “for enough to eat and drink and wear, for a comfortable home, for a good income, for a balanced budget in our corporate work, for increased capital holdings.” There will be something about such things later. But they do not come first. Even the prayer for forgiveness does not come first. We have already rested upon forgiveness when we called God our Father. Jesus teaches us to make the request that our Father’s name might be hallowed the top item on our prayer list.

To hallow means to set apart as something holy, to treat with holy respect. When we do that to our Father’s name, we are doing it to him. We treat our Father’s name with proper respect when we think and act as those should think and act who know that God is their Father. Jesus worked hard to get his disciples to show the attitude which ought to be typical of our heavenly Father’s children. Trust in him to supply your needs. “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Mt 6:26). Trust him to answer your prayers. “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Mt 7:11). Trust him to protect you. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. So don’t be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows” (Mt 10:29,31). We hallow our Father’s name by showing a childlike trust in him, depending upon him to do everything which a heavenly Father could be expected to do.

That is also what we pray our people might do. This is one thrust of our ministry in general and the particular thrust of our ministry of comfort. Trial and affliction may seem to be meaningless and cruel to our people until they are reminded that fathers chastise with a loving purpose in mind. Burdens may seem to be too heavy to bear until the bearers are reminded that their Father invites them to cast their burdens upon him. All of the attributes of God need to be explained to our people if they are to grow in knowledge. But we need to be careful not to offer so much else that they lose sight of the fact that God is their Father.

Since our Father is in heaven, he is the supreme authority. When he speaks, he is also the supreme authority. His word is truth (Jn 17:17). His Word is the final authority. His name is not being hallowed when men make their reason the final authority and presume to sit in judgment over what he says and to determine what in his Word is to be accepted offhand and what needs to be altered to satisfy their reason. Our people need to be trained to realize that heterodoxy is as ungodly as lying or stealing no matter how attractive the sheep’s clothing may be which is worn by those who will not let our Father’s truth be the truth. But there is also a positive side. When we pray that our Father’s name might be hallowed, we ask that we and our people as well might daily be led to marvel anew at the kindness and condescension which our Father has shown in giving us his Word as a lamp to our feet and a light for our path (Ps 119:105) and meditate on it day and night. (Ps 1:2).

Thy Kingdom Come

This petition has the most direct bearing upon our ministry. His kingdom is his gracious working for the salvation of sinners. We may think of four phases in his kingdom. There was the time of preparation stretching all the way from the forming of his eternal counsel to the fullness of time. There was the time of fulfillment in the incarnation and ministry and death and resurrection and ascension of our Savior. There is the present time of outreach to the nations and building of the church. And there is the consummation when the elect will have been fully gathered in and will live with their Lord in everlasting glory.

When we pray that our Father’s kingdom may come, we shall recall with heartfelt gratitude what he has done to save the world. We shall also echo the closing prayer in the Bible: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Re 22:20). But our thoughts will turn in particular to what our Father is doing now for the salvation of sinners, a work in which he has made us his partners and instruments.

When we pray that our Father’s kingdom may come, we are led to think of the many souls out there who are not calling upon the name of the Lord because they have never heard the gospel. We want our Father so to shape the course of events that they may have the opportunity to hear. If one of them should cross our path, we

want our Father to make us “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pe 3:15). We generally are bound to one place. But everywhere out there are souls who are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). They need to be reached. Since “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Mt 9:37), praying that our Father’s kingdom may come will include asking “the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (Mt 9:38). That will remind us of all that we are doing in our day and age to send out workers: our mission work abroad and at home, our worker training program, the bureaucracy which is required to implement and administer our corporate activity. When we view our work in the light of the Lord’s Prayer, we shall realize that it is to be our endeavor to help our people become increasingly mission-minded, to realize that mission work is not an expendable luxury but one of the chief reasons for the existence of the church. We shall want to help them to be informed, interested and supportive.

There is also another aspect to the coming of our Father’s kingdom. Not only is it to grow like a mustard seed but also to permeate like leaven. The New Testament is full of terms like edification and its cognates and synonyms. Paul chided the Corinthians because he could give them only milk and not meat. Peter exhorts: “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pe 3:18). So in our work we shall caution our people against withering on the vine and against being content with the status quo in their spiritual lives. Our prayer for growth will commit us to providing our people with the means and opportunities for promoting their spiritual growth.

Thy Will Be Done on Earth as It Is in Heaven

When we place the emphasis upon the “Thy,” our prayer becomes an echo of the one which our Savior prayed in Gethsemane. It is not hard to pray it when the sun of bliss is shining. But it is hard to pray when dark clouds of adversity enter our lives. But then we need to remind ourselves that we are praying to our Father. Without his knowledge and consent not even a sparrow falls from the roof and we are dearer to him than many sparrows. He must be acting in love even when he allows adversity to enter our lives, for he “demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Ro 5:8). To his will we shall submit patiently. And that is the attitude which we want our Father to stimulate among our people—through us. This is the thrust of our ministry of comfort to the sick and the dying, the shut-ins and the afflicted.

If we, however, place the emphasis upon the words “be done,” this becomes a prayer to be helped to obey our Father’s will. We mention the standard to which we want to be helped to attain: “as it is in heaven.” The obedience of the angels is exemplary. They do the Lord’s bidding, obey his word, do his will (Ps 103:20,21). We have a long way to go to become like them and ask for help to do it. There is nothing irksome about doing our Father’s will. We want to join his one and only Son in saying: “To do your will, O my God, is my desire” (Ps 40:8). We are truly happy when in love for our Savior we are doing our Father’s will. That is also the attitude which we want our people to show in an increasing measure. It involves crucifying the flesh, incurring the scorn of the world and resisting the devil. But in love for their Savior they will put forth the effort, encouraged by us.

It is our Father’s will which we want to be helped to do and want our people to be helped to do. His will is revealed in the Bible. It is useful for “training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tm 3:16,17). Now the Bible is adequate, but it is not always specific. What am I to do if my neighbor’s son perpetrates an act of vandalism against my property? Our Father has given us the law of love and the Golden Rule, but it is our responsibility to determine how they are to be applied in a specific situation. So we pray that our Father may help us know and then apply his will. This too is something that he does for our people through us and we pray that he may enable us to measure up to our responsibility. Our people are besieged by philosophies, theories, movements, causes which call evil good and good evil. They need our guidance. We pray that our Father might make us able correctly to handle the word of truth (2 Tm 2:15) so that we can show our people which portion of the Word applies in a given situation.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

The placing of this petition is significant. There are more important matters than daily bread and Jesus teaches us to mention them first. Do we follow his order of priorities? Or are our minds at times so full of our material needs and problems about the affairs of this life that they occupy the bulk of our prayers and leave little time for spiritual concerns? While Jesus does not mention daily bread first, he does teach us to mention it. He wants us to do so in the confidence that our Father will surely supply our needs. On more than one occasion he argued from the lesser to the greater in order to bolster that confidence. If our Father feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies, he will surely feed and clothe his children. This is the assurance which we are to give to our people when they are all too quick to worry.

The spot which the Fourth Petition occupies in the Lord's Prayer can give us a criterion for evaluating the relative importance of matters which are part of the life of the church. It has been reported that in the good old days a voters' assembly might spend two hours debating whether or not to purchase a new lamp shade but could conclude a case of excommunication in five minutes. Since we are in this world, we shall have to take care of business matters. Faithfulness requires that we do so wisely. But we shall always have to remember that balanced budgets, impressive plants, well-kept grounds, efficient administration are only of secondary importance. This is the wisdom we learn from observing the place of the Fourth Petition.

Forgive Us Our Trespases as We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us

We have already commented on the fact that it is noteworthy that the petitions do not begin with this one. Surely we cannot hope to approach God as our Father if our sins are not forgiven. But it is the very fact that our sins have been forgiven that emboldens us to call God our Father. After Paul had summarized the gospel by saying that God had his Son become incarnate and under the law to redeem us who were under the law that we might receive the adoption of sons, he added: "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Ga 4:6). Still Jesus teaches us to pray for forgiveness daily just as we pray for bread daily to keep us mindful of the fact that we do sin daily and daily need forgiveness.

In the last three petitions we ask our Father to save us from several great dangers. One of these is an unforgiving spirit. So Jesus teaches us to ask our Father to make the manner in which we forgive the trespases of others the manner in which we ask him to forgive us. He adds his commentary: "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Mt 6:14,15). In the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt 18:21-35) Jesus illustrates this. We do not earn forgiveness by being forgiving. Our being forgiven depends upon the grace of our King. But we can forfeit his forgiveness by being unforgiving. Living among sinful human beings as we do, it is inevitable that at times their sinning will affect us even as we at times will sin against them. Our Old Adam wants to get even, to nurse a grudge. We can find strength to crucify him only as we dwell upon the forgiving grace of our Father. As we move among our people we know all too well how often they can irritate, aggravate and hurt us. Still we shall forgive them, remembering the exhortation: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph 4:32). Our people too need constantly to be urged to be forgiving. Pastors complain that the number of marital problems among their people is increasing. It is only to be expected that when two sinful beings live as closely together as husband and wife do, they are going to sin against one another. That is not the problem. The problem is that instead of forgiving and forgetting they remember, keep a tally of wrongs suffered and nurse a grudge. They forget the admonition: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph 4:26,27). They need to be reminded of what they are saying when they pray the Fifth Petition. The hurt which they have suffered from their spouse may be great. But the hurt which they will suffer if they refuse to forgive is infinitely greater. The old man needs the club of the law, the new man responds to the warmth of grace.

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

A modern translation would have us pray, “Do not put us to the test.” But if we were to ask for that, we would be ignoring passages like these: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (Jas 1:2,3). “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (Jas 1:12). Not as though the Lord is not sure about the quality of our faith and for his own information needs to test it. But we need to have our faith tested. When things are going smoothly in our lives it is easy to say, “I trust in the Lord and am sure of his love for me.” But when trials come and we still have the spiritual strength to say, “I trust in the Lord and am sure that he is dealing with me in love,” we have stood the test and are happy because we have.

The temptation into which we ask our Father not to lead us is the temptation to sin. The very holiness of our Father precludes the possibility that he would ever tempt us to sin. James reminds us: “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone” (1:13). Temptation comes at us from a different source: the devil, the world and our sinful flesh. We ask our Father to lead us in such a manner that their temptations may not overcome us. We have his assurance that he will do that: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor 10:13). He has provided us with “full armor” for overcoming temptation: truth, righteousness, readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God. Using it and having done everything in the process “you may be able to stand your ground and...to stand” (Eph 6:11–17). But having the weapons we also need the skill and the strength to use them. Since only our Father by his Spirit can supply our need, we are to keep on praying while we put on and use God’s armor. Jesus tells us: “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Mt 26:41). Here he has also taught us which words to use when we pray: “Lead us not into temptation.”

Whenever we pray the Sixth Petition we are alerted to the fact that we are going to be beset by temptations. The “devil’s schemes” (Eph 6:11) are clever. He will try to exploit any sign of weakness on our part to the utmost: covetousness, vanity, vengefulness, discontent. The world’s propaganda is insidious: “Times have changed and you have to keep up with the times.” And Scripture is full of passages showing in which direction our sinful flesh wants to go. People may imagine that members of the clergy are immune to temptation, but we know better and shall never cease to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

Jesus teaches us to pray in the first person plural. We do not want our brothers and sisters in our Father’s family to be overcome by temptation. Then we on our part dare not put temptation in their path. Paul was ready to present himself to believers as a model of Christian living (Php 3:17). But he was also aware of the damage which would result if he were to set a bad example: “We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path” (2 Cor 6:3). So we because of the position of leadership with which we have been entrusted need to be especially careful lest by flippant words or a relaxing of moral standards hinder someone from coming to faith or cause believers to be disturbed and even to doubt and fall away. But we also need constantly to remind all of our people not to give offense: “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God” (1 Cor 10:32). Just as our good works seen by men will lead them to glorify our Father our bad works will have the opposite effect.

Deliver Us From Evil

Since the definite article is used with evil, we may look upon this as a reference to the evil one who is in a class by himself, the devil. But we have already mentioned him in the previous petition. We therefore prefer to pray this petition thinking of anything and everything which at the moment might be designated as the evil thing. So this petition becomes a catchall for all of the evils which have not been mentioned previously. Each time we pray different evils may come to mind. Our danger is that we might hold them so closely before our eyes that they keep us from seeing that our Father is greater than any or all of them. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). Bearing that in mind we shall ask him to deliver us from the

evil, either by protecting us against it or by rescuing us out of it in his good time and way. Thinking of past dangers Paul said: "Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them" (2 Tm 3:11). Here he uses the same word which is also translated "deliver." Looking ahead, again using the same word, he wrote: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom" (2 Tm 4:18). We want to view the evil from the same perspective and help our people do likewise. Our Father will hear and help us!

The Doxology

The doxology may be an interpolation in the original text, but there is scriptural support for each of its statements. The Second Petition has reminded us that our Father's kingdom is the manifestation of his saving concern for us. The love which it manifests assures us that he will hear and answer our prayers. The address of the Lord's prayer reminds us that he rules in glorious power and is surely able to give us what we ask. His glory shines forth brightest in his grace. He will add to his glory every time he answers our prayers. Nor will he ever vanish from the scene. His glorious virtues will endure forever. He will ever be there for us to approach in childlike confidence. Every reason then for us to conclude our prayer with Amen, the word which expresses complete confidence. When we view our work in the light of the Lord's Prayer, we may in such confidence pray for ourselves, our people and for all people in the world.