

A Prescription
for
Prayer

A Fresh Perspective on the Lord's Prayer

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A Prescription For Prayer
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A PRESCRIPTION FOR PRAYER

The city of Hanoi in North Vietnam is still in the nightmares of some American men who were pilots during the Vietnam War. What they called the "Hanoi Hilton" was a notorious prison in Hanoi where our pilots, who had been shot down over Vietnam, were imprisoned for the duration of that war. Some of these men spent as much as seven years in solitary confinement while they were incarcerated in that infamous prison.

Most of them were not especially religious men when they were captured. Many were "top gun pilots" with egos to match. In addition to solitary confinement, in the early months of their imprisonment, they were interrogated and tortured almost every day. In their intense loneliness, they had a need and they found a way to communicate with each other by tapping out messages in Morse code on the walls of their cells. Since they were experiencing the greatest trial of their lives, they also had a need, and they found a way, to pray.

Some of them tapped out a prayer they memorized when they were children. What they remembered as "The Lord's Prayer," or "The Our Father" was, and still is, the greatest prayer and the greatest prescription for prayer this world has ever heard. That prayer/

prescription of Jesus proved to be just as profound and filled with meaning for those pilots in their solitary confinement as it was when Jesus taught it on a hill in Galilee two thousand years ago.

In the silence of that foul-smelling place, lonely, desperate, hurting men tapped out these words to God: *"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen"* (Matthew 6:9-13).

This prayer, taught by Jesus, is essentially three providential petitions and four personal petitions. A providential petition is a prayer request that has what matters most to God at the center of the request. A personal petition is a prayer request that has what we need at the heart of the petition. The three providential petitions are: *"Hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come,"* and *"Your will be done."* The four personal petitions are: *"Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, lead us not into temptation,"* and *"deliver us from evil."*

WHAT IS PRAYER, ANYWAY?

The verb form of the word "to pray" literally means, "to ask." A prayer is usually more than just asking, but asking God for something is the heart of a prayer. In the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus taught a parable about the prayers of a Pharisee and a tax collector. In that parable, the Pharisee didn't ask God for anything when he prayed. Jesus was being satirical when He told us the Pharisee prayed "*with himself.*" That Pharisee's prayer began with himself. It was all about himself and it never went beyond himself.

The Pharisee had "I" trouble. In his very brief prayer of just a few short sentences, he used the personal pronoun "I" five times. He was not actually talking to God at all. He was just making a little speech about himself. He was simply telling God and the people in the temple what a good man he was.

In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector did ask God for something. He beat upon his breast, which was a sign of humility and contrition, which means to be exceedingly sorry for sin, and prayed, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner*" (Luke 18:1-13).

The short, simple, yet profound prayer tapped out by those imprisoned pilots is composed of a salutation, seven petitions, and a benediction. That prayer was designed by

our Lord to teach us how to pray if we are a new believer, and how to deepen our prayer life if we have been a believer for many years. In this booklet, I plan to do a close-up focus of each part of the prayer Jesus prescribed, especially the seven petitions Jesus taught us to pray. Before I do that, here are four general observations that will introduce you to the greatest prayer/teaching this world has ever heard. Those four observations are that this prayer Jesus taught us is a disciple's prayer, a corporate prayer, an index prayer and a teaching prayer.

A DISCIPLE'S PRAYER

This prayer of Jesus should not be called "The Lord's Prayer" because it was not a prayer that was prayed by our Lord. When He prescribed this prayer, Jesus said to His disciples, "*When you pray, you say...*" It should more accurately be called "The Disciples Prayer," because this is a prayer, and a prescription for prayer Jesus taught to guide His disciples as they pray and as they learn how to pray. This prayer teaching of Jesus has impacted my personal prayer life and taught me so much about how to pray as I have followed Jesus.

A CORPORATE PRAYER

We know this prayer was designed by

Jesus to be prayed by His disciples in a group setting because the relative pronouns are plural. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us... deliver us...*" As a pastor, I have found this prayer to be filled with meaning when I have prayed it in unison with a large congregation or with a small group. The more I grew in my understanding of the profound meaning of this prayer of Jesus that teaches us how to pray, the more it meant to me, as a pastor, in the context of worship services, elder's meetings, and small groups.

AN INDEX PRAYER

The old rabbis taught people to pray by giving them what they called "index prayers." These were example prayers that showed people how to pray. Those who were learning to pray were told by the rabbis to "pray like this," and then they were given an index prayer. When we hear Jesus say, "*Pray after this manner,*" as He gives His disciples this example prayer, He is following the pattern of the old rabbis. This prayer of Jesus is an inspired index prayer that is designed to guide new disciples of Jesus as they pray and as they learn how to pray. It is also designed to deepen, heighten and broaden the prayer perspective of a mature disciple.

A TEACHING PRAYER

There are two places in the New Testament where Jesus teaches this prayer. According to Matthew, He gave His disciples this prayer/teaching at the heart of His greatest discourse, "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 6:9-13). According to Matthew, Jesus was teaching His disciples that they would never be the salt of the earth and the light of the world until they learned how to pray.

Luke writes that Jesus taught His prayer/prescription in response to this request of His disciples — "*Lord, teach us to pray*" (Luke 11:1-4). According to Luke, the disciples were impressed with the priority of prayer in the life of Jesus. In addition to asking Jesus to teach them the how-to of prayer, they were asking Jesus to teach them to value prayer as He valued prayer. In this brief booklet, my perspective on this great prayer/prescription of Jesus is based on the way Matthew records this teaching.

When we consider the context in which Jesus taught this prayer, we should realize that His purpose was not just to give us a prayer to pray, but to teach us how to pray. The seven petitions at the heart of this prayer/prescription should outline, impact, and determine the way we express our providential and personal petitions when we pray. When we pray, we should begin our time

of prayer with expressions of worship and follow the pattern of the three providential petitions in this prayer that teach us how to worship when we pray. As we bring our personal needs to God, we are to follow the pattern of the four personal petitions of the prayer Jesus taught His disciples.

THE SALUTATION

"OUR FATHER"

Something that is often overlooked when we pray privately, and especially corporately, is that the essence of prayer is *talking with God*. Jesus begins this prayer/prescription by instructing us to make sure we address our prayer(s) to God.

Many years ago, a famous bishop convened a large religious conference in New England with a prayer. The next day, the Boston Globe named the bishop and reported that his prayer was "... the most eloquent prayer ever addressed to a Boston audience!" Have you made the observation that many public prayers are addressed to audiences on earth rather than our Father Who is in heaven?

A woman was praying in a church prayer meeting. When she made reference to verses of Scripture in her prayer, she gave all the specific chapters and verses where those Scriptures were located in the Bible. After the prayer meeting, her pastor asked, "Eleanor, don't you think God knows where those verses are found in the Bible?" Eleanor responded, "Yes, pastor, but the people don't!"

Jesus begins His prescription for prayer by telling us to be sure to address our prayers to God and not (like the Pharisee in the parable of Jesus I referenced above) to those who may be

joining with us in corporate prayer.

In His teaching, both preceding and following this disciple's prayer, Jesus clearly values private, or what He called "closet" prayers, over public prayers. Jesus is not literally telling us to pray in a broom closet. He is telling us to pray in private. This could be in our automobiles because that is one of the few places we are alone today. He teaches that when we pray in our prayer "closets," we are to *"pray to our Father Who (really) is in secret,"* or in the secret, private place. The point He is making is that there is nobody in our prayer "closets" to address, or impress, but God. Therefore, we are more likely to truly address God in our solitary, secret prayers, than we are in our corporate prayers.

"MY DADDY"

Jesus not only exhorts us to address our prayers to God, Jesus also instructs us to address God as *"Our Father."* The Old Testament people of God were not invited to enter into the presence of God and converse with God on intimate terms. A priest approached God for the people on a regular basis, but even the priest did not enter into the presence of God as he interceded for the people. Once every year, with all the people gathered around the Tabernacle in the Wilderness or the Temple of Solomon, the

High Priest entered into the presence of God for all the people of God.

As His disciples, Jesus is instructing us here to *enter directly into the presence of God and address God as "Our Father!"* That was a radical concept to the disciples who heard Jesus give this teaching, because they were all Jews who had been taught all their lives to perceive and approach God in the manner I have just described.

If they had known the Psalms of David better, they would have remembered that David also believed we should think of God as a heavenly Father Who loves us compassionately, the way a father pities his children (Psalm 103:13). Paul writes that when God fills, or controls our hearts with the Holy Spirit, we will cry "*Abba, Father.*" (Galatians 4:6) The word "Abba" in that verse is actually Arabic for "my Daddy." In the Word of God, David and Paul precede and follow the prayer Jesus taught us with the revelation that our God is intensely personal and should be perceived and addressed intimately, as a loving heavenly Father.

If we add His instructions about prayer in the Upper Room Discourse to this prayer/instruction of Jesus, we can summarize the approach to prayer He taught by saying that Jesus taught us to address our prayers to God, as our heavenly Father, and in the name of

Jesus Christ (John 16:23, 24).

Many parishioners have said to me over the years, "Pastor, when I pray 'Our Father,' I feel as if a circuit breaker has been tripped and I have absolutely no sense of the presence of God." Without exception, I have discovered that when a parishioner has that problem, they have had, or they have a notorious earthly Father. We must observe that Jesus teaches us here to pray to "*Our Father in heaven.*" Our Father in heaven is a perfect Father. We know that because Jesus challenges us to be perfect, "*even as our Father in heaven is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48).

Jesus teaches that God is personal (as in "my Daddy"). He teaches that God knows and cares about the number of hairs on our heads and, as a loving Shepherd, holds us in His hand (Matthew 10:30; John 10:28, 29).

THE THREE PROVIDENTIAL PETITIONS

"HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME"

The names of God represent the essence of Who and What God really is. The names attributed to God in the Bible tell us that our God is, was, and always will be (Jehovah). He is the God Who heals (Jehovah-Rapha), the God Who provides (Jehovah-Jireh), and the almighty, powerful God (El Shaddai). He is the God Who sees (El Roi), Who sanctifies (Jehovah-M'Haddesh), and the God Who is our Shepherd (Jehovah-Ra-ah). All these concepts, and many, many more like them, are represented by the names of God in the Bible.

When Jesus instructs us to pray "*Hallowed be Your name,*" He is instructing us to begin our prayer, (once we are sure we are addressing our prayers to our heavenly Father God), by asking that the essence of Who and What God really is might be known, respected and revered through our lives, because this is the God to Whom we are offering our prayer(s).

GOD FIRST

The message of the Bible frequently sifts down to just two words. Those two words are simply, "God first." In the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, the bottom-line interpretation and application of the commandments, the

character studies, allegories, parables, psalms, sermons, gospels, epistles and teachings is simply "God first." The prayer Jesus taught us begins with that "God-first" emphasis when He instructs us to begin our petitions by asking God that His name, the essence of Who and What He is, might be honored and revered because we are offering our prayer(s) to our perfect heavenly Father God.

"YOUR KINGDOM COME"

The names of God in the Bible also tell us God is a King and that God has a kingdom. In the second providential petition of the prayer Jesus taught us, the God-first emphasis continues by telling us we are to identify ourselves as subjects in the great kingdom of God — *before* we get to our personal petitions.

One of the many ways the Bible makes the claim that Jesus Christ was God is when Jesus is described as the "*King of kings*" and the "*Lord of lords*." In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is a King and He is seeking subjects for His kingdom. When we pray, we are not to be building any kingdoms of our own. This prayer of Jesus clearly teaches us that when we pray, before we pray "give us," we are to affirm our allegiance to the kingdom of God, and to the King of kings and the Lord of lords by praying, "*Your kingdom come.*"

As we pray according to this inspired

index prayer of Jesus, we are not only instructed to begin our prayers praying, "*Your kingdom come*", we are also instructed to conclude our prayers by pledging to our heavenly Father, "*Yours is the kingdom.*" In this way, we are beginning and ending our prayers with that God-first emphasis. Jesus teaches that we are to begin our prayers by telling God we are not building any kingdoms of our own, and we are to conclude our prayers by telling God that the results of all our answers to prayer will belong to our King — and to His kingdom.

"YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN"

The third providential petition is actually a paraphrase of the second. When we pray "*Your kingdom come*," we are expressing the essence of the third providential petition — "*Your will be done.*" When God is our King, and we live as His loyal subjects, the purpose of our existence will be to do His will. Those of us who have always enjoyed the freedoms of democratic forms of government do not grasp these kingdom metaphors as quickly or as well as those who know what it means to have a totalitarian dictator, a king, or a queen ruling over them.

This third God-first petition has been called, "The prayer that never fails." We don't

have to know God's will to pray this petition. James writes that we don't have, because we don't ask, by which he means we don't have because we don't pray (James 4:2). The Apostle John assures us that we will receive what we ask God for in our prayers if we ask according to the will of God (1 John 5:14, 15). Challenged by James and believing the promise of the Apostle John, when we come before God in our closet or corporate prayers, our problem is that we don't know the will of God — and so we don't pray.

In another profound passage about prayer, the Apostle Paul writes that we should not let the fact that we don't know the will of God keep us from praying. According to Paul, if our hearts are right when we pray, even if we ask God for the wrong thing, the Holy Spirit, Who does know the will of God, will make intercession for us according to the will of God. Essentially, Paul is telling us that when we pray, even if we ask God for the wrong thing, God will give us the right thing, if our wills are aligned with the will of God (Romans 8:26-28). You can see why our Lord would teach us that we should always precede our personal petitions with this third God-first petition — *"Your will be done."*

THE REAL LORD'S PRAYER

This disciple's prayer could be called, "The

Prayer the Lord Never Prayed." However, there is a prayer the Lord did pray that could properly be called "The Lord's Prayer." In the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), when He is about to be arrested and crucified, Jesus sweats blood as He prays, "*O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will*" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus not only taught that we should pray after the manner of this third providential petition, He modeled this third God-first petition when He prayed while facing the greatest trial of His own earthly life.

The third verse in the fourth chapter of James is translated in the King James Version to inform us that there are times when our prayers are not answered because we sometimes "*ask amiss.*" (One day a little boy asked me if praying amiss was the opposite of praying a hit!) When James wrote that we ask amiss, he was essentially telling us that we sometimes forget to precede our personal petitions with these three providential petitions – "*Hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come,*" and "*Your will be done in earth as it is in heaven.*" Most of our so-called unanswered prayers can be traced to one utilitarian cause. We pray more "misses" than "hits" because we fail to prioritize these providential petitions before we pray our personal petitions.

The Apostle Paul gave us a wonderful description of the essence of prayer when he shared this inspired metaphor with the Corinthians and with us — "*co-operators with God...*" (2 Corinthians 6:1 J. B. Phillips)

The King James Version uses the preposition "in" as it translates this petition. One of my favorite authors, Philip Keller, in his book on this prayer/prescription of Jesus, called, A Layman Looks at the Lord's Prayer, relates this petition to a concept found in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Paul informs us that we have the Treasure of the risen Christ living in our earthen vessels (our bodies), that it might be obvious to everybody that the power source of our lives is coming from God and not from us. Philip Keller believes, that in this third providential petition, Jesus was teaching that we should ask our heavenly Father to do His will in our earthen vessels just as His will is done in heaven. Obviously, if the will of the Father is done in us, then the will of the Father will be done on earth through us.

According to Paul, God delights in placing His risen, living Son in weak earthen vessels so that it will be obvious to everyone who observes our lives and ministries that nothing is coming from us, but everything is coming from the great Treasure Who lives in us (2 Corinthians 3:5 RSV).

When I had the opportunity to hear Dr. A.

W. Tozer preach, I remember that he said, "The Bible says, 'We have this Treasure in earthen vessels.'" After an eloquent pause, he added, "And some of those vessels are a bit cracked!" He then went on to preach that sometimes the light of the Treasure shines out even more through the cracks in those cracked earthen vessels. His application and the apostle's application was that there are times when the cracks in the earthen vessels magnify the greatness of the Treasure, and bring only greater glory to God (2 Corinthians 3 and 4).

One of the greatest truths in the New Testament is, "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" (Colossians 1:27) The Living Bible paraphrases this prayer petition of Paul for one of his churches to read, "*That they might learn this spiritual secret, that Christ in your hearts is your only hope of glorifying God...*"

When I compare this third providential prayer petition with the essence of the truth about prayer Jesus shared with the apostles in the Upper Room Discourse, I am persuaded to agree with Philip Keller when he writes that Jesus was telling us to ask our heavenly Father to do His will in our earthen vessels, just as His will is done in heaven (John 14:22, 23).

IN SUMMARY

When Jesus mandated that these three providential petitions must precede our

personal petitions when we pray, He was teaching that prayer is not a matter of us persuading God to do our will. The very essence of prayer is an alignment between our will and the will of God. Prayer is not a matter of us making God our partner and taking God into *our* plans. Prayer is a matter of God making us His partners and taking us into *His* plans.

These three providential petitions prescribed in the prayer Jesus taught should send a message to every disciple of Jesus when we pray. That message is that we are not to come into our prayer closets, or into our corporate worship prayers, with a "shopping list" and send God on errands for *us*. When we pray, we should come into the presence of God with a blank sheet of paper and ask God to send us on errands for *Him*. When we pray we should be like soldiers reporting for duty to their Commander in Chief.

THE FOUR PERSONAL PETITIONS

"GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD"

We must continue to look through the priority grid of God-first as we get to the "gimmie" part of this prayer Jesus taught. The three "God-first" petitions should focus our motivation as we come before our heavenly Father with our personal petitions. Why do we want our heavenly Father God to give us our daily bread, one day at a time? We should ask our perfect heavenly Father to provide our daily bread because we earnestly desire to see the essence of Who and What God is, honored and revered on earth in and through us.

Most people don't even know they were created in the image and likeness of all that the names of God represent. We should want our heavenly Father to provide our daily needs because we want to see our Father's kingdom come in our earthen vessels, and on earth through us. We should want our needs met because we want to be earthen vessels in and through whom God's will is done in earth and on earth, just as it is willed and done in heaven. In this way, the three providential petitions are designed to control the motives that determine and drive all our personal petitions. These three God-first petitions should be the grid we always look through as we ask God to give us each day all that we

need personally.

The Lord is using the symbol of bread here in this first personal petition to represent all our physical, emotional and spiritual creature comfort needs. We are a veritable "Internet" of creature needs. Our needs are physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. This first personal petition should not be limited to our need for food but for all the needs we have as physical, emotional, mental and spiritual creatures of God.

Observe that the concept of *"one day at a time"* is repeated twice in this petition of just seven words. Alcoholics and drug addicts with many years of sobriety tell me that when they took their first step toward sobriety, they could not even entertain the thought of being sober or straight for more than just one day. This prayer of Jesus prescribes that we are to pray *"this day"* and *"daily"* when we present our creature needs to our heavenly Father. This principle of one day at a time has proven to be the therapy that has been the difference between life and death for some of my closest friends who are celebrating many years of sobriety. Observe how Jesus concludes His great teaching about values in the sixth chapter of Matthew with this same emphasis: *"So don't be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time."* (Matthew 6:34 Living Bible)

We read in the book of Numbers that when God miraculously provided bread from heaven (manna) in the wilderness for the children of Israel, they were only permitted to collect enough manna for one day. That story, recorded in the eleventh chapter of the book of Numbers, is obviously an allegory of this one-day-at-a-time principle Jesus is prescribing in the prayer/prescription He taught.

When we apply the story of that great miracle to our daily devotions, we should make the application that we cannot hoard our experience of a word from God, or the blessings of a time in the presence of God. We must have our souls and spirits nourished with heavenly manna every day, one day at a time, just as we must have our daily bread every day, one day at a time.

"FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS"

The next three personal petitions are obviously petitions for the spiritual needs we have every day. This second personal petition is for forgiveness. The next two petitions are for guidance and deliverance. Forgiveness, guidance and deliverance are spiritual needs we have every day. The principle of that first personal petition for daily bread, one day at a time, should be applied to these petitions for our spiritual needs. The spirit of these four

personal petitions could be, "Give us this day our daily bread, including our need for forgiveness, guidance and deliverance, every day, one day at a time."

When we pray this prayer in an ecumenical worship service, we must tell the worshipers whether we are going to pray "debts" or "trespasses." This is necessary because the Presbyterians pray "debts," while most congregations pray "trespasses." Matthew uses the words "debts" and "debtors" as he records this second personal prayer petition of Jesus. Luke writes, "*...and forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one who is indebted to us.*" (Luke 11:4 NKJV) The commentary of Jesus, after He teaches this prayer/prescription, makes it obvious that He is speaking here of sins or trespasses. That is why many people who pray this prayer, pray, "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

The concept of debts and debtors, as Jesus used those terms here, is illustrated in two parables Jesus taught about the forgiveness of sins. In the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus taught a parable that illustrates what He meant when He prescribed this petition about our forgiving our debtors, just as our debts have been forgiven. In the seventh chapter of his Gospel, Luke describes the unusual setting in which Jesus taught another

parable in which He compared the forgiveness of sins to the concept of debts, and the forgiveness of debts.

Many people are disturbed by the commentary of Jesus on this second personal petition when He had finished teaching this prayer. This petition for forgiveness is the only part of this prayer upon which Jesus comments when He has finished the teaching. According to Matthew, He supplements this second personal petition with the awesome commentary that if we do not forgive those who trespass against us, our heavenly Father will not forgive our trespasses.

The only people who have no questions about the Bible are the people who never read the Bible. People who read the Bible have many questions about the Bible. This commentary of Jesus troubles many devout souls because it appears as if Jesus is teaching that God forgives us *because* we forgive others. This is a legitimate question that deserves an answer. That's why Jesus gave us His clear and profound answer to this question in these two parables.

In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus told the story of a man who owed a very great debt. In those days, if you owed a large debt you couldn't pay, you were sent to prison and your wife and children were sold into slavery until your debt was paid in full. Since you

certainly couldn't generate any income from prison, you would more than likely die in that prison and your family would be slaves for the rest of their lives. Those who heard this parable of Jesus were very much aware of that practice in their culture. (There was no such thing as "chapter eleven" or "chapter seven" bankruptcy in that culture.)

Relative to our currency, the debt in the story of Jesus was a multi-million dollar debt. When the man who owed this great debt was summoned to court, he begged for mercy because he could not bear the thought of prison and of his wife and family being sold into slavery. Miraculously, the one to whom he was indebted, out of compassion for him and his family, completely forgave the debt!

On the way home from his extraordinary day in court, this man, who had just been forgiven such a great debt, met a man who owed him twenty dollars and could not pay. He grabbed this poor man by the throat and shouted, "You pay me every cent you owe me or I will slam you in prison and sell your family into slavery!"

People who observed both these happenings reported what they witnessed to the merciful man who had forgiven the multimillion dollar debt. When that man heard their story, he summoned the ungrateful, forgiven man to another court hearing and

reversed his compassionate decision. He had the man sent to prison and sold his family into slavery.

Having told that story, Jesus pronounced, *"Even so my heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses"* (Matthew 18:35).

The essence of the truth Jesus was teaching is not that God forgives us because we forgive those who sin against us. The essential truth Jesus was teaching here is that if we see our salvation and forgiveness as the cancellation of a multi-million dollar debt, we will be *forgiving* because we have been *forgiven* so very much. If we are not *forgiving*, then we do not really believe that we have been forgiven a large debt. Our lack of faith in the forgiveness that is at the heart of our salvation means we do not have the caliber of faith that can be called "saving faith." If our faith is flawed because it falls far short of saving faith, our sins, in fact, are not forgiven!

We will never truly understand the second personal petition of this prayer/prescription Jesus taught us, especially His sobering commentary on that petition, without understanding His profound parable in the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew — and another parable just like it.

Jesus taught this same truth in a similar, though very short, parable which is recorded

for us in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus was dining with a Pharisee who had apparently invited Jesus into his home to entrap and discredit Him.

A woman who was obviously a sinner and had experienced salvation through Jesus, began washing the feet of Jesus with her tears and drying them with her hair. The woman did this spontaneously when she observed that the Pharisee had not washed the feet of Jesus. In that culture, not washing the feet of an invited guest was like refusing to shake hands with someone you had invited to dinner. To this woman, who had likely been saved from a life of prostitution, this meant that the Pharisee had not even extended common hospitality to her Lord and Savior, whom she loved so very much.

While the Pharisee was thinking lurid thoughts about this gesture on the part of the woman, Jesus told him a parable. It was the story of two men who owed debts to the same wealthy lord. As the Living Bible paraphrases the story, one owed him five hundred dollars and the other owed him five thousand dollars. The wealthy man forgave both debts. After telling this story, Jesus asked the Pharisee which man would have loved their benefactor the most? The Pharisee answered, "The one who owed him the greater debt."

Jesus agreed with the Pharisee. Then He

asked the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman?" The question was actually, "How do you see this woman?" Jesus was challenging the Pharisee to think about how he saw the sin of that woman relative to how he saw his own sin. He obviously saw her sin as the great debt, and he saw his own sin as the small debt in the parable Jesus had told him. Jesus then interpreted and applied His parable for the Pharisee by announcing, "*Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, the same loves little.*"

Jesus then said to the woman, "*Your faith has saved you.*" Those words of Jesus clearly affirmed the Gospel reality that she was not saved because she loved much. She loved much because she had saving faith. The real sinner at the luncheon in that Pharisee's house was not that forgiven sinner who loved much. It was a self-righteous Pharisee named Simon.

The parable Jesus told Simon the Pharisee focused the reality that we cannot isolate our own forgiveness of sin from our attitude toward the sins of others. That is why Jesus wrapped His petition for the forgiveness of our sins in the same package with our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us.

These two parables, that compare the forgiveness of our sins to debts that have been forgiven, show us why Jesus taught us to pray the forgiveness petition of His profound prayer

this way: "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*" The scholars tell us the Greek in which this petition is written should be translated, "*Forgive us our debts as we have already forgiven our debtors.*"

"LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION"

Disciples who read the New Testament all the way through have a problem when they read the third personal petition of this prayer/prescription Jesus taught. Their problem is that the earthly brother of Jesus writes, in the first chapter of his inspired New Testament letter, that when we are tempted to sin we should never say we are tempted of God. According to James, God is not tempted with evil and He never tempts any man (James 1:13). In light of that teaching, why would our Lord teach us to pray to our perfect, loving, heavenly Father God, Who never tempts any man, "*Lead us not into temptation?*"

I am persuaded that the spirit of this petition is based on the collective teaching of Scripture that we are not pillars of strength when it comes to temptation. Jesus evaluated our human condition when He said, "*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Matthew 26:41). According to biblical scholar William Barkley, when the Bible refers to our flesh, it often means "human nature, unaided by God."

One night, Jesus was having an all-night

session of prayer. He had asked the apostles to pray with Him. He was grieved that they couldn't stay awake. Have you ever attended an all-night prayer meeting? If you have, did you find it hard to stay awake? The Lord said to the apostles on this occasion, "*You should be praying that you enter not into temptation*" (Luke 22:46).

His meaning seemed to be something like, "If you only knew the power of the evil one and the weakness of your flesh, you would be awake and praying that you enter not into temptation." When the Lord prescribed this third personal petition, "Lead *us* not into temptation," He was being consistent with His evaluation of our human condition, our flesh, or our "human nature unaided by God."

I believe it would be a legitimate paraphrase of this third personal petition to pray it this way: "Lead us, and we will not find ourselves facing the confrontations of the temptation to commit sin." Do you believe the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord (Psalm 37:23)? If you do, then answer this question: If you were following the leading of the Lord, step by step, do you think you would find yourself confronting the temptations to sin?

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used some awesome metaphors. He essentially taught that "If our eye, even if it is our best

eye, is leading us into sin, we should pluck it out; if our hand, even if it is our right hand, is causing us to sin, we should cut it off." In another place in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus included the foot in these metaphors (Matthew 5:29, 30; 18:8 Living Bible).

Jesus was obviously addressing sexual sin as He used these metaphors. Throughout the history of the Church, devout men have actually had themselves made eunuchs because they took this teaching of Jesus literally. The spirit of the truth Jesus was teaching through these awesome metaphors sends a strong message to those who are addicted to pornography today because it was actually something like this: If what you are looking at with your eye is causing you to sin, stop looking. If what you are doing with your hand is causing you to sin, stop doing it. If where your feet are taking you is causing you to sin, don't go there. Although it is a shame to read that men so sadly misapplied this teaching of Jesus, should we not marvel that God-passionate men were that determined to live holy lives?

All this teaching, which is based on our Lord's assessment of our human nature, unaided by God, comes down to this: Since our flesh is so very weak, we must put rigid disciplines and structures in place to the end that we may not face the confrontations of the

temptations that can lead us to commit sexual sin. The third personal petition in this prayer prescription is intensely realistic. Since we are not pillars of strength when it comes to the temptations to sin, we should, therefore, in effect, pray every day to our loving heavenly Father, "If You lead us, step by step, we will not have to face the confrontations of the temptations to commit sexual sin."

The Apostle Paul echoes the spirit of our Lord's prescription regarding the temptations in the life of a believer to commit sin. Paul writes that our God will never let us be tempted beyond our ability to resist temptation, but will always provide a way of escape when we are tempted to sin (1 Corinthians 10:13). Many people memorize that verse, but they overlook the verses that precede and follow this great promise. The verse that precedes this promise warns us that the man who thinks he will continuously stand, and never fall, should take heed lest he fall. The very next verse tells us precisely what that way of escape from temptation is — that God will always provide for us. That verse begins with the words: "*Therefore, flee!*"

In this third personal petition, Jesus teaches that even though our spirit may be very willing to do the will of God, we are so very weak in our flesh that we must pray every day, "*Lord, lead us so that we will not face the crises of temptation.*"

"BUT DELIVER US FROM THE EVIL ONE"

Martin Luther warned us:

"For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe.
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.

You ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He!
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle!

Martin Luther understood that we have an enemy who does not wish us well — and His power is so great we must be delivered from him. Jesus obviously understood that reality. He began His public ministry with a marathon confrontation with the evil one in the wilderness. Jesus was more than a Conqueror in that wilderness where He was victorious over all the temptation strategies of the devil.

The Good News in this last personal

petition in the prayer/prescription the Lord taught is that we, also, can be delivered from the temptations of the evil one. The disciplines and structures against temptation I referenced above are part of the answer to our prayers for deliverance from the evil one. If we knew the power, craft and cruelty of our ancient foe, we would fervently pray these last two personal petitions together every single day, *"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

THE GOD-FIRST BENEDICTION

"YOURS IS THE KINGDOM, THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER, AMEN"

In this prayer/prescription of Jesus, He teaches us to conclude our prayers the same way He taught us to begin our prayers. Jesus taught us to begin our prayers by praying three providential petitions before we pray our personal petitions. We are to conclude our prayers by praying this profound providential benediction.

Our Lord teaches us to begin our prayers with a God-first mind-set and He instructs us to conclude our prayers with that same focus on God first. We are to begin our prayers looking through the grid of "*Your name be revered, Your kingdom come,*" and "*Your will be done (in earth and) on earth, just as it is willed and done in heaven.*" We are then instructed to conclude our prayers the same way.

YOURS IS THE KINGDOM

Jesus wants us to conclude our prayers by making this commitment to our heavenly Father: "*Yours is the kingdom.*" By this confession, He means for us to pledge to God that the results of our heavenly Father's continuously answering our prayers will always belong to Him.

I experienced the meaning of this

providential, kingdom benediction in a special way twice in my more than fifty years as a pastor. I served two churches as a pastor, and I was involved in the founding of both churches. After serving each church for more than twenty years, my health forced me to give up those churches after they had become large churches. To start a church with about twenty people and watch that church grow into a large church is a marvelous experience. However, it is very difficult to step back and surrender that ministry to others when that church has become large, fruitful and a very exciting church to pastor.

While serving those two churches, this prayer/prescription Jesus taught His disciples continuously guided my prayers. Therefore, when I was forced to give up those ministries, I said to the Lord, "I called on You over the years for the grace to pastor this church. Since I was only able to pastor this church because You answered those prayers, the result (the church) belongs to You." It was in that context, on those two occasions, separated by twenty years, that I more fully learned the meaning of these words. As I turned those churches over to others, I did so saying to the Lord, "*Yours is the kingdom.*"

YOURS IS THE POWER

As we face the challenges of life every day, we should be poor in spirit enough to confess that we need the power of God. When I have entered into a challenging day, I have confessed, thousands of times in my journey of faith and ministry, "I can't, but He can." Jesus also includes, with the kingdom part of the benediction He prescribes for our prayers, the mandate that we are to confess to God that the results of our answered prayers are only in place because the power of God has worked in answer to our prayers. When God had obviously blessed the churches I had shepherded, I practiced the power part of this benediction prescribed in this prayer/prescription by confessing, "I didn't, but He did."

YOURS IS THE GLORY

Finally, we are to conclude our prayers by essentially confessing, "*Yours is the glory.*" When we apply this third providential benediction to our prayers, we are simply confessing, "*Because I didn't but He did, all the glory goes to Him.*" Along with our confessions about the kingdom and the power of God in the benediction with which we are to conclude our prayers, Jesus prescribes that we conclude our prayers every time we pray by making this solemn commitment to God: "The glory for

everything that happens in my life because You have answered my prayer(s), will always go to You."

The essence of the spirit of this benediction is: *"Because the power will always come from You, the result will always belong to You, and the glory will always go to You."*

"Amen" simply means, "So be it!" or "May it be so!"

CAPSULE SUMMARY

This prayer/prescription Jesus taught challenges us to be sure to address our prayers to God. We are instructed to address God intimately as our perfect, loving heavenly Father. We are then to begin our prayers with three providential, or God-first, petitions, which are: *Your name, Your kingdom and Your will*. Those three providential petitions are to be followed by four personal petitions: *Give us, forgive us, lead us, and deliver us*. Finally, we are instructed to conclude our prayer(s) by confessing, *"Because the power to answer my prayer(s) will always come from You, the result will always belong to You, and the glory will always go to You."*



Who We Are

ICM is a non-profit, trans-denominational, parachurch ministry guided by a strong statement of faith and the Lausanne Covenant. We are the ministry of the Rosser Foundation, which covers ICM's overhead expenses and most of its fundraising costs. Thus every designated dollar goes to the specified purpose.

Mission Statement

To nurture believers and assist Church growth worldwide.

What We Do

ICM partners with Prayer Partners, Indigenous Church Growth Partners, Donor Partners, and Volunteer Partners to fulfill its ministry call.

ICM focuses its ministry efforts on assisting Church Growth Partners in the formation of sustainable growth in

...the faith of believers

...membership in churches, and

...number of churches.

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