

The Lord's Prayer – An Exegesis

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Despite his fallen nature, man still has the privilege of being able to have a relationship with God, his creator. An important part of that relationship is communing with Him in prayer. People of the Old Testament looked forward to that day when the Messiah would come, to be offered up as a single sacrifice for the many. People today can now look back and understand through God's word the full scope of what that meant. People can also study the word, and learn from Christ himself, how to live their lives for God. Of the many teachings of Christ recorded in the Bible, one can learn of the privilege of being able to communicate with God, and the manner in which it should be done. This paper will discuss this privilege of prayer, specifically the Lord's Prayer as recorded in Matthew 6:5-15, beginning with a discussion of the influences that may have contributed to the style and content of the prayer. Discussion then turns to an exegesis analysis of the Lord's Prayer followed by how it can be applied by the believer today.

The Lord's prayer is contained within Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew chapter five through seven. This event is early in Jesus' ministry, occurring just after his baptism, temptation, and selection of the disciples. Harner (1987) says, "the structure of the Sermon on the Mount itself reflects...the relationship between God's grace and human response" (p. 174). The Beatitudes represent the theme of grace, and by and large, the remainder of the Sermon represents the theme of human activity or law (Harner, 1987). This paper will discuss later how the Lord's Prayer follows in a similar format.

When Jesus sat on that mountainside and began to teach (Matthew 5:1-2, KJV), he taught as one having authority, not just as a teacher (Matthew 7:28-29, KJV). Of course, being God incarnate, he knew what the people in general, and the disciples in particular, needed to know, but did Jesus reference, and Matthew record, previous wisdom the people had heard before from Proverbs and deliver the teachings using contemporary ways of expression for the day? These are some of the thoughts put forth by Byargeon (1998).

Byargeon (1998) contends that there are a number of possible influences that could have contributed to the form of the Lord's Prayer as it is recorded. The traditional perspective, according to Byargeon (1998) is that the Lord's Prayer is similar to, or even based on, first century synagogue prayers. The Qaddish prayer is often cited by Christian scholars as having been a possible influence because of similar parallels in wording between the two prayers referring to (1) God having a hallowed or sanctified name and (2) looking forward to God's coming kingdom (Byargeon, 1998). While the two prayers share theological ideals, it is not clear when the Qaddish first came to be in use or what it contained. It was not a fixed part of synagogue worship until after the first century and the first recorded versions date to the sixth century (Byargeon, 1998).

The second prayer that could have been influential in the writing of the Lord's Prayer is "The Eighteen Benedictions" (Byargeon, 1998), based again on similarities in content. The prayer is actually a sequence of individual prayers, which O'Neill (1993) contends, is how the structure of the Lord's Prayer was intended as it was the custom of the day to speak small, single purpose prayers frequently, rather than a longer multiple purpose prayer. According to Jewish tradition, the benediction was compiled after the destruction of the temple and was customarily prayed three times a day. Its general components were fixed but not the exact wording as each synagogue used a different version of the prayer (Byargeon, 1998). Byargeon (1998) indicates that this prayer is similar to the Lord's Prayer in areas of "praise, petition, and thanksgiving" (p. 353), but there is no way of knowing what parts of the benediction, if any, that Jesus was aware of at the time of the Sermon on the Mount.

Another perspective that Byargeon (1998) suggests could have influenced the Lord's Prayer is the use of previous wisdom like that found in Proverbs 30:7-9 (KJV). As stated previously, the Lord's Prayer is found within the Sermon on the Mount, which Byargeon (1998)

indicates can be thought of more as a teaching rather than a sermon. The teachings are that of wisdom and knowledge, or sapiential material, presented through beatitude and proverbial material common in that kind of literature (Byargeon, 1998). It stands to reason then that when examining sapiential material, one could look at previous sapiential work as a possible influence. Byargeon (1998) indicates there are similarities between the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 and Proverbs 30:7-9 in the areas of "prayer for bread, emphasis on the name of God, [and the] wanting to avoid temptation" (p. 353). Again, there is no way of knowing what Jesus, or the writer of Matthew was referring to during the Sermon on the mount, but despite this, the usefulness of the Lord's Prayer is not diminished as a guide on how to approach God and make requests (Halley, 1965).

As was stated previously, the Lord's Prayer follows a similar structure to that of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon starts with a theme of grace in the Beatitudes and then spends most of the rest of the discourse discussing human activity, including prayer. The Lord's Prayer differs in that while opening with a theme of grace, it continues with further petitions of gifts from God's grace (Harner, 1987) and indicates only one act of human activity, as the following exegesis will show. It should be understood that God's grace is freely offered. The human activity mentioned is not to be viewed as how to earn God's grace, but as how man should obey God's will and respond to his grace, by prayer, for example.

Jesus says, "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward" (Matthew 6:5, KJV). Jesus is warning in this verse to be careful of what is the true motivation. Rice (1955) says that prayer, particularly in public, is one of Satan's principle grounds of attacking and misleading Christians. If the motivation of prayer is for the pride of recognition from other men, then do as the hypocrites and

pick public places to pray and stand to be seen (Henry, 1721). When the rewards of men are desired over the rewards of God, then that is all the reward there will be. Whatever the act of righteousness that is being performed, it should be done to be approved of God, not for the applause of men (Henry, 1721).

“But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:6, KJV). In the verse five above, Jesus is indicating that public prayer is heard of men for men. But when prayer is done in the closet, or secret place, the prayer is unobserved, undisturbed, and unheard by other men, but God hears it. By praying in secret, God is glorified for his universal presence (Henry, 1721). When the hypocrite’s prayer was rewarded, it was before all the men in the synagogue, or perhaps the town. But when the secret prayer is rewarded, it is before the entire world, angels, and men. This is something the hypocrite desires to have and cannot get (Henry, 1721).

“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matthew 6:7, KJV). Henry (1721) says that prayer is lifting up the soul and pouring out the heart. Vain repetitions to gain God’s attention are words with no purpose because they no longer represent the sincere desire of the heart (Rice, 1955). Prayer without sincerity is displeasing to God (Henry, 1721).

“Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him” (Matthew 6:8, KJV). Jesus is warning in this verse to not be like the hypocrites, be instead like a child going to a parent in an easy and natural manner. A parent understands the needs of their child before they ask, just as God understands His children’s needs. Prayer is a way of expressing our need and dependence of Him (Henry, 1721). After teaching how prayer should be approached, Jesus then turns his attention to providing an

example of what areas should be included in prayer.

“After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name” (Matthew 6:9, KJV). Only Christians can approach God in this way for how can one call God “Father” without being His child through accepting the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ (Rice, 1955). The prayer starts out by honoring the Creator of all. By praying to “Our Father”, we are reminded that prayer is not just alone and for ourselves but with and for others. Just as children can honor a parent by calling them mother or father, God can be honored in much the same way by being referred to as “Father” (Henry, 1721). Just as with a parent, He can be approached with boldness, but with reverence of His position on the throne in Heaven. Glory is given to Him by acknowledging that His name is sanctified and glorified by those that come to Him (Henry, 1721). Rice (1955) says that while prayer is usually asking for something, it should also include “worship, adoration and submission” (p. 105).

“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10, KJV). The prayer further acknowledges that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Henry (1721) says, “It was the Jews’ daily prayer to God, Let him make his kingdom reign, let his redemption flourish, and let his Messiah come and deliver his people” (p. 9). The latter part of verse ten is asking that everyone, believer or not, be brought to an obedient state with God’s will. It is the idea that earth becomes as much like Heaven as possible in observance of God’s will (Henry, 1721), until that day that God’s kingdom is put in place on earth.

“Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11, KJV). This verse is a request for bread, the sustenance for life. “Our bread” refers to that which is not gained deceitfully from someone else (Henry, 1721). It is a request to God for just this day, for as Jesus said, “take no thought for the morrow” (Matthew 6:34, KJV). A believer asks for today and trusts in tomorrow (Rice, 1955). The request is for spiritual and physical sustenance that needs to be renewed

everyday, which is a desire of one's soul as well as physical body (Henry, 1721). The body can no more go without food for a day than the soul can go without prayer!

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12, KJV). Just as one prays everyday for bread, forgiveness of debts, or sins, must also be prayed for. While a Christian's sins are always and forever forgiven, sin can still effect the relationship between the Father and His children (Rice, 1955). As Sandage et al. (2000) says, “Forgiveness is the healing balm for wounds to...relationships” (p. 21). Without forgiveness, relationships quickly fall apart (Sandage et al., 2000). It is also a duty to extend forgiveness to others, just as God has extended forgiveness to the believer (Henry, 1721). This is the case whether the subject is money or some other offense. This extension of forgiveness to others is the only human act discussed in the Lord's Prayer.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” (Matthew 6:13, KJV). After praying for the debts of sin to be removed, it follows that one pray not to return to that sin again. Temptations should be prayed against so one does not again be exposed to the danger of being overcome by the guilt and grief caused by sin (Henry, 1721). The prayer concludes with again testifying to the character of God, giving the praise and thanksgiving He deserves.

“For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15, KJV). Jesus concludes by providing an example of how sincerely one regards the other graces of God by the evidence shown by how one forgives others. As Henry (1721) says, “Christ came into the world as the great Peace-Maker, and not only to reconcile us to God, but to one another, and in this we must comply with him” (p. 13).

While Christians could use the Lord's Prayer literally, it is better applied if they pray

sincerely, in the spirit of the Prayer. God is not concerned so much that someone pray word for word the Lord's Prayer, but rather, use it as a model or guide for how and what to pray for.

A Christian should approach God with reverence and honor, looking to that day when His presence can be enjoyed in the kingdom. A Christian should be thankful for every gift of God, and know that He is the God of plenty, who can be approached daily without fear of Him not being able to provide tomorrow. A Christian's sins are forgiven, blotted out by the blood of Jesus Christ, and God is able to restrain Satan from committing evil against the believer. All that God has is available for the asking, but the Christian is asked to do one thing in return. Just as forgiveness has been extended from God to the Christian, the Christian must not forget to extend forgiveness to his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

One should examine themselves daily, not only ensuring that their relationship with the Father is in good standing, but also ensuring that their relationships with others are in good standing as well. As Jesus said, what is done to others by a Christian, so shall the Father do to them (Matthew 6:14-15, KJV).

This paper has discussed the Lord's Prayer, beginning with a discussion of some common views of how contemporary prayer, and previously known wisdom material like that found in Proverbs, could have influenced its style and content. An exegesis analysis was provided to explain the contents of the Prayer, describing the different graces from God contained in it. This paper then concluded with a discussion on applying the Lord's Prayer by taking God's forgiveness and extending it to others as the only human activity revealed in the Lord's Prayer.

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