

# The Sermon on the Mount

## Matthew 6:1-18: The Lord's Prayer

### BACKGROUND

- “In Jesus’ day the ‘prayer of prayers’ used twice daily in devotions was the Eighteen Benedictions, the *Amidah*. While its form was in flux before 70-100, “several at least of the more elaborate eighteen-fold form would certainly have been known to and used by Jesus. Characteristic of each is the final response or blessing: ‘Blessed are you, Lord ...’—‘shield of Abraham,’ ‘who makes the dead alive,’ ‘who delights in repentance,’ ‘rich in forgiveness,’ ‘who humbles the insolent,’ ‘who builds Jerusalem,’ ‘who heads prayer.’” [DJG, *Prayer*]
- “Another ancient Jewish prayer whose earliest form probably goes back to the time of Jesus, the *Qaddish*... begins thus: ‘Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world, which he created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the whole household of Israel, speedily and at a near time.’” [DJG]
- Traditionally Jews prayed at sunrise, noon and sunset (Ps 55:17; Dan 6:10; Acts 10:9).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: THE LORD'S PRAYER

1. The Lord's Prayer begins with a uniquely personal address, “Father,” characteristic of Jesus’ prayers, the only prayer without it being the prayer from the cross (which is also a quote from Ps 22). It is believed that Father (*Pater*) translates the Aramaic *Abba*, of which Dunn writes,

The reason why *abba* would be so little used in presumably because it was typically a family word, or expressive of a degree of intimacy or reverence which would be characteristic of children (but not just little children) within the family circle, or of disciples of a loved and revered teacher. [DJG, *Prayer*]

“Father” is the typical translation, but this is hardly a universal term used by children and may sound stiff or distant to some. Which of the following best, for you, strikes the balance between intimacy and reverence: Father, Dad, Daddy, Pop, Papa, Sire, Sir, Pa, Old Man (maybe not), Paterfamilias? What did you call your “Paterfamilias” growing up?

2. The kingdom of God is where God reigns, where God's will is done. As noted in the handout on the Lord's Prayer, the prayer for the coming of the kingdom can be placed in the context of Jesus’ kingdom parables, which tell us:
  - The kingdom is spread to individuals via a message (Sower)
  - It doesn't mean evil disappears immediately (Weeds)
  - It starts small and grows rapidly (Mustard Seed) and inscrutably (Growing Seed)
  - It brings great joy and is worth sacrificing all for (Pearl and Hidden Treasure)

When we pray for something it helps to conceive of it, to imagine or even picture it, and certainly to think of it as something God might actually *do*. What do you think of when you pray the opening petitions of

the Lord's Prayer?

3. The Lord's Prayer uses the plural in the second triad of petitions: “give *us* today our daily bread.” Jesus certainly didn’t require the prayer to be used in corporate settings, as 6:6 demonstrates. Nevertheless his prayer leads us to pray not just for ourselves, but on behalf of our community of faith. In the words of Lois Tverberg,

In my own Christian “quiet time” I decided to read from the *Amidah*, the Jewish daily prayer liturgy, knowing that it's typically recited communally. I was reciting lines like this:

Heal us and we shall be healed, help us and we shall be helped, for you are our joy. Grant full healing for all our wounds, for you, O God and King, are a true and merciful physician. Blessed are you, O Lord, who heals the sick of his people Israel.

All by myself I was praying these ancient lines that were exclusively framed in terms of “we” and “us” and “our people” (as is the Lord's Prayer, of course). A few days later I attended a large Christian worship service. There, the focus of every song was on God and *me*: “I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice”... “Just as I am, without one plea”... “Here I come to worship, here I come to bow down.” Hundreds of us were worshipping side by side, a sea of voices resounding together, and every one of us was pretending to be all alone.<sup>1</sup>

Discuss.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: PRACTICING PIETY

4. Jesus warns against the danger of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, for fear of losing our “reward.” C. S. Lewis once wrote, “The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.”<sup>2</sup> We might ask what rewards for prayer or almsgiving or fasting might be prevented by bad motives? Calvin answers the first of these three for us:

Believers do not pray with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray in order that they may arouse themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things.

That takes care of prayer. Fasting is covered below. How about almsgiving?

5. In 6:1-18, Jesus applies to three areas of righteous living—almsgiving, fasting and prayer—the principle, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” A challenge in applying this principle is that we do not tend to be vulnerable to it in the areas in which Jesus applies it. We have little cause for solo prayer in corporate settings save in small groups, where we don't tend to pray to the audience. Our almsgiving is generally done in confidence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* (Zondervan, 2012), 57.

<sup>2</sup> “They asked for a paper” (Bles, 1962), p. 198.

And our fasting, when done, is generally a private affair.

A curious example of practicing a virtue, frugality, for appearances' sake, is described in a *New Yorker* article about New Englanders:

Concord has always been a haven for conscientious people ambivalent about their money, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in the real estate they own. I recently heard about an older couple who sold their many-acred house well below market price because they were too embarrassed to list it for what the real-estate agent said it was worth. It's always been this way in Concord. For the [British] Calvinists<sup>3</sup>, appearances were everything: they must look as if they had money (and therefore clearly belonged to God's Elect) and yet they must seem to care nothing for it. The one luxury the Old Guard New Englanders continue to permit themselves is a well-proportioned house in the right part of town, shabby yet big enough for them to complain that they can't afford to live there. For at the root of the tangled New England neurosis is a deep respect for the money it loathes.<sup>4</sup>

Whether frugality is in the same category as fasting, prayer and almsgiving, it is certainly prone to the contamination by mixed or selfish motives described in 6:1. And whereas the New England old guard may look down on those who don't both live in the right part of town and simultaneously display their frugality, a Rochester Calvinist may be just as tempted either to own a nice car or boat; or self-consciously drive a beater. A closely allied virtue is industry, especially when it leads to the right college or the right job.

When making a decision about a car or an activity or even a college for your children, have you ever found your mind wandering to what others in your church or family will think of your decision?



*Fun fact:* The Pharisees of Jesus' day fasted every Monday and Thursday. The early second-century church manual, the Didache, instructs, "Let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but do you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays" (8:1).

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<sup>3</sup> The press often has distorted ideas of Calvinists. Try not to be too distracted by this.

<sup>4</sup> "Pilgrim's Progress," *New Yorker*, July 30 (2012), 32.