

Sound Living

The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6: 7-13

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The Lord's Prayer

"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

This, then, is how you should pray:

***'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one'."***

Chapter One

Kingdom Prayer Matthew 6:7-8

What important truth does this statement capture: Prayer is a confession of faith. This series is for those who pray, and not for those who don't. It is not the point of this series to make anyone feel guilty about his or her lack of praying. In Matthew 6:5-8, Jesus doesn't say, "You ought to pray." He says, "When you pray..."

Why do you pray? Habit? To get things? To soothe your mind? "The Lord's Prayer," sometimes called the "Our Father" is a model prayer. What does it model? Well, you say, it models how to pray. Yes, Jesus specifically says, "*This, then, is how you **should pray.***" To start this series it seems important to "camp" for a while on what Jesus emphasizes about prayer even before He models such prayer.

Let's look at Jesus' words:

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they

have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

"This, then, is how you should pray:

*'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'*

"For 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.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:1-18)

In these verses Jesus draws a sharp contrast between hypocrites and what He wants from His followers. In verse 1 of this chapter, He instructed His followers not to do their “acts of righteousness” to be seen by others but only to serve God. Beginning in verses 2 and 5 of this chapter, Jesus used the illustrations of giving and praying to teach that He wants His followers, Christians, to “play or live to an audience of one” – God. In verse 16, He teaches us the same about fasting. But it is on the subject of prayer that He gives the most instruction.

Who Do You Pray To?

In verse 5, Jesus said, I don’t want your prayers to be a statement to others in the guise of talking to God. Our prayers ought not to be a short sermon, or an announcement, or worse yet, gossip, for the hearing of those around us. That’s hypocrisy – pretending to be talking to God, when in actuality we are talking to others. Even in public prayer, while it is true that we are leading others in prayer, we are still only talking to God.

Maybe it is not in your actual prayers that you parade before others; maybe it is in taking pride in being known as a man or woman of prayer. You pray much in order to be known as one who prays. Jesus says, “don’t do that.” Let your prayer be between you and God.

When He says to go into your closet to pray He probably didn’t mean literally into a closet because private places in a house were probably unheard of in His culture. He does mean to let our prayers be prayers to God not statements to others about ourselves.

Who do you pray to? You say, “I don’t pray to others, I pray to God.” Do you? There was once an article on prayer that went something like this:

“People must engage in...prayer for the following reasons. People today are being constantly assaulted from the out-

side by so many things, like work, haste, telephones, correspondence, the honking and noise of traffic, the radio, (television), and movies, that they absolutely must erect a wall to protect themselves against this avalanche of impressions and demands. The best way to prevent one's being completely absorbed and devoured by these impressions is to enter into a state of inward composure which must constitute a kind of counterbalance to our present way of life, which is so constantly turned outward."¹

"Prayer is not a soliloquy but a conversation with a person, with your Father in heaven."

In this, prayer becomes little more than "centering" or quieting the mind. Some people are really talking to themselves when they say they are talking to God. But Jesus says, "Prayer is not a soliloquy but a conversation with a person, with your Father in heaven." We don't go through the motions for anyone else's sake nor even just for our own. We are in conversation with our Father.

Then in verses 7-8, Jesus adds another very important teaching about prayer.

"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."(Matthew 6:7)

"Babbling" is an onomatopoeic word like "buzz" or "hum" where the word actually sounds like what it represents. In this case it means nonsense sounds – babbling. Historians tell us that other religions Jesus' day used long magical incantations in their prayers.² These were nonsense syllables comparable to "abracadabra." There were religions where the people just said the names of their gods over and over again. Muslim prayers are to be recited five times each

day.

Hindu and Buddhist prayers are better if they are longer and more repetitious because repetition is the soul of their prayers.

The Jews of Jesus day had many prayers commanded of them:

The "eighteen prayer" of 18 parts was to be prayed three times a day.

The Shema, twice daily,

Then there were confessions, table prayers, and doxologies.

I can't know someone's heart but it seems that this kind of thoughtless repetition is almost begged when someone is given 10 "Our Fathers" or "Hail Marys" as penance.

Why Pray That Way?

Jesus said they thought they would be heard because of their many words. They believed they had to get or earn God's attention. I'm reminded of the prophets of Baal in Elijah's day. God's servant Elijah challenged the false prophets of the mythical god Baal to prove his existence.

"Then (those prophets) called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. 'O Baal, answer us!' they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.' So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention." (1 Kings 18:26-29)

Sometimes even today people pray with many words as if by heaping up words they might better capture God's attention. I have been in prayer meetings where it seemed that some believed that if we could get everyone praying at the same time and get a lot of noise resounding, energy flowing and emotion showing, it was better prayer. I have also been in prayer meetings where it seemed that some

Our praying with many words may be nothing more than an expression of our distrust of God

believed it was only quiet, slow, Elizabethan English that opened God's ears. Some people prattle on in their prayers because they think they have to get God's attention and coerce, cajole or earn his favor. We must not become legalistic in our praying – as if more prayer equals better Christians. Knowing that someone else prays hours a day ought not to make us feel spiritually inferior nor that person spiritually superior. In fact, our praying with many words may be nothing more than an expression of our distrust of God – as if we feel we have to convince God to help us. Or that He will **only do so** if we earn His favor by acting sufficiently needy and desperate by our cries and many words. I'm not saying we can't have a long conversation with God but it ought to be a conversation.

Some of you might remember Jesus' parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18. Doesn't it teach that banging on the doors of heaven is the way to get God to act?

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, "Grant me justice against

my adversary." For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

In the parable we are likened to the widow who persistently asks for favor. But it is important to see that God is not likened to the egocentric, selfish, judge but in fact God is contrasted with him. Jesus is teaching that surely if such an evil person, as that judge, would give what the widow wanted, you can certainly expect your God to meet the needs of His chosen ones who ask. God doesn't have to be coerced.

It is not that persistence makes an unwilling God act, but that persistence in prayer is an expression of trust in God.

What is Jesus getting at when He says in Matthew 6, "*Don't keep on babbling...*?" *Many words or few words, energetic words, loud, soft, celebrative or solemn words; the way we say the words is not the key to prayer. Matthew 6:8 says, "Do not be like them..."* They thought their prayers made the difference. They thought the style, the length, and the persistence of their prayers is what moved their gods to act. **Their faith was in their praying.**

Do we pray as if we are hedging our bets? We aren't convinced prayer makes any real difference but we can't be certain, so we pray, as if our prayers might be the payment necessary to get God to unlock his willingness to intervene

for us. Yes it is true, in chapter 7, Jesus teaches that persistence in prayer is an expression of faith.

Matthew 7:7-8 says,

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

It is not that persistence makes an unwilling God act, but that persistence in prayer is an expression of trust in God. Yes it is true, in James 4:2, we are taught that God chooses to give some things only in response to prayer.

"You do not have because you do not ask God." (James 4:2)

But we are not to assume that our badgering, our many words or babbling is what finally moves God's hands. The point Jesus is making, I believe, is that our understanding of God is reflected in our praying. What do we really believe about God? Is the God of our prayers truly there and is He generous or stingy?

Their view of God was that He must be convinced. But as Jesus said, "your Father is not like that."

"your Father knows what you need before you ask him."
(Matthew 6:8)

"Father" here is the Greek "pater" but it translates the Aramaic, which was Jesus' language. Jesus word would most likely have been, "Your Abba knows what you need before you ask him." It is an intimate familial term close to our "daddy" or "papa." This term of intimacy between a child and his father was used into adulthood. It is the warmest Aramaic word for this relationship. "The male parent" or "Pa" doesn't cut it.

The word "father" also carries the idea of responsibility with it. This "Father" of ours is responsible for us, to guard, provide and guide.

Isaiah 65:24 says, *"Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear."* Most people, then and now, have no concept of God as intimate and personal as this.

This "Father" in Jesus mind, is the father in the story of the Prodigal Son.

This is the 'father' who grieves over his son's choices, but doesn't stand in the son's way.

This is the "father" who waits through agonizing days and nights of his son's rebellion.

This is the "father" who, when he sees his son returning home, runs to him with open arms

This is the father who doesn't demand payment but celebrates his son's return.

The title "father" denotes our God as the one who goes before us and who turns us back and welcomes us home.

Helmut Thielicke wrote, "He is already there, even before your need comes. He is already there ahead of the waves that threaten to engulf you. I, your Savior, am already there, before your sins; you have only to claim what lies ready for you to use. For the blessing and the help and the salvation are there, ready at hand. Don't you see that all your efforts, your chattering of empty phrases, your crying is like battering down a door that is already open? Don't you see what a terrible distrust this is of him who has opened the door and is waiting for you, as did the father of the prodigal son? What you are doing in these furious prayers is like writing threatening letters to your Father, telling him he is obligated to help you, when all the while this Father is thinking of you day and night and waiting for

the first sign that you are willing to come home. When you know that someone loves you and is near to you, it does not require many words, but only a quiet sign, a glance, a little suggestion, and he will understand. Should it be any different with your Father? Your Father who know what you need before you ask him?"³

God is not impressed with much prayer or little prayer – He’s impressed with prayer in faith—our trust in His love and power not in our much praying.

We aren't to pray as the pagans do. We are to pray as children confident of a father's love and willingness to do the very best for us. My son is still young enough and I haven't failed him enough times yet so that when he asks me for something, he expects that I will get it for him – he trusts me, he expects I want the best for him. Now I want him to mature to the place where he will trust me even when I tell him what he wants isn't best for him. But the point is that his faith is in me, not in the way he asks.

God is not impressed with much prayer or little prayer – He's impressed with prayer in faith—our trust in His love and power not in our much praying. We aren't concerned about technique, we aren't concerned about how long we pray, we aren't concerned about getting everything "right" so that God will then be pleased enough to respond to us.

I know a man and woman who have prayed for their sons for over 60 years. They have asked God specifically to bring their sons to saving faith and obedience to God. 60 years! It doesn't appear that God has completely answered their prayers. So, why do they keep praying?

Because their faith is in a gracious God; their faith is not in the answer nor in the way they pray the prayer. They will

keep on praying because they trust God will do what is right and because God has called on them to express that trust in prayer. Their faith is in God not in certain results. Jesus says that is how we are to pray.

John Calvin captured it well:

“Believers do not pray with a view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he was 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 the anxieties (on Him); in a word, that they may declare that from him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things.”⁴

The God you pray to – what is He like? Is He a petulant God waiting for you to get it right? Is He a stingy God waiting for you to deserve it? Or is He your willing father desiring your trust?

At the beginning of this sermon I made this statement:

Prayer is a confession of faith. We pray because we believe! It’s all about relationship. If we turn prayer into a mechanism instead of a conversation we will lose hope or get bored. But if it is a conversation with our Father, communion with Him, and an expression of our trust in His love – it makes all the difference.

We aren’t going to Him to get something, as much as we are going to Him to be with Him. Yes, we let Him know our needs, but He is more important to us than our needs.

“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:7-13)

Our father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins as
we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory forever.
Amen!

End Notes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 17,18

² Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, p. 118

³ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 105

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, p. 314

Chapter Two

Our Father Matthew 6:9

"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1)

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' " (Matthew 6:9-13)

President Theodore Roosevelt's childhood was idyllic, especially his relationship with his father. Teedie, as his family knew him, was always with his father. His father personally educated him; his father took him all over the world (and this 130 years ago). And, his father cared for him when he was sick, as he often was. Roosevelt's earliest memory of his father was being carried in his arms hour after hour in the night so Teedie, the weak, asthmatic child, could breathe.

His father encouraged him and tutored him into manhood. Years later, when Roosevelt became President, he told his sister that "he never took any serious step or made any vital decision for his country without thinking first" what his father would have done.¹

But when Teedie was 20 and in college, his father, whom he called his best friend in life, very suddenly died at 46 years of age. That day Theodore, who had "journalled" from childhood, wrote in his diary, "My dear Father. Born Sept 23, 1831..." And there his pen wavered and stopped.

It was three days before he again picked up his pen again and then he wrote, "He has just been buried. I shall never forget these terrible three days...the dull, inert sorrow, during which I felt as if I had been stunned, or as if part of my life had been taken away...He was everything to me. My father was the best man I ever knew."²

For twenty years it had been Roosevelt's experience to know his father's presence, encouragement, guidance and love. With a father like that you can take on the world. If you remember something of his history, you know that Theodore Roosevelt was a man's man and a Renaissance man all in one – adventurer, cowboy-rancher, "Rough rider"-warrior, New York aristocracy, Harvard-educated, author, naturalist and politician. But into adulthood, he longed for his father.

Practically and realistically, are we, each one, alone in the world?

For the first time in his life he felt alone when his father died and the world around him grew very large.

Practically and realistically, are we, each one, alone in the world? Oh, we have acquaintances, even some we call friends, we have parents or a spouse but there is a part of us, maybe a large part of us that feels alone. It's the part of us that no one else sees or hears. It's our private lives of the past with its guilt or the future with its uncertainty, or even the present with its mixture of motives. Alone in the anxiety we feel about work, or kids, or marriage and alone in determining how to fix the situations we face day after day.

In the movie about WWII submarine "U571," when the boat was in crisis, the young captain told his crew he didn't know what to do. The older Chief took the captain aside

and asked for permission to speak freely and then said, "You're the captain. Don't ever tell the crew you don't know what to do. The captain always knows what to do whether he does or not." That young captain must have known something of the "aloneness" of which I speak.

In many of the roles of life, we feel almost forced into an "alone" position – on our own – and the truth is we don't know what to do.

With a good marriage, healthy kids, and a successful career, John Eldredge still found himself so often angry. He writes, "I realized I was so furious about feeling all alone in a world that constantly demanded more of me than I felt able to give. Something in me felt very young – like a ten-

The very word "Father" spoken from the heart is a statement of faith. Jesus knew that someone was there, listening.

year-old boy in a man's world but without a man's ability to come through. There was much fear beneath the surface, fear that I would fail, fear that I would be found out, and finally, fear that I was ultimately on my own... Why does something in my heart feel orphaned?"³

As young adults we separate from our parents and unless pride totally clouds our perspective, we begin to ask, "Am I on my own?"

We try to attach ourselves to another through marriage and/or other close relationships but even if we succeed, sooner or later we are still asking from the depths of our souls, "Is anybody with me?" As we grow older and answers to life's questions become less certain, we continue to wonder, "Am I alone?"

There is in every person an aching, though often-unacknowledged homelessness and fatherlessness. Novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote, "The deepest search in life...the thing that in one way or another was central to all living, was man's search for a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."⁴

When we look at history and even our own lives, it can appear that we are alone – that there is no God out there, no "father" listening, caring, and acting. Children die, friends are unfaithful, and evil too often wins. When things happen, good or bad, chance too often seems as good an explanation as Providence. We don't want to be alone, we want there to be someone out there – but do we dare to believe there really is?

Helmut Thielicke suggested it is as if each person is walking through a dark forest at night all alone. Strange sounds make them afraid, shadows flit across their path. They would give anything for someone to be with them who knew the way, knew how to avoid the dangers, and was good enough and powerful enough to take them through safely. But in our day we have become so sophisticated that we "know" no such person exists to help us – we are on our own. And so some attempt to compensate by having times when they can enter into the solitude of their own souls and find a counterbalance to the frenetic activity of life. We must be centered, they say, we must find that place of inner composure.

Some call it mediation while others might call it prayer. They would say that prayer is really only another way of talking to oneself to clarify life and bring composure to our minds. And so we talk to ourselves like a child walking through a graveyard trying to comfort himself with the

sound of his own voice, even while knowing that he is all alone.⁵

But Jesus wasn't whistling past the cemetery. He wasn't just making noise to drown out his fears and He wasn't talking to Himself. His speaking was a call – He was addressing **someone** - "Father!" He said to His followers in Matthew 6:9

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven...'"

The very word "Father" spoken from the heart is a statement of faith.

Jesus knew that someone was there, listening. Jan Lochman wrote, "The classical New Testament confession of faith is prayer...(and) the context of prayer is our need" of God... In prayer we reach beyond ourselves... Prayer is a protest against (aloneness).⁶

When we utter the word "Father" we are saying, "I believe you are there God." The first thing in prayer is coming to **Someone. In** prayer we are not talking about God but to Him. This is foundational! Ultimately God is not to be talked about but to. He is, and therefore we must engage him. Karl Barth wrote, "Seriously, properly, and strictly, Christians cannot speak about the Father but only to him... 'Father' as a (called name), whether expressed or not, is the primal form of the thinking...speaking...and obedience demanded of Christians...the primal form of the faithfulness with which they may correspond to his faithfulness."⁷

In the autobiography of Friedrich von Bodelschwingh he writes in one chapter of the death of his four young children within two weeks of each other during the Allied bombing of his German City. Most moving is the way he describes how he committed them one after another to the fatherly hands of God. Most impressive is that even during

this darkness of life, this man never lost contact with his Father in heaven. He never started talking **about** God as when we ask, "How could God let this happen" or "Why is God doing this?" He did not speak about God but always to God.⁸ He trusts his Father enough to call to Him.

And in our speaking to God, the main thing is not that we make correct requests but that we enter into conversation and relationship with God. Speech is an integral part of a relationship. There may be silence but it is eloquent silence, full of meaning. Again from Thielicke, "That is why God did not merely give us pious feelings and subjective religiosity, of the kind that is inspired by the odor of incense, the strains of sacred music, or the silence of a sun-drenched clearing in the woods. These pious feelings pass away..." but His Word does not.⁹ Isaiah 43:1 says, "...I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

***He did not speak about God but
always to God. He trusts his Father
enough to call to Him.***

Prayer is not a soliloquy but a dialogue. But to engage that great "Someone" in conversation, to call on His Name, is to call on a very specific "Someone" – "Our Father" – or as Jesus called him, "Abba"!

Joachim Jeremiah of the last century said he had studied all the prayer literature of ancient Judaism and found no place where God was referred to as "Abba." Abba was an everyday word; it was a homely, family-word. No other Jew would have dared to address God in this way and yet Jesus did it always. And He authorized us to use that same familiar and trusting word when we speak to our heavenly father.¹⁰

No, we are not alone but even better, the One who is there is “our Father”, our “Abba.” That word “father” had a place in other religions of Jesus’ day and certainly in Judaism. But Jesus adds an emphasis that was otherwise, largely missing. There is in His use a closeness, a relationship of love and trust.

What is your understanding of God? God as “Father” can be misunderstood when compared to our selfish, capricious, authoritarian ways as human fathers. Sometimes we act out of unrighteous anger and the punishment does not fit the crime or is altogether unwarranted. But our heavenly Father is not an angry father or an absent father or a dependent father. Without diminishing His Father’s majesty, Jesus demonstrates a very different Father, a Father of consistent love. Jesus is the God who comes near.

When Jesus says we can call God “OUR Father,” he is passing on to us his own priceless relationship with His Father.

The “father” in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son is the clearest illustration of the use of the word “father.” There is, here, no authoritarian picture of a father. The prodigal’s father doesn’t stop the son from going, though he could have; he runs to his son upon his son’s return – unheard of by a patriarch – and he demands no restitution but instead celebrates his son’s return. The prodigal’s father defies our usual concept of a stern, remote, unyielding, do-or-die God.

In his book, *The Great House of God*, Max Lucado writes that the Father’s mission is adoption, His motive is devotion and His method is redemption.¹¹

Our Father's Mission

What is our Father's mission? It is to adopt us, to adopt you. When Jesus says we can call God "our Father," the issue is sonship.

Jesus speaks of a new relationship with God. Because of His justice God cannot dismiss our sin and because of His love He cannot dismiss us. There may be unplanned pregnancies, but there are no accidental or unplanned adoptions. When Jesus says we can call God "**OUR** Father," "he is passing on to us his own priceless relationship" with His Father.¹² This word "Father" binds God to us unconditionally. You can't undo fatherhood.

Galatians 4:4-6 says, "...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. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

Through faith in Christ, we are, you are, a son or daughter of God.

He is "our Father."

Our Father's Motive

And what is our Father's motive? It is devotion.

"Long ago, before God made the world, God chose us to be his very own, through what Christ would do for us; he decided then to make us holy in his eyes, without a single fault we who stand before him covered in his love. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by sending Jesus Christ to die for us. And he did this because he wanted to." (Ephesians 1:3-5 – TLB paraphrase)

Not because we were attractive or worthy but solely for "his good pleasure." We don't readily accept that because we know that among ourselves there is no free lunch, there is always a price, an expectation, that if we don't pay or measure up to, it's over. Many Christians, and I think especially men, live with a quiet fear that they are alone and even if there is a God out there, they live with the quiet fear that they don't measure up or they live with the proud assumption that they do. But that is not the way with our Father. He asks for nothing but our trust.

Our Father's Method

And what is the Father's method for bringing us into this relationship? It is redemption. The only rational basis for saying "our Father" is if the Father has shown Himself to us first. It is only in response to his voice that we know to say anything. Otherwise prayer is only our wishful thinking. That is why it is very important that Jesus Himself is the one who taught us to pray, "our Father." In Jesus, God has spoken to us!

Hebrews 1:1-2 says, *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..."*

And that Son, Jesus, took the penalty for our sin, against God and others, on himself and died in our place. Our Father, in Jesus, removed the legal barriers and brought us into His family by adoption. To change metaphors, our Father rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves. We, you, have become His child.

Don't misunderstand; Jesus did not come to save us from the Father. It isn't that the Father is just and Jesus is merciful. George MacDonald wrote, "This is and has been the

Father's work from the beginning...to bring us into the home of his heart. This is our destiny."¹³

Take Bethlehem, Calvary, and the empty tomb out of the equation and we have no evidence that we are not in fact all alone. But put Jesus, the Messiah, into the picture and we can say, "Our Father." The point I am making is that your relationship with God is all of grace! Think about it: adoptive parents don't ask the agency if the child can perform certain tasks or has a certain amount of money to give. If the couples in our church who recently adopted children, had asked the caseworker, "Does the child have clothes and money for school tuition? Does she have a col-

...our Father rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves. We, you, have become His children.

lege fund and a willingness to help make meals and wash clothes?" If they weren't summarily dismissed, maybe someone would say, "Wait a minute, you don't adopt because of what the child has but because of what he needs. A child receives adoption they don't earn it."

We have become children of the Father not because we deserve it but because He has chosen us based only on His love. That's the kind of Father He is.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"(1 John 3:1)

We must stop feeling safe with God only when we think we are doing well. We must come to understand that He is our Father even more when we are doing poorly, mostly when we have failed miserably – for then I am believing

that His love is not caused by me; it is His love, freely given. One author wrote, "When I seek to fashion a self-image from the adulation of others and the inner voice whispers, 'You've arrived; you're a player,' there is no truth in that self-concept. (Or) when I sink into despondency and the inner voice whispers, 'You are no good, a fraud, a hypocrite, a dilettante,' there is no truth in any image shaped from that message. My dignity (comes from being) Abba's child...."¹⁴

I know every stage of life has its unique challenges but as we grow older we look at childhood as such an idyllic time. "Look at that kid," we say of our own child, "not a care in the world." With my own son, I know he doesn't have to worry about where food will come from, whether he will have a bed tonight or if anything frightens or hurts him, he can come running to me with no doubt I can save him.

I'd like him to learn to say "please" and "thank you" but they are superfluous formalities to him because he fully expects to be cared for whether he says those things or not because, after all, I'm his father. He may choose to disobey me and grieve the loss of a privilege or the threat of a spanking but it never even enters his mind that I would cease to love him or care for him – he knows I'm his father. In fact if I put my own life at risk to save his, if he were even aware of it, he would expect it; it would seem perfectly congruent with the relationship – after all, I'm his father.

Do you know that is your relationship with our heavenly Father? You are not alone; your Father loves you! Brennan Manning tells the story of Edward Farrell a pastor in Detroit who went to visit his 80-year-old uncle in Ireland. On his uncle's birthday, the two of them went for an early morning walk. After walking in silence for some time and then standing side-by-side watching the rising sun, the uncle suddenly turned with a great smile and began skipping

down the path. The pastor followed and said, "Uncle Seamus, you look so happy, can you tell me why?"

"Yes," said the eighty-year-old man, "You see me Abba is very fond of me."¹⁵

Everett Fullam was a missionary to a tribe of people in the interior of Nigeria. These people had never heard the word

If you know the Father and want to know Him more you come to Him as a little child to his father, full of expectation and full of confidence that His love for you is so great that He will do only the best for you.

Africa much less the word America. When the chief heard one day of two Americans walking on the moon, he said it was impossible because one only as to look to see that the moon is too small to hold two people. But in spite of their naïve view of the world, when they became Christians their understanding of things eternal was deep. Fullam explains it this way after he baptized three of them:

"There were two men and one woman. We stood on the banks of a muddy river, wet and happy. I had never seen three more joyful people. 'What is the best thing about this experience?' I asked. All three continued to smile...but one spoke, in clear, deliberate English, 'Behind this universe stands one God, not a great number of warring spirits, as we had always believed, but one God. And that God loves me.' " ¹⁶

Thomas Merton wrote, "Whether you understand it or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you and offers you an understanding and compassion which are like nothing you have ever found in a book or heard in a sermon."¹⁷

I have taken the time to write about this opening phrase in the Lord's Prayer because I hope it is now obvious to you how crucial that phrase is – "Our Father." If you misunderstand who the Father is, you miss the whole prayer. If you know the Father and want to know Him more you come to Him as a little child to his father, full of expectation and full of confidence that His love for you is so great that He will do only the best for you. Then no matter what the situation, we call out to the God who is there and we say "Our Father"! Whether in word or only in thought, that is how we begin every true prayer!

Our Father who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

***And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin
against us.***

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

***For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the
glory forever,***

Amen.

End Notes

- ¹ Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, p. 72
- ² Ibid, p. 70-73
- ³ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, p. 126
- ⁴ Wolfe cited by Doberstein in the introduction to Thielicke's *Our Heavenly Father*, p. 9
- ⁵ Ibid, paraphrased, p. 18
- ⁶ Jan Lochman. *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 5-7
- ⁷ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life, Dogmatics IV*, p. 51
- ⁸ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*
- ⁹ Ibid, p. 38
- ¹⁰ Jeremiah Joachim, *The Prayers of Jesus*, p. 57
- ¹¹ Max Lucado, *The Great House of God*, p. 13ff
- ¹² Fredrich Bruner, *The Christ Book*, p. 239
- ¹³ George MacDonald cited in Michael Phillips, *A God to Call Father*
- ¹⁴ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child*, p. 63
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 64
- ¹⁶ Everett Fullam, *Living the Lord's Prayer*, p. 27,28
- ¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters*, p. 146

Chapter Three

Father, Make Your Name Holy Matthew 6:9d

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.'" (Matthew 6:9-13)

As we go next to the phrase, "hallowed be your name..." in the Lord's Prayer, I must ask this question: Is God necessary? Many in our world and even in our community would say "no." There is no evidence that my neighbor ever even thinks of God. My neighbor and I both live in adequate homes. We pull out of our driveways in the morning both going to satisfying jobs. He enjoys his family and days off, as I do. He manages his way through hard times as I do. He goes on with life after the death of loved ones. His cars break down no more often than mine do. His kids get sick no more often than mine do.

He expects to die someday and knows that will end it for him, but he will enjoy life while he has it. While he would be sensitive to my feelings, if I asked him, I'm certain he'd say he has no need for God. From every appearance, God is, to him, completely unnecessary.

What about for you; is God necessary? Those who claim to be Christians don't live any longer than others. In fact I think I'm correct in saying that the Shintoists of Japan live longer than others. Christians don't have a lower mortality or morbidity rate than others. Christians who have daily devotions don't find premium parking places downtown more often than others do. Your employment or the profitability of your business is just as tied to the economy as anyone else's. For every testimony I've heard of a miracle, I've heard just as many of happy coincidence.

Is God necessary?

I'm sure my question is confusing for some of you. You are being led, by the way I'm asking the questions, to say, "No, maybe God is not necessary." But at the same time you are searching for a way to refute that. Something inside you says that can't be right – of course God is necessary. But in what way is He necessary? It's fairly self-evident that He isn't necessary like food or sleep are necessary. I think I've already demonstrated that in the sense people can live without God. Those of us who are part of the evangelical tradition might quickly say, "Well, maybe you don't need God right now, but a day is coming when you will. When you face the judgment of God, you'll need Him then!"

***No, God is not necessary;
God is more than necessary.***

Is that all we mean when we say we need God – that we will need Him at the end? That we somehow need God like we need our membership card to get into the health club or our passport to reenter the United States? We can frighten people into thinking that way, but is that what we mean when we say we need God? Have we reduced God to a "sugar-daddy" or "rabbit's foot" in this life and a ticket to heaven at death? No, God is not necessary, "God is more than necessary."¹

In Luke 7:1 it says, "*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray...'*" These men had been taught to pray from childhood. Something about the way Jesus prayed captured them. And Jesus taught them the prayer we read in Matthew 6: "*This, then, is how you should pray...*"

What follows is an appeal, a call, a request to be heard: "Father." It is the invocation, invoking God's presence and attention. At its simplest, it is our mouth to God's ear. Following Jesus' invitation to call God "Father," there are six requests or petitions:

- Hallowed be your name
- Your kingdom come
- Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven
- Give us today our daily bread
- Forgive us our debts (sins)
- Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.

The first three are about God and the last three are about us.

Jesus is not suggesting we say this prayer and only this prayer, in these words, in some strict, legalistic way. He neither encourages nor discourages the repetition of these very words. He is not suggesting that prepared prayers are better or that extemporaneous ones are better. Instead, here He gives us a model for prayer, or what Fredrich Bruner called "a kind of handrail along which to proceed in forming our own words." Of all the things for which Jesus could have prayed, He carefully chose those six. He is teaching about prayer even as He prays.

What Jesus requests first would seem significant: Hallowed be your name."

And what request He makes **first** would seem significant: "*Hallowed be your name.*" Please notice this is not a throw-away line like some, in ancient times, might use when approaching a king: "O King, most gracious and understand-

ing, most worthy, all-powerful, and did I mention good-looking." One might think that by piling on all these positive adjectives, the petitioner might ingratiate himself to the king and more likely get his requests met.

The text here does not say or mean, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed or holy IS your name. Notice the sentence is not a statement but a request – "Hallowed BE your name." He's not saying, "Your name is holy." He is asking, "Father, make your name holy."

Let's look at this more closely. Start with the word "name" – "*hallowed be your Name.*" I know of a woman whose name is "Precious." I don't mean she has a precious name, I mean when you call her you say "Precious." That gives you some idea of what her parents thought of her. But usually we are more casual about naming our children. We might pick a name because it sounds pleasant to the ear. We might pick a name because it sounds strong as in "Sam." But in other cultures and times and particularly in the Scriptures, names were often selected for much more significant reasons. Eli's wife named one of her sons, "Ichabod" because it meant "the glory has departed" when her husband died and Ark of the Covenant had been stolen by the enemy. Isaiah named one of his children "Maher Shalal Hash Baz" because the swift judgment of God was imminent.

A much happier illustration is when Joseph the husband of Mary was told in Matthew 1:21, "*you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" If I remember correctly, the name Jesus is a variation on Jesuha or Joshua meaning "the salvation of the Lord." A name was not an arbitrary word attached to a person but the name carried with it the unique personality of the individual. The name was not just a label but it symbolized the character and essence of a person—and even more so with God. His name is God as He has made Himself known to

us. To speak the name of God is to speak of His character, the essence of God.

Read Genesis 21:33: *"Abraham...called upon the name of the LORD..."* This certainly doesn't mean he called on some arbitrary name. And this is not just a quaint way of saying he called on God. But it means he called on the God who is all His name means.

Later we read in 1 Samuel 17:45: *"David said to Goliath, 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty'."* David didn't think any old name would save him. He knew that the NAME meant a particular name and all that name stood for – God Himself.

In the New Testament, John writes, *"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* (20:31)

And Moses wrote in Exodus 34:5-7, *"Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin'."*

The name of God is the composite of all those characteristics. Is it any wonder then that God should say in Exodus 20:7, *"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name"?* I was raised with strict warnings against using or misusing God's name – using it in vain, thoughtless, ways such as cursing people by misusing God's name or misusing God's name lightly as an exclamation "Oh my God!" Even "gosh" or "gol" were suspect because they were known to be variations on the name "God." Even say-

ing "God bless you" following someone's sneeze is probably a thoughtless, and thus vain, misuse of God's name.

Some will say, "When I absent mindedly say, 'God' or 'Jesus' or some other variation as a exclamation, I don't mean anything by it." I think that is precisely what the Scripture is referring to – you didn't mean anything by it – you were taking that name, that name that stands for all God is, and misusing it in the worst possible way – using that most significant, precious name as if it meant nothing.

***To speak the name of God is to speak of
His character, the essence of God.***

George MacDonald wrote of the following conversation:

Young Alister promised, "In God's name we will!"

"There is no occasion for an oath, Alister!" said his mother.

But Ian said, "Alister meant it very solemnly." But his mother replied, "Yes, but it was not necessary...The name of our Lord God should be as a precious jewel in the cabinet of our hearts, to be taken out only at great times and with loving awe."²

By the Father's "name" Jesus means God's very essence. God and His name are inextricably linked in Scripture and even become interchangeable. In one sense God is His name and His name is God.

So what does Jesus request of the Father about the Father's name? He prays, "*Hallowed be your name.*" The word "hallowed" is rather uncommon to us but not totally. We might speak of the "hallowed halls" of our alma mater. But the word "hallowed" is much more significant than that. The word means "holy" or "sanctified," set-apart from the common.

So the prayer is, "Father, make your name holy."

Of course God is already holy, so what is Jesus suggesting we ask for? We are asking for God to act. We are asking for God to give His name the highest place and honor. We are asking Him to make His name known and experienced by everyone. We are asking Him to make His name honored by us in everything we do. Several of the commentaries I consulted immediately began commenting on our responsibility to make God's name holy. But please notice Jesus does not say, "Father, we know we ought to revere your name." He says, "Father, make your name holy." The prayer is not first about what we do but what God does.

We are asking for God to act. We are asking for God to give His name the highest place and honor.

Why would Jesus find it necessary to ask this? Because God's name is not made holy in this world. In heaven it is but not here. Even we who have been saved by God's grace often take little account of God. Clarence Jordan said, "We take it (the name of God) and on we go and it means nothing. We keep sailing under the same old banner, living the same old life, having the same old attitudes, and walking the same old way. The name has meant nothing to us. It doesn't change us. You don't (most of all) take the name of the Lord in vain with your lips. You take it in vain with your life. It's the people... whose lives are totally unchanged by the grace of God. They're the ones who take the name in vain."¹³ Atheist Fredreich Nietzsche said that he could believe in the redeemer if Christians would look more redeemed. We may feel guilty about this but something in us says we are powerless to do much about it. That is why we pray – God you do it. God act.

Prayer is rebelling against the status quo! Isaiah rebelled against that.

"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! ... come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!" (Isaiah 64:1,2)

This is the prayer for revival. Jan Lochman wrote, "It is an appeal to the power and faithfulness of God, that he will make a breach in the regime of ambivalence and desecration... Only with his intervention can we really overcome the tragic temptation of pride and apostasy or sloth and dissipation."⁴

Father, make your name holy!

God is now doing that very thing. He makes His name holy by disciplining His own children. Ezekiel 20:9 says, *"But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among..."* He makes His name holy by punishing others who oppress His people. And most significantly He makes His name holy by putting a new heart into His people. He has placed His Spirit in us and is transforming us – oftentimes through pain for a very specific purpose:

Ezekiel 36:22 says, *"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone'."*

God be Yourself; God reveal Yourself. God, do what it takes to make us and everyone else be aware and respond to the fact that you are God, you are life. We can't make that happen God; You must do it. Only if You are God can we be Your children. Only if You act according to Your character can we have the relationship we desperately need.

I began this chapter by asking if God is necessary. We often pray and think mostly of our own needs. We judge most things by how well they serve our needs. We even pray most intensely about that which most directly relates to us. If we perceive that a prayer doesn't benefit us directly, we judge it irrelevant. But please note that while we pray for things that we see as essential to our existence we often miss the most essential. We think of the superficial and the temporal most often. Jesus knew that the very existence and glory of God was far more significant not only for God but for us. God is not necessary, "God is more than necessary."⁵

Jesus' prayer begins at the most fundamental level, the most basic level, the most important level. If God's name is not hallowed, all else is for nothing. If God is not God, we are nothing. "*Oh God, make your name holy!*" The opening petition puts everything in perspective.

The prayer begins by putting God in first place – He is first and foremost. It puts God in His rightful place and reminds us of our place as beneficiaries of His grace and servants of His purposes. He is God. David said it so well. "*Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*" (Psalm 73:5-6)

And again in another Psalm:

*"My soul yearns, even faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God."* (Psalm 84:2)

God, You are complete, You are whole, You are not corrupted and helpless as we are. You are the source of life – without You in Your perfection we would all be hopelessly lost. There would be no future worth living for. Without a "God who is there," our lives have no meaning.

One author wrote, "We are dealing here with our human condition. In many respects we human beings are creatures of necessity. We are dependent on nature, limited and shaped by our psychological makeup, entangled in complicated relations of culture and history, and conditioned by structures and pressures of economic and social destiny. Yet, in fact, are we only that? Hardly anyone who has self-awareness will agree that we are. We want to remain 'we' in life and death... We are not just the human world. We are more than an ensemble of social relationships... We are made in the image of God...(and) related even in the midst of necessity to what is more than necessary. When Jesus teaches us to ask the Father to make his name holy, ("Hallowed be your name") he is talking about our basic condition, our great need for God which is also our deepest need."⁶

The prayer begins by putting God in first place – He is first and foremost.

Only because God has a name can we have a name. Because God has made Himself known in His holiness, we don't dissolve into namelessness. Oh, how desperate we become in seeking to make a name for ourselves, to become something, to be different than the masses! Remember that at the tower of Babel their intent was "*to make a name for themselves?*" People will do almost anything to accomplish this even at the expense of others. What people think of us, our image becomes more important than reality. But if this is all we achieve, it is smoke and mirrors and has no substance – it won't last.

Recalling God's name is what saves us from that. We don't have to make a name for ourselves. God is there and He has a name and He has given us a name.

We are known.

We are loved.

We are not exchangeable with anyone else in God's eyes.⁷

Hear Isaiah reinforce this truth: *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you...For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."*(43:1b-3)

Yes God, make Your name holy! As the Apostle Paul said, *"In God we live and move and have our being!"* God, break through all my pretenses, all the facades erected in life. Break through the systems of belief that refashion You into what You aren't. Break through the busyness that crowds You out. Break into my life, into our lives, with a lively sense of Your holiness.

End Notes

¹ Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 30

² Cited in Boers *Lord Teach us to Pray*, p. 59 from MacDonald's *The Highlanders' Last Song*, p. 113

³ Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith*, p. 134

⁴ Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 41

⁵ Ibid, p. 30

⁶ Ibid, p. 32

⁷ Ibid, p. 36

Chapter Four

God Your Kingdom Come (But not too soon and not too much) Matthew 6:10a

*"This, then, is how you should pray:
'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come'..."* (Matthew 6:9-10)

Over and over again through the centuries, leaders have called their followers to alter history by their actions. In a multitude of variations the call is the same, "Come, help change the world!"

By it Alexander the Great called an army together to conquer the world.

By it Islam pushed from the deserts of the Middle East to the very thrones of Europe.

By it the Crusaders called the masses to march to Jerusalem.

By it Lenin roused a nation to overthrow a tyrant.

By it John Kennedy called many of America's best and brightest to join the Peace Corps.

Why is this appeal so effective in every culture and every generation? Ask any, except the morally blind, and you will get the same answer: "Because the world needs radical change!" Unless they are sidetracked by apathy, hopelessness, or greed, people want to see the world changed. Especially young people want to see it changed. They've not yet become cynical. We can't be aware of what is happen-

ing in our world without wanting to do something about it.

I read of a mother who, after repeatedly abusing her son, struck the 2-year-old in the face, nearly killing him, because he wet his pants. I felt sadness, anger, rage, and a desire to punish. I felt a desire to defend, to keep it from ever happening again – to him or any other child. Somebody do something! Something has to change!

Unless they are sidetracked by apathy, hopelessness, or greed, people want to see the world changed.

In a news magazine I saw the picture of a young Palestinian man's dead and bloodied body hanging upside down like a battered piñata – executed by his own people for collaborating with the Israelis. That young man was somebody's son, somebody's brother, and somebody's friend. Day after day we are shown the tragic results of this intractable, impossible cycle of revenge in the Middle East.

Something has to change!

In South African civil-rights leader Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, he describes standing near a post office in Pretoria, South Africa with a friend of his. A white man approached and, as was customary all over the country, ordered Nelson's friend to go into the post office to get something for him. To not do it could mean a state-sanctioned beating and to do it meant the further shrinking of one's spirit. That kind of discrimination and abuse of souls goes on all over our world.

Like some of you, I get up close to a lot of pain every week, if not every day. I hear it in the voices of those who speak of what is happening in their lives. I see it in the faces of children who are so often the victims of the evil

choices of their parents.

Should I show it to you in the graphic pictures of slaughter in Israel, Afghanistan, or Sudan?

Should I show it to you in the nearly silent weeping of a five-year-old girl whose daddy left her when he left her mother?

Should I show it to you in the crushed spirit of a heroin addicted 10-year old boy sitting in an alley off east Colfax, who has never known anything but real poverty and has never even imagined anything else existed for him?

Most every ideology of the centuries has been an attempt to bring about change – to introduce peace, prosperity and happiness into the human experience.

Should I play for you the audio recordings of a thousand conversations that have taken place this past week in pastors', doctors', and counselors' offices all over this city and let you listen to the tragic stories? What do we do with that reality? Something has to change!

Fight or Flight

How do we respond? Two responses seem to dominate: Flight or Fight. The "flight" is a refusal to think about it, a turning away from it in pain or apathy, or a sense of helplessness in being able to do anything about it. We are tempted to take a "head-in-the-sand," "as-long-as-it-doesn't-touch-me-or-mine," approach. And some of this "flight" approach has been adopted by Christians – a "save all the souls we can as the ship of this world sinks" and a hope that Jesus comes soon to end all of this.

Another response is "fight" – a determination to change the world. This is a "roll up the sleeves," "get our hands dirty,"

“change the system” method. Most every ideology of the centuries has been an attempt to bring about change – to introduce peace, prosperity and happiness into the human experience. I think Marx, Engles, Lenin, Mao and a host of others adopted forms of communism to bring about a change. The utopian enterprises of the past were attempts to reduce the suffering of humanity and bring about a lasting difference.

Think of history’s attempts to respond in one way or another:

- Woodrow Wilson’s “League of Nations”
- Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal”
- John Kennedy’s “Peace Corps”
- Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” and “war on poverty”
- Ronald Reagan’s “trickle-down economics”
- And Bill Clinton’s “Nation Building”

In our desire to address suffering directly there is:

- Amnesty International
- Doctors without Borders
- The United Nations Security Council
- UNICEF
- World Vision
- Food for the Hungry
- World Relief
- Samaritan’s Purse
- And the Mennonite Central Committee

We’ve even tried power and negotiation to make the world better:

There was

- World War I (“the war to end all wars”)
- The Treaty of Versailles
- World War II
- The Korean and Vietnam Wars to keep us safe from Communism
- The “Cold War”, détente, and “mutually-assured-destruction”
- The Middle East, Camp David Accords
- The Gulf War
- The Bosnian, Dayton Accords
- The present war against terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere

And the on-going “drug war”

So much, for so long - to what end? Wars still erupt with ever-increasing frequency. The resulting human suffering continues unabated. For all of our laws, our prisons, and social programs it seems that pain and despair are deeper and more pervasive with each passing year. Billions of dollars, millions of lives, untold hours of effort, for what? Why can't we change it?

Prior to WWII, even many Christians thought everything would gradually get better and better until finally peace and prosperity would be ushered in fully – the kingdom of God on earth would arrive. But as the evils of Hitler's concentration camps were being discovered one German pastor wrote, “(Who today) can utter the words ‘human progress’ without getting a flat taste in his mouth? Who can still believe today that we are developing toward a state in which the kingdom of God reigns in the world of nations, in culture, and in the life of the individual? The earth has been

plowed too deeply by the curse of war, the streams of blood and tears have swollen all too terribly, injustice and bestiality have become all too cruel and obvious for us to consider such dreams to be anything but bubbles and froth."¹

What's to be Done?

Jesus came in the midst of just such times. In our text in Matthew, Jesus was speaking to a broken people – oppressed politically and economically (they were a subjugated people), they were sick, crippled, and many were driven to despair. They lived at a subsistence level dependent each new day even for their bread. Jan Lochman wrote, "These were the poor, the failures, both in the economic sense – the hungry and unemployed – and also in the moral and religious sense – the despised and ignored whom the official church and society excluded... There were also the blind, the physically and mentally handicapped, the sick, with their reduced potentialities. There were also the defeated, those who had suffered shipwreck through outer blows or inner failure and collapse. They were all there, the whole human race, all of us with our own special needs."²

In our text in Matthew, Jesus was speaking to a broken people

And what did Jesus claim? What was He promising in their and our messy, painful world? Jesus came preaching the good news of the kingdom. In Matthew 4:23-25 it says, "*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom...*" He said the "good news" was that God's presence and power had invaded our world and was available to us, individually and corporately – life could be different.

Not only was He preaching "good news" but the Scripture says, He went everywhere: *"healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them."*

And all the time, the clear implication was that this was just the tip of the iceberg – that this was, in part, what it means when the "world" of God – "the kingdom of heaven," "the kingdom of God" - invades our "world." Jesus said in Luke 4:18,19, *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

***The Kingdom of God is His loving
authority in our lives***

Jesus had come to change the world! Has He? Is He? Will He? Do I dare believe Him? And what do I believe? Jesus said the Kingdom of God has come! What am I to understand about that? What difference does it really make? Jesus made it very clear that the Kingdom of God is not a realm but a rule. It is not a place but a power. It operates in a place, our lives and our world, but it is God's sovereign rule operating in our world. Rutgers wrote, "The kingdom of God in this sense may then be defined as the rule or will of God established in the hearts of (his) people, which rule... is, and progressively increases to be, the operative principle that motivates the Christian's life, gives direction to and determines the purpose of living."³ It is God's loving authority in our lives.

Think for a moment about God's kingdom rule historically. If we look at Genesis 1 and 2, we see God's kingdom, God's rule exercised fully not only in heaven but on earth. All earthly creation, the stars, sun, plant life, animals and humans (Adam and Eve) lived in the sphere of God's gracious rule. God was king and His creatures were His willing subjects.

Then in rebellion against God's authority, humanity, in our first parents Adam and Eve, threw off God's grace and went its own way. Karl Barth wrote that the tragic results of the Fall have a paradoxical aspect:

"Parallel to the history of man's emancipation from God there runs that of the emancipation of his own possibilities of life from himself: the history of the overpowering of (Man's) desires...by the power...of (Man's) ability."⁴ We were given the ability to reject God, to be "emancipated" from Him, and we did, and in so doing we lost, we were "emancipated" from the possibilities of life as God intended.

Jan Lochman wrote, "Like Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice, man becomes the victim of the lordless powers that he conjures up but can no longer control, which have come to lord it over him."⁵ "There is nothing more terrible than the man who is left to himself"⁶

We have not created a world that brings greater peace and joy but a world that increasingly threatens our very existence.

God's Perfect Rule

Since the Fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden, God's perfect rule has been exercised only in heaven. Throughout the Old Testament period from Abraham to John the Baptist, the promise was that the King Himself would come to our world and reestablish His kingdom. And though the King would come through the lineage of one family –

namely through Abraham and Israel, the kingdom would be available to all people. The gestation period was over 2000 years but the King finally came – at exactly the right time – “*the fullness of time*,” God said.

In Jesus, that kingdom rule once again invaded earth. That is why John the Baptist was called a “forerunner” (one who runs before the coming king and announces his arrival) and said the kingdom of heaven was at hand. That is why Jesus said He came preaching good news of the kingdom. It is why Jesus did the signs and wonders He did to prove to those who would listen and watch that the kingdom has come and is coming in even greater influence. And that is why He died and rose again so that the power of sin to blind and control would be broken, releasing those who trust in Jesus to enter that kingdom and serve the risen king.

The King has come bringing His Kingdom

There are two misconceptions about the kingdom of God:

The first is that we understand the kingdom of God as only future – the coming “kingdom” when Jesus comes again. In such thinking we are tempted to think that the Kingdom of God has nothing to do with this real world in which we live but is applicable only to our hearts. In such thinking we relegate the “kingdom” only to the future.

The second misconception is to reduce the kingdom of God to only here and now. More specifically, to reduce it to the Christianizing of secular institutions in modern society – to attempt to make the institutions of school, state and commerce, Christian. Was this also the short-sightedness of Cromwell’s rule in England and is it the short-sightedness of the Reconstructionists and the religious right of today? Are we trying to force God’s “kingdom” on the world?

One author wrote, “(This) method of bringing about the kingdom is one of social reformation; they approach hu-

manity from the outside; the agency is machinery."⁷ Believing that the machinery of social reform will make the world better by our programs is short-sighted.

No, the kingdom of God is not only future, though God's gracious rule will only be universally embraced at the end of the age. But neither is the kingdom of God simply our best efforts at making life on earth better through political or social programs or even by force. Jesus said to the ruler and military leader, Pilate, in John 18:37, "*My kingdom is not of (or like) this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But my kingdom is from another place.*"

...that is why He died and rose again so that the power of sin to blind and control would be broken, releasing those who trust in Jesus to enter that kingdom and serve the risen king.

Jesus said His kingdom was not about swords and programs. His kingdom is unseen but every bit as real. It is one of regeneration, of conversion. This approach is from the inside; the agency is not human social programs but the effective work of the Holy Spirit in the individual hearts of people. And Jesus' merit is applied to us and we are progressively shaped to be like Jesus.⁸ By God's Spirit we are increasingly convinced of the gracious will of God for our lives and we yield to His love. God doesn't take us by force but woos us to Himself. And one life at a time, the kingdom of God comes.

Jesus told us His kingdom works a wholly different way from the kingdoms and methods of the world. Matthew 13:31-33 says, "*He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your*

seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.’ He told them still another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough’.”

By God’s Spirit we are increasingly convinced of the gracious will of God for our lives and we yield to His love.

It appears so insignificant but it is so powerful and will be pervasive. And it changes individuals, families, churches, communities and even countries.

God’s Social Program

One person at a time, with God’s love, we love people into the Kingdom. Read what Jesus says in Acts 1:8: *“And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Witnesses to what? Witnesses not to a program but to a person – the King and His love for you and for them. That’s God’s “social” program. That’s God’s plan to change the world.

I think of the time that has passed since the Garden of Eden and even since the first coming of the Messiah Jesus and I ask, “How long God?” Every indication is that humanity is destroying itself. If Your kingdom has come, if You are changing the world, why doesn’t it look like it? Jesus could have asked the same questions! It had been 2000 years or more since God’s promise to Abraham. Jesus could have looked at the suffering world around Him and despaired of ever seeing a change. But instead what did He do, and what did He teach us to do?

Pray!

"*Our Father in heaven...your kingdom come.*" Jesus was not talking to His followers, He was talking to His Father and ours. He was not telling us to do something; He was petitioning God to do something.

Leon Morris wrote, "This prayer looks for God to take action, not for us worshipers to bring the kingdom into being – the establishment of the kingdom of God is by God for us, not by us for God."⁹ God, You do it. God, make Your kingdom come. God, we need You to act. God, revive Your people and save us from ourselves. God, bring in the full authority, power and presence of Your kingdom rule and let it begin with me! And let it spread to others.

An Invitation to Faith

When Jesus prayed that prayer and when He invites us to pray it, He invites us to faith – faith in God. In that prayer we are saying, "God I know that You and You alone can change this world. I know all our political and social efforts, altruistic as they may be, are weak and fruitless attempts at changing what only you can change."

And in that prayer we are also laying claim to God's promise. "God, You can and You will make it happen. I believe You, God. Make Your kingdom come. Change this world, God!"

What did Jesus expect as a result of that prayer? What did He mean when He asked God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven? Did He think only of that day when He, Jesus, would come again? No! He expected the world to change by the power of God.

How often we are tempted to lie in such a prayer. Truth be told, many of us don't want God's kingdom to come, at least not now. We like the kingdoms we have built. But

when we think that way, we reveal how little we understand the Kingdom of God. We might think of the “kingdom of God” as only heaven or life after death. We might even think of it negatively as living now under restrictive and deadening rules. But to think such ways only indicates how little we know of God.

I remember a friend telling me that instead of telling his children he was taking them to Disney World, he told them he was taking them to this fantastic (albeit make-believe) place in Missouri. He described the make-believe place in such exciting detail that when they got to Missouri and he told them it didn’t exist and told them where they were really going – to Disney World – they didn’t want to go. They had no idea what Disney World was like and they wanted the make-believe place.

We think our vision of the future is superior to God’s vision. We don’t trust God’s plan for our lives and for the world, so we settle for something so much less than what He wants for us. On our own and at our best, in spite of all our social programs, we have created a world, not of greater peace and joy but a world that increasingly threatens our very existence. On our own at our worst, we have settled on little islands of distraction in our recreation, and of security in our investment portfolios and insurance policies, but deep inside we know the islands are situated in an ocean of uncertainty.

Jesus came offering so much more.

We’ll settle for a temporary cease-fire in the world when Jesus wants peace.

We’ll settle for humanitarian aid when Jesus wants people to thrive.

We’ll settle for giving homeless people a place to sleep and a meal to eat when Jesus wants them to have a life.

We'll settle for more welfare, child-care, and counseling for kids when Jesus wants stronger marriages and families.

We'll settle for mind-numbing entertainment or narcotics when Jesus wants people to have joy and purpose.

Is it either/or? Is it either social programs or gospel? No, a thousand times, no, but we want to treat more than the symptoms of poverty, illiteracy, hatred, and greed. We want to deal with the disease – the alienation of the human heart from God and each other.

...deep inside we know the islands are situated in an ocean of uncertainty. Jesus came offering so much more.

It isn't that we want too much when we dream of raising the literacy rate, reducing poverty and increasing the life-expectancy of children. It is that we want too little. We don't dare to dream as large as God's vision. "Come, change the world" is not a slogan; it is a reality in God's mind and plan.

Our Father in heaven, make your kingdom come! Do it God! We need you to act.

End Notes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 62

² Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 62

³ Rutgers in Abraham Kuiper's, *Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*, p. 66

⁴ Karl Barth, *Christian Life*, p. 214

⁵ Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 59

⁶ Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*, p. 58

⁷ Rutgers in Abraham Kuiper's, *Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*, p. 72

⁸ Ibid, p. 72

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 145

Chapter Five

God Wills! - Fatalism or Expectation Matthew 6:10b

*"This, then, is how you should pray:
'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
**your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**"*

The ancient philosopher Epictetus described life as a dog running downhill with a cart harnessed to him. The dog feels free as long as he stays ahead of the cart. But if he slows down or stops he will be crushed. He believed everything is predetermined and one either has to go with it or get run over. Most ancient philosophies and religions were fatalistic. Even modern philosophies and religions are the same. The idea that the will of the gods should be done and we should conform our wills to their will seems present in all religions. Plato said, "If it is pleasing to the gods, so let it be." After all, what does the very word "God" mean except that He has the ability to do as He chooses? In Islam, Hinduism, or the secularism of modern America, most believe that ultimately our fates are determined by outside forces.

So whether it is a god or gods or fate isn't everything predetermined as in the words of that modern theologian Doris Day, "Que sera, sera" - "Whatever will be will be"? An old Stoic proverb said, "The willing are led by fate; the unwilling are dragged by it." Is that really any different from the way some portray Christianity as either yielding to God's

will now or getting crushed under it later? When Jesus prayed, *"Our Father...Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* was He simply accepting fatalism? If we pray "your will be done," as Jesus instructed when He said, *"This, then, is how you should pray,"* are we just accepting fatalism or are we asking God for something?

Have you ever prayed, "Father, Your will be done"? Have you ever prayed "Father do what you want" when a loved one was dangerously sick? I'm not asking if you have ever prayed that prayer when all hope was gone but have you prayed that prayer when the worst looked like it could happen. Have you ever prayed "Father, Your will be done" when you were about to lose a job? I'm not asking if you ever prayed that prayer after you lost your income but when it looked like you could.

Have you ever prayed "Father, Your will be done" when you were about to lose a job?

Sometimes when the bad has already happened, we can say, with resignation, "Okay God, whatever You want." But what about when it hasn't yet happened, but it is pending? Do we then dare pray, "Your will be done"? What do we mean when we say those words"? It seems to me that the words, "Father, do your will on earth as it is done in heaven" begs answers to a couple of questions:

What is the Father's will?

If the Father does His will, what of my will?

What is God's Will?

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 135:6, *"The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth..."* Is that what we pray for— that God will do whatever He wants? I don't think the Psalmist here was speaking of the

will of God but of the sovereignty of God – reminding us that God is able to do whatever He pleases. I don't think Jesus' prayer is as general as that. I don't think He is just saying, "God be sovereign!" So what "will" of God is Jesus asking to be done?

Is Jesus thinking of the Scriptures – asking for all of God's commands to be faithfully carried out by us? Is Jesus thinking of how God's people should strictly follow God's law in our obedience? Is He thinking of compliance with the Ten Commandments or the rest of the Law? Do we find in this phrase a call to greater compliance with the will of God in our lives? I don't think so, and least not in some "command and obey" sense. We are too prone to reducing the "will of God" to a compliance to law, when I think Jesus has something much broader in mind here.

***The will of God is more about
relationship than precision.***

I don't mean to suggest they are antithetical, but to do the will of God is less about fulfilling particular commands than it is with pleasing God. The will of God is more about relationship than precision. How could the adulterer/murder David be called a "man after God's own heart" and the repetitively disobedient Abraham be called "the friend of God"? These men lacked precision in their obedience but they had a relationship with God. And again, as I noted earlier, Jesus is not asking us to do something but for God to do something.

What "will" of God is Jesus asking the Father to do when He prays, "Father your will be done"? Listen to Jesus' own words:

"For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of

him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:38-40)

God's Will is Salvation!

God's will is to save His people, fully and finally! John 3:17 says, *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*

And as the apostle Paul said it:

"And he made known to us the mystery of his will... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Ephesians 1:9-10)

And Paul made it clear that the will of God to save, to restore, and to reconcile extended even to the rest of the created universe: *"The creation waits in eager expectation for the (final resurrection). For the creation...itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."* (Romans 8:19-21)

The "will" of God is the salvation of His people and His creation. It is that active, dynamic, saving work of God that forms the background for us to speak of the will of God not fatalistically but expectantly. It is not that the will of God is some static, even negative, predetermined plan, but that the will of God is being worked toward the glorious freedom of the children of God. It is not "Que sera, sera" – but the will of God is the gracious salvation of His people.

So when Jesus prays "Your will be done," and He teaches us to pray the same, what are we asking God to do? We are asking God to do what He has planned and promised. We are asking Him to work His gracious will in such ways that in and through the events of every day we will be saved and that history will move to the end that God has in

mind – a total transformation of this world.

So what does this mean in my experience today? What does it mean to pray for and experience God's will in the now? I am convinced that it is not coincidental that Jesus prayed these very words again in the gospel of Matthew. And when He prayed them again the words are not said in the abstract but in the concrete experience of life and death.

Read carefully Jesus' own experience with this "will" of God:

*"Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and **he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'** Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, '**My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.**' Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.' He went away a second time and prayed, '**My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.**' When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.*

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!'" (Matthew 26:36-46 – emphasis added)

And with those words Jesus headed to a kangaroo court and crucifixion. We are told that three times that night in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the same prayer: Father, I wish I didn't have to go through this but *"your will be done."* There those words are again, *"Your will be done."* The Scripture teaches us what we can hardly grasp – that before time began, the eternal triune God planned that God the Son would come to earth to save His people from the disastrous results of their own sin and rebellion against God.

We are asking God to do what He has planned and promised.

When God the Son, Jesus, was here on earth, He knew why He was here. He said in John 3:14, *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up..."* And again in John 12:32,33, *"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."*

Jesus knew He was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about a perfect sacrificial lamb that would be offered to take away the sins of God's people. In the Garden of Gethsemane He knew His "hour" was near meaning that the greater suffering was imminent and a decision was called for. And so Jesus prepares for it in prayer.

Jesus does not take a Stoic fatalistic approach—accepting the end, philosophically, as inevitable. No, like Jacob of old, Jesus struggles with the Father!

In its final report, the National Transportation Safety Board said the 1999 Egypt Air flight 990 that crashed into the ocean off Nantucket Island was driven into the waters by the co-pilot. As he disconnected the auto-pilot, reduced power to the engines and stepped on the controls that

nosed the plane into the water, on the cockpit recorder he can be heard saying, in a calm manner, "I rely on Allah, I rely on Allah." Jesus did not accept the will of God in a disconnected sense of calm. The text says *"He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death'."* Jesus did not say, "Well, if God wills it." Jesus struggled with accepting God's will. Jesus was fully human as well as being fully God. And remember His struggle was not sinful and neither it is for us.

The Inner Struggle

Most of all, He talks to the Father. He relates His own personal, very human, desire – *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."* Jesus was no masochist. He would like to have avoided the suffering. But Jesus knew His suffering was not all that was going on there. He and the Father had determined in ages past that Jesus would bear the sins of His people and take their punishment. What He would go through would be God's judgment against sin. But that judgment would be the very salvation of His people. His human nature loathed the judgment but Jesus loved the salvation it would bring. The liberation of

Jesus certainly struggled with the idea of the suffering He would encounter but the far deeper struggle was that He was tempted to let His will, conditioned by present circumstances, get in the way of His Father's far better will.

the world was at stake. The decision was not abstract but very concrete – what Jesus did in those next few hours would make all the difference in the world and the world to come.

Jesus certainly struggled with the idea of the suffering He would encounter but the far deeper struggle was that He was tempted to let His will, conditioned by present circumstances, get in the way of His Father's far better will. And so in His struggle He said, *"Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

Jesus didn't like the process He had to go through but He loved the promised outcome. Jesus didn't say "Your will be done" through clenched teeth with a sense of resignation but instead He said it with expectation. He did not surrender fatalistically to the inevitable – He chose salvation for us. He is not passively surrendering; He is very actively participating. And He got up, woke up His disciples and resolutely headed to the cross. And He dared to go because He trusted His Father.

The Call to Trust

You and I may face seemingly impossible situations; we may look ahead and see nothing but darkness, no light to tell us what will happen. We can easily imagine the worst and have no evidence that it won't happen. And then in the very midst of it we recall Jesus' words, *"This then is how you should pray, Father your will be done."*

We find ourselves resisting that. We aren't certain of God's will. And so we resist it, until finally beaten down we yell "uncle." "I give up, God." "You've beaten me." "Go ahead and do whatever!"

But we say it with frustration or even anger. We say it fatalistically, resignedly – crushed and bowing to the inevitable. That's not what Jesus is calling us to. It's not what He did. He calls us to embrace the will of God. He calls us to trust the Father.

We are often afraid to pray, "Your will be done" because we fear what God will make us do. We wrongly think God's

will has most to do with making us comply with a set of life-killing restrictions – the “thou shalt nots.” But hard as His road was, Jesus showed us that God’s will is about life-giving not life-taking. The whole prayer is controlled by the opening words: “Our Father.” The will of God is not an “anonymous destiny.”¹ The will of God is the desire of our Father in heaven who loves us and has made a covenant with us. The God whose will we pray for, is the Father who lives in dynamic relationship with us.

Jan Lochman wrote, “He is not hard necessity to which we must adjust.”² God dialogs with us, He changes His mind, He pardons our sins, in some measure His will can be defied, and our prayers to Him make a difference. I don’t fully understand all that but the Bible affirms it. His will has to do with our relationship with Him – not a static but dynamic relationship.

We shouldn’t be afraid of God’s will because as Helmut Thielicke wrote, “Everything that happens to you, whether good or bad, must first pass muster before your Father’s heart. And if the Father’s dealing with you appears to be utterly horrible, cruel, and incomprehensible, then let your tormented gaze find rest in Jesus’ compassion...Even the darkest places in your life must be seen in this light, in this Christ-light. And only because you see him there as he really is, can you love him—can you love him in return.

“Then afterwards, perhaps after long years of inner growth, you may also learn to love and affirm what is now so bitter and cruel. For the Father’s hands transform and hallow the destinies that flow through them.

“He who is reconciled to the Father is also reconciled to his lot. For whomsoever the will of God has lost its terror (and this it has for all who know the Father of Jesus), for him the darkest night of the valley of life has lost its specters and it shines with light.”³

Missionary stateswoman Elisabeth Elliott Leitch told of an experience she had in North Wales. She was visiting a shepherd and his wife by the name of John and Mari Jones. The Jones had a dog named Mack who assisted in the herding of the sheep. Leitch wrote, "It was a marvelous thing to see him circling to the right, circling to the left, barking, crouching, racing along, herding a stray sheep here, nipping at a stubborn one there, his eyes always glued to the sheep, his ears listening for the tiny metal whistle from his master that I couldn't hear."

Leitch asked the shepherd's wife, "Do the sheep have any idea what's happening?"

"Not a clue!" (Mari) said.

"How about Mack (the dog)?"

"The dog doesn't understand the pattern – only obedience."

***Jesus showed us that God's will is about
life-giving not life-taking.***

Leitch said, "I saw two creatures who were in the fullest sense in their glory—A man who had given his life to sheep, who loved them and his dog, and a dog whose trust in that man was absolute, whose obedience was instant and unconditional. The dog didn't know what the shepherd was up to but he knew the shepherd."⁴

We dare to pray "your will be done" because we know the Shepherd. And our Father is unfailingly gracious – even through and beyond the worst of circumstances. The struggle is no less painful but the Father won't fail. Again from Jan Lochman, "This means that if we pray 'Your will be done' to a God of this kind, our prayer is not to be confused with prudent resignation or pious capitulation... It is more a

matter of the cry of those who pray to God that he would establish his declared will – his kingdom – among us. Seen in this way, the petition does not drug the devout. It does not make them ready to accept without question anything that might come. It is not a spiritual anesthetic or opiate to reconcile them a priori to circumstances. On the contrary, it encourages them constantly to orient themselves to the true will of God, which means... to confront circumstances with (God's) promises."⁵ We know that our Father's will is the very best for the world and us. It's not fatalism because He's our "Father!"

"Our Father...Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

End Notes

¹ Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 70

² Ibid, p. 70

³ Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again*, p. 75

⁴ Elisabeth Elliott Leitch, *World Vision*, April 1977, p. 12

⁵ Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 71

Chapter Six

Bread Matthew 6:11

*"Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
(And now about breakfast) **give us today our daily bread.**"*

As you have heard or recited the Lord's Prayer in the past, have you ever been struck with the apparent incongruity of this fourth request in comparison with the others? There you were praying along about the great and eternal truths of God's holiness, God's kingdom and God's will and then suddenly the prayer turns to "bread." It abruptly changes from God's glory to breakfast bagels. In Luke 7:1 it says, *"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray...'"* Now Jesus' disciples had been taught to pray from childhood. But something about the way Jesus prayed captured them.

And so Jesus taught them to pray. In Matthew 6 we read,

*"This, then, is how you should pray..."
'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'"*

There are six requests, six petitions. The first three are in direct reference to God:

- His name
- His kingdom
- His will

God, cause Your name to be honored, Your authority to be accepted and Your will to be done in all the earth.

The last three are in direct reference to us:

- Give us
- Forgive us
- Lead us

Give us bread, forgive our sins and lead us not into temptation.

...something about the way Jesus prayed captured them.

It is the fourth request I address next – “Father, give us today our daily bread.” There are some who consider such a request so mundane in the grand scheme of things that Jesus can’t possibly have meant literal bread or food—He must have meant spiritual food.

But Jesus supports nothing of the dualism that permeates so much of other religions and philosophies. Too many, even today, think of the body and the material world simply as necessary evils to be endured. They speak as if the world of spirit and ideas is the only real world. Some religions suggest we achieve the ultimate only when we are released from the physical – when we rise above it, conquering and discarding it. Even some Christians seem to believe that being released from the body is the final reward. Not so!

We do not long for the immortality of the soul but for the resurrection of the body! God created the heaven and the earth, the material, and it was good. God created the human body and it was good. God is not anti-material. To the contrary, God created matter and it is in a very material way we will exist for eternity.

***God knows our hearts – we might
as well be honest.***

The physical, our daily bread, is not inconsequential – it is not the insignificant thing of life that we must get out of the way so we can speak of the lofty things. You can't enjoy what some call the "finer" things of life such as a Beethoven symphony if you are cold or Rembrandt's painting if you are hungry. When you run for an air raid shelter it is wiser to take a coat than a CD collection.¹

We are Physical Beings!

I think it was journalist G.K. Chesterton who was asked, if he were stranded on an island what book would he most want to have. The questioner no doubt expecting to hear a title of great spiritual depth or philosophical height was surprised when Chesterton replied "I would want *A Practical Guide to Shipbuilding*." Yes, life contains the sublime but it also contains the mundane.

No matter your age or occupation, a large percentage of life consists of what we might otherwise call "trivialities" – sleeping, eating, dressing, standing, waiting, cleaning, walking, or sitting. We spend time deciding what to wear. We sort through fruit to find the best. We study Internet sites or magazines to learn all we can about the best car or computer to buy. We answer e-mail, we read a letter, we make a phone call, we put gas in the car, and we fix a meal.

Imagine if Jesus said, "I want you to pray only about the 'big' things of life and eternity because the rest is too trivial." It would be as if God were like a father who said we could only see him on Sunday about important things. If He did so, God would rule Himself out of most of what is life. But our Father created us and accepts us as we are; yes, able to dream large visions but also existing in the everyday stuff of life. Yes, we can get priorities reversed but all of life is important to God – it is how He made us.

We don't need to pretend we care only for the big things of life when underneath we are worried about bread, or health, or a job, or other physical necessities of life. God knows our hearts – we might as well be honest. God is the one who taught us to pray about "bread." He wants us to do so. A breadboard plaque hung in our kitchen for years. On it was a quote from Martin Luther: "God is found midst the pots and the posies." The presence and touch of God transform all of life.

"Father, give us today our daily bread."

How long has it been since we have seriously prayed that prayer or anything like it? Who among your community of friends, honestly, does not know whether they will have food for breakfast in the morning? Except intentionally or accidentally, most of us have never missed a meal. In an age of affluence and refrigeration, is this prayer for daily bread irrelevant? Not if we truly understand the prayer and have a realistic understanding of our actual situation. In few words Jesus says and teaches a mouthful:

"Give us today our daily bread" teaches us dependence, contentment, generosity and gratitude. It teaches us that in our dependence on God we need to be content, generous, and grateful.

The very first word, "give," speaks to what we lose sight of so easily. We are to pray "Father give..." If our Father doesn't give, we won't get. We imagine we provide for ourselves. We reason it is our ability and hard work that are responsible for our livelihood. We dare to assume it is with our own arm we reach whatever we need, not remembering that we stand on the shoulders of parents, friends, teachers, and a host of others. And most of all, not remembering that life itself is from God.

We are dependent on God.

In 1 Corinthians 4:7 the apostle Paul rightly asked, "*What do you have that you did not receive?*"

James pointed out, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...*"(1:17)

The Psalmist described, "*The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*" (Psalm 145:15-16)

I understand that the Czech language has a term for bread that is translated as "God's gift." If a piece of bread fell from the table it would be picked up carefully and tenderly kissed as one said, "bozi darek- God's gift."² Do we forget that the money we have was earned by using time, health and intelligence given to us by God?

If others don't "give" to us and mostly if God doesn't "give" to us, we would have nothing.

Today

This dependence on God is also seen in the word "today" – "*Give us today our daily bread.*" Until a 9/11 happens or a close friend of the same age dies, or a job is lost, we feel secure. And the security is based on an imagined independ-

ence—our sense of immortality or our sense of competency. But when that changes we realize afresh how dependent we are. Jesus said when we pray we are to recognize and acknowledge our day-to-day dependence on God.

Do we forget that the money we have was earned by using time, health and intelligence given to us by God?

The Israelites, those hundreds of thousands of Hebrew people who left Egypt 3500 years ago and headed to their Promised Land, every day had a lesson in their complete dependence on God. God fed them with quail in the evening and manna in the morning. The quail flew into the camp in the evening and the manna fell to the ground in the morning. They had no way to preserve any of it and were dependent on each day's provision. In truth that is how dependent we are. And the stories in our newspapers each day of the fragility of life remind us of that truth if we will only see it. We are dependent on our Father's provision!

Contentment

The second thing Jesus' prayer teaches us is that we are to be content with what God provides. The request is "Give us today our daily bread." "Today" and "daily" - that is not a redundancy. That word "daily" most likely refers to the amount of bread—the daily portion—the exact amount to meet the needs of the day. Looking back at the story about the Israelites in Exodus 16:4, "*Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day.'*" When we pray as we ought to, we don't pray for more, we pray for enough.

Our physical needs are legitimate but as a result of sin, they tend to dominate. Legitimate hunger becomes gluttony, greed, and hoarding. Power and sex tend in the same direction. In excess, the legitimate need becomes illegitimate. The word "daily," in the prayer, puts limits on the legitimate. The need is real and worthy but it must be controlled. We have a freedom in praying for our needs but we also have a responsibility to test them so that "needs" don't get out of hand.

The rich farmer in Luke 12 let it get out of hand.

Jesus *"told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'" Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' (Then Jesus added this commentary) *'This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.'* (Luke 12:16-21)*

***When we pray as we ought to, we don't
pray for more, we pray for enough.***

We live in a society of overabundance. We call it freedom but has our ability to "more than meet our needs" really led to freedom? Jan Lochman wrote, "At first sight it might seem so to an observer from past centuries. Much has been achieved compared to the elementary conditions of life that obtained for our ancestors. Yet most of us know better. In relation to our society we cannot speak of the realm of freedom in the full sense. Our realm of freedom is at the

same time a realm of new compulsions. Many of us are linked to the excessive, artificially provoked, and manipulated needs of our consumer society. They do not make us freer or richer. At the cost of our true human and co-human needs, they make us poorer and more dependent.”³

Marshall Shelley, who grew up in Denver and is now with Christianity Today Inc. tells of spending a day with his father-in-law, a Kansas farmer, hoisting hay bales from a baler to a flatbed truck. Afterward, they philosophized about city life and farm life. His father-in-law said, “The biggest difference I see is that city people tend to expect each year to be better than the last. If they haven’t gotten a raise, acquired something new, or found themselves somehow better off, they’re dissatisfied.”

He went on to say, “On the farm, you don’t expect the fields to yield more each year. You expect good years and bad. You can’t control the weather, and you pray that you avoid disaster. You work hard and accept what comes.”⁴ It’s called contentment—trusting our Father.

As a college junior, Deborah Bragg lived for six months in a Nicaraguan village wracked by drought and flood. It was there that she learned how to trust God for daily bread. At harvest season insects moved in and threatened to destroy the entire crop. The woman with whom Deborah lived awakened her one morning and said they had to work fast to get the crop before the insects did.

She wrote: “The field looked as if a fire had swept through it. Black worms hung greedily on the bare stalks, swaying heavily in the wind. My mother (so I called her) got on her hands and knees and began praying to God, pleading with God to help her husband accept the fact that all his hard work was in vain and that he would not be able to provide for his family.

Then she praised God for the corn she would be able to

salvage that day – and thanked God for teaching all in the community a lesson on trusting the Lord for food and the future. Bragg said, “I had never seen anyone pray to God in the middle of a field, on bended knees, with a cornstalk in her hand. I didn’t know what to think. But after her words sank into my heart, I realized that this was the food God had decided to give us for the next few months, and I fell to my knees. Together we thanked God for God’s love and kindness.”

The two women worked hard and managed to salvage two bags full of corn. As they walked more than a mile to their home the older woman gave skirts full of corn to friends she passed. When they stopped at one home to get a drink, the older woman not only gave the balance of her own corn to the hostess but she took corn out of the bag carried by Deborah.

Contentment is what Jesus calls us to. Our Father will supply our daily needs.

Deborah wrote: “We drank, and my mother gave the woman enough corn for her entire family – out of my bag! I had picked that corn. It was mine. Because of my mother’s generosity with my corn and hers, (there remained) only two ears each and that was our breakfast and lunch.”

Deborah said she couldn’t get over her resentment until a miracle happened. Another woman and her daughters stopped at Deborah’s home on their way home from the field and left enough corn to feed us all. And that kind of sharing went on for the balance of the six months.⁵

The writer of Proverbs captures this contentment best:

*“...Give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.*”

*Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.*" (Proverbs 30:8-9)

Contentment is what Jesus calls us to. Our Father will supply our daily needs.

Generosity

Jesus' prayer also teaches us to be generous. In the context of the prayer for God's kingdom to reign, the words "us" and "our" certainly mean more than just a collection of individuals, it means us together. This is not a self-centered prayer but a prayer for "us" - thus it is a prayer for social justice—that there would be bread for all of us. When we who tend to be overfed and overfull pray this prayer we are praying for our brothers and sisters who do not have bread—"give us bread."

The church described in the Bible, in the book of Acts, gave attention to those who were in physical need. It was a logical and natural outgrowth of being Christ-followers. Bread is to be shared. In Isaiah 58:7, God said the kind of religion He has chosen is *"to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him..."*

As we pat our well-filled stomachs and say "it's a sin how much we have eaten," we may be speaking more truth than we think. Dieting and even fasting may be in order today not to lose weight but to genuinely make more available for others. Self-denial and benevolence are called for, but more is needed. Those who seek a New World order are right. Something is wrong when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer—not in some slick slogan-way that politicians might exploit but in real ways. We want greed and conspicuous consumption to disappear. We want fair

wages, an end of unemployment, and the elimination of exploitation. We want children in our city and every city of the world to have bread.

That is not a plea for economic socialism or a naïve belief in utopia but it is a conversion to a new way of thinking and praying that doesn't end with me but "us" – give US today OUR daily bread. There is a Latin American prayer: "O God, to those who have hunger give bread; and to those who have bread give the hunger for justice."⁶ Only God can

***Only God can remedy the human condition
but we can be God's means to make a
difference one person at a time.***

remedy the human condition but we can be God's means to make a difference one person at a time.

In his book *Neither Poverty nor Riches* Denver Seminary professor Craig Blomberg wrote:

- 1 billion people in our world live in poverty—by any standard of "poverty"
- 48 million people are living as refugees
- 2 million children die each year from easily preventable infectious diseases.
- 1.3 billion people have no access to safe drinking water.
- And the 387 billionaires of the world have a net worth that exceeds that of the bottom nearly 3 billion people of the world.

Americans spend:

- 2 times as much on cut flowers as on overseas Protestant missions.
- 2 times as much on women's hosiery.

- 5 times as much on pets
- 17 times as much on diet and diet products
- 26 times as much on soft drinks
- 140 times as much on legalized gambling

And \$385 billion are spend on ads to convince us of our “need” for these things. By comparison, American Christians give just 2.4% of their income to charitable causes.⁷

Canadian Mennonite Paul Boers commented that “It is troubling to know people who have a lot of money. Not because we are tempted to want what they have, though that temptation is certainly there for some of us, but because we are tempted to think we are not like them, to think that we are not wealthy.”⁸ Comparing ourselves to those who have more does two things:

It creates discontent: “I need more because I’m not rich.” And, it promotes injustice: “I can’t give because I’m not rich.” When Jesus says we are to pray “Give US today OUR daily bread” He is calling us to care and generosity.

Theresa McSheffrey was traveling one night by bus in Tanzania when the vehicle overturned. As the passengers waited into the next morning for rescue they began to share food with one another. “When a woman gave her last piece of bread to Theresa, the missionary responded, ‘Mama, save that for yourself and your little girl.’ The woman smiled and replied, ‘Sister, we have some bread now, and we all share that. If we have nothing to eat later, we will share the hunger’.”⁹

Gratitude

Lastly Jesus’ prayer also teaches us to be grateful. I grant you that this is only implied but it is implied all over this part of the prayer. The very first words of the prayer set

the tone of gratitude: "*Our Father...*" One man wrote, "God's omnipotence (power) is surpassed only by one attribute: his love"¹⁰

Our daily bread is a gift from God and a proof of His goodness. The Psalmist says, "*The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*" (Psalm 145:15-16) And our prayer is a response to that goodness and love. How can we pray with anything else but gratitude?

In the Bible the word "bread" is used not only of literal bread and food but of all the necessities of physical life. (See Mark 14:22; Acts 27:35-36; 2 Thessalonians 3:8-12) And there is no better time than when we sit down for a meal to express our gratitude. Our grandparents and parents required us to pray before a meal. Then somewhere along the way, we lost our sense of dependence—we lost sight of the miracle of "daily bread" – and we expressed our ingratitude by no longer giving thanks at meals.

A man once wrote: "No wonder that the family has ceased to be a place of meeting and has often become instead a place of...fractious lodging."¹¹ His comment made me think that in detachment from God and neighbor and without gratitude we eat to our peril.

Meal prayers are especially appropriate because at the most basic level of life (food for our hunger), we see God's hand in sustaining us. The prayer at meals may be as simple as: "God is great, God is good And we thank him for our food. Amen"

It may be as formal as:

"Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who feeds the whole world with your goodness, grace, loving kindness and tender mercy: you give food to all flesh,

for your loving kindness endures forever. Through your great goodness food has never failed us: and may it not fail us forever for your great name's sake. You, are blessed, O Lord. Amen."

...in detachment from God and neighbor and without gratitude we eat to our peril.

Or, it may be as spontaneous as:

"Our Father in heaven, thank you for this food this day. We acknowledge your provision in all of life. You are merciful and gracious in meeting our every need. We love you and thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen."

With your gracious provision we are content, generous and grateful.

"Our Father...Give us this day our daily bread."

End Notes

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*, p. 83

² Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 101

³ Ibid, p. 95

⁴ Marshall Shelley, "Within a Leader's Soul, Ambition and Contentment Must Coexist in Peace" *Leadership*, Summer, 1990, p. 3

⁵ Deborah Bragg, "Daily Bread" *The Other Side* July/August, 1988, p.17

⁶ Jan Lochman, *The Lord's Prayer*, p. 98

⁷ Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*

⁸ Paul Boers, *Lord Teach us to Pray*, p. 92

⁹ Carroll B. Houle, Mary Knoll quoted in *The Other Side*, November, 1987, p. 9

¹⁰ Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*, p. 86

¹¹ Lochman paraphrasing from Unser Vater (Basel:1961), p. 57

Chapter Seven

Forgiven and Forgiving Matthew 6:12

*"...Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
**Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors...**"*

When Marietta Jaeger's seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped from their tent during a camping trip in Montana, her initial reaction was one of rage. She wrote: "I was seething with hate, ravaged with a desire for revenge. I said to my husband and I meant it with every fiber of my being 'Even if Susie was brought back alive and well this minute, I could kill that man for what he has done to my family'."¹

Have you ever been deeply hurt? Abandoned? Someone you loved killed? A spouse unfaithful? Your income or business or retirement stolen? A child or best friend betrayed your trust? Repeatedly slandered?

Most of us have had enemies, acquaintances, friends and even loved ones who have hurt us, hurt us deeply, and who have sinned against us greatly.

Some offenses against us we shrug off as inconsequential. But others cut too deeply to dismiss and we find that even when we try to forget about them, they keep coming back to mind and hurting all over again. The world says, and

even something in us says, "Keep score and get even" or at least "Beware." But Jesus says, "Forgive."

Knowing how seemingly impossible forgiveness sometimes is, the Apostle Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us. Peter magnanimously suggested an answer to his own question by indicating that he might be willing to forgive seven times. But Jesus answered, *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times!"* Then to drive home the point of how and why we are to live with an attitude of forgiveness toward others, Jesus tells a story:

Knowing how seemingly impossible forgiveness sometimes is, the Apostle Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until

he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:23-35)

It is the last sentence, Jesus' commentary on His own story, which led me to this text. Remember that Jesus told the story because Peter asked how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us. And His answer, in the story and after the story, I think is much more significant and profound than Peter expected.

Forgiveness

Regarding forgiveness, what two issues does Jesus tie together? He inextricably links God's forgiveness of us with our forgiveness of others. This is not the only time Jesus does this. In Luke 6:37 we hear Him saying, "*Forgive and you will be forgiven.*" In Mark 11:25 we read, "*If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*"

Matthew 6:9-15 says:

*"This, then, is how you should pray:
'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done*

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors...For 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."

Again, what two issues does Jesus tie together? Our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us! The implications of this are disturbing to us. Does Jesus mean we have to forgive others before the Father can forgive us? Is Jesus saying that God's forgiveness of us is dependent on our forgiving those who have sinned against us? Doesn't the Bible teach that we don't earn forgiveness? I think the best way to answer these and similar questions is to go back and think carefully about what Jesus said we are to pray.

***Jesus inextricably links God's forgiveness
of us with our forgiveness of others***

When Jesus speaks of forgiveness where does He start? He starts with our relationship with God: "*Father forgive us our debts.*" Most of you know that the word "debts" speaks of our obligations to God. Karl Barth said it this way: "We are God's debtors. We owe him, not something, whether it be little or much, but, quite simply, we owe him (everything); we owe him ourselves, since we are his creatures, sustained and nourished by his goodness."²

Another more common way to think of "debts" is as sins or in older language "trespasses." We have sinned against God. The Bible teaches that as creatures created by God and loved by God, we have an obligation to God. Anything short of full obedience and allegiance to God is sin. Outside

of church, the word "sin" sounds strange today – almost embarrassing! Who speaks this way any longer except preachers? Tongue-in-cheek I ask, "Haven't we learned enough about the human psyche to know that people today don't sin; they are simply maladjusted or they are in error or they do something with negative consequences?" We don't speak of "sin" because "sin" is believed to be an obsolete category for describing human behavior.

But if sin disappears then so too does guilt. Guilt then changes from objective guilt (being guilty for doing a sinful thing) to a guilt complex (a feeling of guilt). If that is true then we don't need the forgiveness of sins, we need help in overcoming the psychological guilt complex.

We Need Forgiveness

But God teaches that we are sinful and we are guilty. We have violated the holy standards of God, we have not lived in obedience and loyalty to Him, we have rejected His overtures of love and we have violated each other. The Bible indicates that the reason we feel guilt, is because we are guilty!

The Bible indicates that the reason why we feel guilty, is because we are guilty!

Most of the people of the world, as evidenced by the religions of the world, spend a great deal of time attempting to deal with their sense of guilt. And even among the so-called "enlightened" secular people of the world, those who reject religion, countless hours and millions of dollars are spent in psychotherapy and other means attempting to get beyond the feelings of anger, resentment, and guilt that people have mostly because of broken relationships. We may not call it "forgiveness" but forgiveness is what people long for.

The first time the conjunction “and” is used in The Lord’s Prayer is between the request for bread and the request for forgiveness. You won’t find it in the NIV but in the New American Standard and in the Greek from which the translations come, the word “and” sits between the two requests:

“Give us today our daily bread (AND) forgive us our debts...” Forgiveness is as daily and as necessary as bread.

When we preachers speak of sin, we are not just trying to get people to feel guilty so they will turn to the church or the preacher to get help. We are not just creating a market for our ecclesiastical wares. We believe what God says and we see it in ourselves and in all the people around us – we have sinned against God and each other and we are guilty. That’s why forgiveness is so necessary. Without forgiveness we would have no relationship with God or others – we would live estranged from God and all others. Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential human needs – as necessary as bread. And forgiveness, when granted, is an awesome experience! God’s forgiveness of us is miraculous. We are so desperately in need of it! “The wonder and glory of Divine forgiveness lies in the measure of its necessity.”³

Jesus makes this point clearly in the story we read earlier. The servant owed the king 10,000 talents. Jesus used 10,000 talents to make it clear that it was more than could ever be repaid. Recognizing his predicament, the servant pleaded for mercy instead of justice. This was no half-hearted plea. He knew he was in trouble. The king was compassionate and was deeply moved to pity. The king was the lord of the slave and had the right to do with the slave as he pleased—the lord was under no obligation.

The slave asked for patience, but the king, knowing the impossibility of ever repaying the debt, instead forgave the debt. It was an act of pure grace.

Many of us treat forgiveness as if it were required of God when we make up for the sins we've committed. By analogy we might say, "He forgot her birthday and so he brought flowers to ask forgiveness." She measures his sincerity by the contrition in his voice and the value of the gift

Without forgiveness we would have no relationship with God or others – we would live estranged from God and all others.

and decides that he has done enough to make up for what he did and thus is worthy of being forgiven. That's not forgiveness – that's compensation. Forgiveness is in a totally different category.

Forgiveness is Undeserved!

Jesus knows we can never sufficiently compensate for our sin. He knows we are hopelessly in debt. That's why forgiveness is part of what we call the gospel—the good news. Jesus came to forgive. The words, life, and death of Jesus meet in forgiveness—it is what He was about here on earth!

His forgiveness is foundational, critical, and absolutely necessary! The miracle of the gospel is that we can be forgiven – no longer under the weight of the guilt of our sin and no longer liable for the penalty for our sin. We can be forgiven! And the basis of that forgiveness is nothing less than Jesus' death for us. He took the penalty for our sin on Himself. The cross makes clear the true cost of forgiveness. On this side of the cross, historically speaking, we understand something which the apostles could not have yet understood—that God's own death was necessary for forgiveness to be granted. On the cross our sin was condemned and conquered:

"We may not know, we cannot tell
What pains he had to bear;
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.
He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood."⁴

The church is the community of the forgiven! It is our message! Forgiveness is the remedy for the world's ills. It is the remedy for the world's relationship with God and with each other. *"Father, forgive us our debts..."*

Forgiving and Forgiven

It is imperative that we understand and experience the first half of the request about forgiveness before we attempt to understand the second half. One man said, "No one can rightly claim to be Christian unless he has received the forgiveness of sins."⁵ And it is the awesome experience of God's forgiveness of us that makes the experience of the rest of the prayer possible: *"As we also have forgiven our debtors."*

This takes us back to our earlier questions: Is Jesus saying that unless I forgive others God won't forgive me? Let's look at His own commentary on that part of the prayer: *"For 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."* (Matthew 6:14-15) That is pointed language. Is Jesus saying that we earn our forgiveness from God by our forgiveness of others?

It would be relatively easy to conclude that if it were not for the vast majority of Scripture that make it abundantly

clear that we do not and cannot earn our relationship with God. God's forgiveness of us is pure grace not compensation. But the language Jesus uses is strong because God's

Forgiveness is the remedy for the world's ills. It is the remedy for the world's relationship with God and with each other.

forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are inextricably linked as cause and effect. I don't mean, as I have already explained, that our forgiveness of others causes the effect of God forgiving us. But I do mean that the cause of God's forgiveness of us creates the likelihood of our forgiveness of others. Bob Guelich writes, "As the parable (of the ungrateful servant) indicates, (our forgiveness of others) does not form the prerequisite for experiencing God's forgiveness. Rather the genuine experience of God's...forgiveness of (our) immense debt conditions (our) ability to forgive others."⁶

Greatly Forgiven People Forgive Greatly

Unforgiven people don't forgive. Forgiveness, properly understood in all its cost and glory, stirs us to gratitude and a forgiving spirit. Theologian Oudersluys wrote, "The wonder of Divine forgiveness lies in what it can do to the forgiven soul, and in what it can make the forgiven soul do."⁷

But it is not only that. God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are linked in another way. We are not ready to ask for and receive God's forgiveness until we are sufficiently broken of our own pride to be forgiving of others who sin against us. When I cannot or will not forgive someone else, when I harbor resentment, when I refuse to be reconciled, when I intentionally replay the memories over and over again, I am too proud to sincerely request or receive God's forgiveness of me. Read several other voices

on the matter:

“One’s relationship with others indicates the extent to which one has indeed experienced God’s forgiveness, one’s capacity rather than one deserts.”⁸

“The spirit open to receive love is of necessity open to bestow love.”⁹

“What Jesus apparently is saying is the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it.”¹⁰

“If we harbor within our hearts grudges and enmities, petty jealousies and hatreds against (others), these attitudes become spiritual obstacles to the entrance of God’s love and forgiveness...We cannot be sons (or daughters) if we are not willing to be brothers (and sisters).”¹¹

“To fail to forgive others is to demonstrate that one has not felt the saving touch of God.”¹²

To ask God to forgive us when we are not willing to forgive others only shows our insincerity; we are not ready to receive forgiveness unless we are ready to grant it. And that is precisely what Jesus so dramatically describes in His parable of the ungrateful servant. The servant who had been the recipient of great grace—the forgiveness of an impossible debt—finds a fellow-servant (another like himself) who owes him a few measly bucks and demands he pay him. The fellow-servant fell down before the servant and promised to repay all. (In this second man’s case, such repayment *was possible* in contrast to the first servant’s total inability to do so no matter how long he lived and worked.)

But the forgiven servant's response is exactly the opposite of the King's. It says the forgiven servant "refused." This was a matter of his will—a continuing, steadfast unwillingness. And the penalty from which he was saved was exactly the penalty he laid on his fellow servant. This is the picture of an unforgiving man—it is the height of ingratitude.

The King hears of this, calls him in, and reminds him of the hugeness of the debt he had been forgiven. The servant had been the recipient of grace. The King states the obvious in a question – *"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"* The king then throws him in prison and the evil servant was to remain there until the debt was repaid – which means he would never get out!

***...we are not ready to receive forgiveness
unless we are ready to grant it.***

Read again Jesus' strong words at the end of the story in Matthew 18:35: *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."* Yes, that is strong, but remember the question Jesus asks through the King: *"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"* It is God's mercy toward us that we show toward those who have sinned against us. It is grace, undeserved favor that we show toward those who have hurt us so deeply. And we do so because we have been shown mercy, we have been granted grace, and we have been loved.

Marietta Jaeger, whose seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped from their tent, soon realized that no amount of anger could bring her daughter back. She wasn't ready to forgive her daughter's kidnapper but she wrestled with God. She finally surrendered and deep down inside she sensed that forgiving the man was the only way she could

ever cope with her loss. She began praying for the kidnaper over the months that followed and her prayers became easier and easier.

Exactly one year, to the minute, after the abduction, she received a phone call – it was the kidnapper. The man's voice was smug and taunting and so Marietta was surprised at the genuine feeling of compassion she had for him. It was yet months later before the man was apprehended and Suzie's body was found. Marietta writes, "By then, I had finally come to learn that Jesus did not come to hurt but to reconcile."¹³ But there's more. When Marietta was asked how God taught her to forgive she told of a pastor from the Balkans who came to visit and told his story.

When the communists took over Yugoslavia, soldiers came to his town and told his father, the mayor, to tell the people to stop going to their church. The mayor refused to stop and this flagrant disobedience by the leading citizen brought down the wrath of the communists. They persuaded a cousin to set up an ambush and the soldiers raided a family gathering machine-gunning to death the pastor's father and ten of his brothers and sisters. The man visiting Marietta, along with one of his older brothers and their 11-year-old brother managed to escape and hid for months.

Six months later friends convinced him that hiding out was not good for the 11-year-old and he allowed his little brother to go home, believing that certainly such a young boy would be safe. On the day he returned to his village the boy went to the cemetery but soldiers were waiting and they killed him. The man himself was eventually captured and sent to a camp where he was tortured. He escaped months later and made his way to Canada and then to Montana.

Twenty five years later, (having himself experienced the forgiveness of God), he decided he had to go back to Yugoslavia, find his cousin who had betrayed them and forgive him. He had forgiven him in his heart but he felt he needed to stand face-to-face and express that forgiveness. At first the cousin hid but eventually they met and that forgiveness was extended. Marietta said that as a result of that man's experience, "God was working on me. I was already feeling a call to be willing to forgive. I could look at this man and see that it was possible. He was a beacon for me, showing me that you could have that change of heart and God would be faithful to you."¹⁴

By the grace of God alone, operating in us and through us, we can be forgiven and we can forgive. "*Father forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" Will we ask, will we receive, and will we forgive? Jesus says this is serious business. Who do you need to forgive?

"Father, forgive us our debts!"

"Father, forgive me for my debt, my sin, of unforgiveness!"

End Notes

¹ Johann Arnold, *Seventy Times Seven*, p. 48

² Karl Barth, *Prayer According to the Catechisms of The Reformation*, p. 65)

³ Abraham Kuiper, quoting Oudersluys, p109)

⁴ Ibid, p. 112

⁵ Ibid, p. 106

⁶ Bob Guelich, p. 298

⁷ Abraham Kuiper, quoting Oudersluys, p. 110

⁸ Bob Guelich. p. 298

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 147

¹⁰ Fredrich Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 28

¹¹ Abraham Kuiper, quoting Oudersluys, p. 114 and 119

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 149

¹³ Johann Arnold, *Seventy Times Seven*, p. 48-49

¹⁴ Paul Boers, *Lord Teach us to Pray*, p. 122

Chapter Eight

Satan, So What? Matthew 6:13

*"This, then, is how you should pray:
'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
**And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one'."***

If you are under 35, I want you to imagine you are sitting in a university classroom among many other students and the professor poses this question to just you. If you are over 35, I want you to imagine you are standing among a large group of your neighbors at a block party and in a voice that everyone can hear one neighbor asks just you the same question. In both settings the same discussion provoked the question. Someone retold the account of the woman who pushed her handicapped son out of a third-story window to kill him because he wasn't as attractive as her other two sons. She then went to the neighbor's to watch television before checking to make certain he was dead.

As your class or your neighborhood pondered the source of such an evil act you were asked: "Do you believe in the devil?" In a nanosecond a flood of thoughts run through your mind. How do I answer this? You search for a clever response – but the question was too seriously put. Some of

the people around you know you are religious and so if you say "no" you run the risk of undercutting your credibility when you say, at other times, that you believe in the Bible. On the other hand if you say "yes" you may be instantly categorized with the Ayatollahs and crazy people who kill their children because the devil made them do it. In our day and age it is usually only fanatical religious groups that use such exaggerated rhetoric as "devil" or "Satan" or even the word "evil."

To say you believe in the devil instantly categorizes you with crazy people.

That latter word, "evil," has seen resurgence in usage in recent years but only in extreme situations and even then it seems oddly out of place such as when President Reagan called the Soviet Union an evil empire and when more recently President Bush used it of the forces behind 9/11. Pundits were embarrassed by Reagan's use of the word evil. But Bush seemed to get by with it because of the heinous nature of the Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. People don't know how to account for the holocaust, the genocide of Rwanda/Burundi or the war crimes of Bosnia. But to credit it to some force called "evil" or worse yet to a "devil" flies in the face of our naturalistic, scientific, closed universe worldview.

M. Scott Peck in his book *People of the Lie* tells of fifteen-year-old Bobby hospitalized for depression. Bobby's older brother had killed himself with a .22 caliber rifle. Bobby had almost totally shut the world out by the time Peck saw him. He was unresponsive to almost all questions. Shortly after Christmas Peck saw Bobby and attempting to initiate casual conversation asked him what he had received as a favorite present. After prompting, Bobby finally said he had received a gun.

What kind of gun?

A .22.

A .22 pistol?

No, a .22 rifle.

After a pause, Peck asked tentatively if he understood correctly that it was with a .22 rifle that Bobby's brother had killed himself. Bobby said yes. Bobby had not asked for a gun for Christmas. Peck went on to ask, "How did you feel, getting the same kind of gun that your brother had?"

"It wasn't the same kind of gun," Bobby corrected him.

Peck said that he felt a little better but said, "I thought it was the same kind of gun."

But Bobby responded, "It wasn't the same kind of gun. It was THE gun."¹

How could parents be so cruel?

What is the Source of Evil?

In reflecting on the Lord's Prayer, we come to the last request Jesus teaches us to make in our own praying:

"And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one'." (Matthew 6:13)

What do you do with that prayer? Of all the things Jesus could have said we should pray He included this. Is it reasonable to suggest Jesus thought it was important? Do we? How long since you have prayed for God's help to withstand temptation? How long since you have prayed for God to protect you from the devil? Isn't it true that we have largely dismissed from our minds the whole idea of a devil or Satan? Don't we find it embarrassing to even say the words in any serious way?

So then in Jesus' model prayer, He forces us to answer at least two questions: Is Satan real and if he is, so what? This time I ask you, "Do you believe in the devil?" I think I am right to say that many of us don't or at least we don't act or talk as if we believe in him.

Some of us don't believe the devil exists because we are ignorant of him – at least we don't recognize him.

***"And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one."
(Matthew 6:13)***

Some of us don't believe in him because we are embarrassed by the actions of those who say they do.

Some of us don't believe in him because we don't think it matters.

Some of us don't believe because we don't believe what we can't see.

For you who don't believe I will not attempt to convince you through accounts of the supernatural. There is truly amazing evidence in our world of the existence of Satan and his demons but all the anecdotal evidence in the world probably wouldn't convince you. And for many of us even if we saw it with our own eyes we would not believe—we'd just shake our heads knowing there must be a natural explanation. We are inclined to say with many in the western world, "Satan is simply a symbol for the bad things that happen in life. He is to religion what Darth Vader is to Star Wars. And Satan as a person is simply the product of ancient superstition and medieval fantasy.

But when Jesus prays the way He does and instructs us to pray the same way, He puts us in a bind. Let me put it this way: Do you believe in Jesus or more precisely, do you believe Jesus? Then secondly, does Jesus believe in the devil?

Evidence from Scripture

Twenty-five times in the gospels Jesus speaks of Satan.

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." (Matthew 4:1) And there it is recorded that Jesus actually engaged the devil in conversational battle.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we hear Jesus saying in Matthew 5:37, *"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."*

Instructing His followers on how some people respond to the gospel Jesus included this in Luke 8:12: *"Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."*

Then in His prayer to His Father just before His death Jesus pleaded, in John 17:15, *"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."*

He takes Satan so seriously that in His last prayer for His disciples Jesus prays that the Father would protect them from the evil one.

Can we with any integrity say we believe Jesus and reject belief in Satan? I won't take the time to show you how the Old Testament declares that Satan is a real person, but I will tell you that every New Testament writer refers to Satan and he is named in 19 of the 27 books.

Luke says in Acts 5:3, *"Then Peter said, 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit.'"*

Peter says in 1 Peter 5:8, *"Your enemy the devil prowls*

around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:5, *"...Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."*

Paul again says in 2 Corinthians 11:3 *"But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ."*

1 Thessalonians 3:5 records Paul: *"I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless."*

II Thessalonians 3:3 reminds us, *"But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one."*

James in James 4:7 says, *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."*

And John in Revelation 20:1-2, *"And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven... He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years."*

Can we, with integrity, say we believe the Bible and reject belief in the person of Satan? May we never again seriously doubt the existence of Satan.

The Second Question

All this evidence raises the second question: "So what?"

The first answer to that is that Jesus takes "the evil one" so seriously that of only six things He mentions, indicating their importance, He teaches us to pray for protection from the evil one. That sounds serious! He takes Satan so seriously that in His last prayer for His disciples He prays that the Father would protect them from the evil one. *"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that*

you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15) And one of His ministries to us today is refuting the accusations of Satan toward us. Romans 8:34 says, “Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

The second answer to “So what?” is found in Satan’s designs on us. 1 Peter 5:8 says, *“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*

The Bible says that Satan desires the destruction of our souls. According to Acts 5:3, he has the power to influence us: *“Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit...’” (Acts 5:3)*

The most dangerous temptations are not those we see but those we don’t.

Paul teaches that Satan devises schemes against us. He says in Ephesians, *“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (6:11-12)*

Jesus said that Satan desires to make you fail: *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.” (Luke 22:31-32)*

These are serious matters. Satan’s intentions are not simply to get you to do naughty things. The temptations of the evil one are not just about the urge to tell a lie, eat some grapes in the produce department, look at a suggestive picture, exaggerate your charitable contributions on your tax forms or stay in bed longer than you should. It is far more significant than that—temptation at its worst would draw us away from God. Temptation is not about little indiscretions;

it is about our souls.

Like young people who think they are invincible, we too live as if our souls are in no danger. I have seen too many friends slide ever so slowly away from Jesus. Jim was an elder in our church, taught the Bible to others, memorized large portions of Scripture, apparently had it all together spiritually. Ever so slowly Jim slid away—he began rationalizing all sorts of unbiblical behavior but he didn't reject Jesus, he just adopted other philosophies along with Jesus. The last I heard he was still a religious man, but he accepted all religions.

I can't remember how many times I have observed people disobeying what to all other Christians is the clear instruction of the Bible and at the same time heard them tell of how much stronger their Christian faith and experience is now. Deceived! It's the only word for it. That's why Jesus says "beware," "watch out," "be vigilant." Our problem is that we don't see it happening! It is for a reason that Satan is described also as the great deceiver (2 John 1:7), schemer (Ephesians 6:11), liar (John 8:44), and wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15).

Helmut Thielicke wrote,

"There is one thing we must understand clearly, and that is that we hardly ever sever our relationship with God standing up and shaking our fist at heaven...and renouncing God with a planned defiance. As a rule this decision against God is made in a far (less obvious) way; it occurs almost unnoticed..."²

The most dangerous temptations are not those we see but those we don't. In fact the most dangerous temptations don't come as temptations at all but as good things to do. There's nothing in the most dangerous temptation that says, "I'm tempting you to do evil." No, the very thing that makes it so dangerous is that we are led to think it is good,

honorable, and even spiritual. Let me illustrate this way. When Satan came to Jesus in the desert to tempt Him, he didn't appeal to self-centeredness, or pride or greed. Satan appealed to Jesus' altruism. He appealed to the very purpose for which Jesus came! There Jesus was alone, hungry, and in a desert when He was supposed to be the Messiah of the world. Satan came and said why don't you turn these stones into bread. Do you realize how quickly you could get a following, how quickly you could achieve your goal of saving the world if you would do that? Jesus resisted the quick path to His real goal.

Satan came next and said why don't you jump off the temple and have the angels catch you. What a spectacular demonstration of Your power – right there in Jerusalem instead of here in this desert or in that backwater area of Galilee. They'd make You the messiah/king instantly. Jesus again resisted the wrong way to His purpose.

Finally Satan showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world and offered them to Him. Isn't that exactly what You came for, Jesus? I can give it to You, right now, without the cross, without suffering. And Jesus resisted again, knowing no matter how lofty the goal, it must be done according to the Father's will. Satan didn't offer Jesus obviously sinful choices; he offered Him apparently good choices.

His most dangerous temptations come to us in similar forms:

He suggests to us that this new relationship instead of our spouse will finally allow us to be the person God meant us to be.

He suggests that saving money (actually hoarding our money) is for the purpose of making certain our children are cared for.

He leads us to rationalize that buying bigger and bigger homes is the way we can host larger church groups.

He convinces us that spending the inordinate time we do at work and away from our families and unavailable for service to others is justified by the money we will be able to give to kingdom work.

He urges us to excessive exercise because our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and God wants us to take care of them.

Satan didn't offer Jesus obviously sinful choices; he offered Him apparently good choices.

Even the very best things of life may be the things that draw us away from God. We enjoy and spend so much time on our work, our play, our entertainment, and our families that there is no time for reflection on life, on God or on eternity. It is the good things in life that tempt us most and are most likely to keep us from God. What is it that Satan uses to draw you away from God? What good things are slowly eroding your soul?

This is so serious that Jesus tells us to pray. And the prayer is in two parts, both seeking God's intervention. "*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.*" When we pray "*Lead us not into temptation*" we are not praying that God would never bring us to a place where we could be tempted. Clearly the Holy Spirit led Jesus to the desert where He was tempted. And we are not praying that God would never allow us to be tempted because clearly Jesus was led to the desert for that purpose. And the Bible makes it clear that God will allow that for our good – as hard as the experience may be. We are also not praying that God would never tempt us to sin because He promised He

wouldn't do that (James 1:13).

When Jesus prays, "*Lead us not into temptation,*" He is asking the Father to intervene. He is asking the Father to empower us. He is asking the Father to support us so that we will not succumb to the temptations. And when we pray

Jesus says prayer is the primary means of fighting the enemy of our souls

"*deliver us from the evil one,*" we are not asking to be delivered from God's testing of us but to be delivered from the stranglehold the evil one would put on us if God didn't intervene. "Don't let me succumb to temptation and don't let Satan have his way with me!"

Self-Sufficiency

As I alluded earlier, I think there are two reasons why we don't take Jesus' prayer for protection from the evil one seriously:

1. We are ignorant of Satan and his ways, and
2. We think we are self-sufficient.

I've written to the first danger already; we will not be ignorant of the evil one if we believe Jesus and the Bible. But we may still be self-sufficient.

More than 50 years ago a philosopher ruled the day with his atheistic, man-centered pride. "Live dangerously!" was his motto. By it he was protesting against the status quo, against the safe, comfortable lives of so many who were content with security alone. A very few years ago another motto with the same protest came along; it was "Carpe Diem" – seize the day! "Live Dangerously." "Seize the Day." But implicit in both mottoes was the throwing off of law and authority and even pushing God aside in order to live

life however. The go-it-alone attitude is that I can handle life and even if I'm wrong, I can withstand the consequences. No religion, no cross, no forgiveness and no bail-out in the end if I blew it.

We face life on our own, we even submit to temptations with the attitude that we can overpower them whenever we wish. With the alcoholic, we convince ourselves "I can quit any time I choose!" And because we believe we can handle it ourselves, we don't pray! But Jesus says prayer is the primary means of fighting the enemy of our souls. He knows of our great need for God's intervention and the need for us to ask for it.

"We can never put too much trust in Jesus and we can never put too little trust in ourselves...Jesus directs us to resort to prayer when we meet the tempter, and thus shows us that contact with the Father is the chief means by which to challenge the tempter. Only the Father's hand, which we hold on to, can ward off the devil's onslaught."³

I attempted to paraphrase and expand the prayer as follows:

"Father in heaven lead me today. I will follow You as a sheep follows its shepherd. I don't know what the day holds so I ask that You not let me go where I will be tempted. But if in Your plan and by Your permission I must be tempted this day, don't let it ruin me, don't let it stain my life, don't let me slip from following You. And Father, keep the Tempter away from me for I know his power and my weakness. And if I must withstand his temptation today, protect me and let the temptation, by Your grace, produce in me the fruit You intend—making me more like my Master, Jesus.

Jesus believes in the devil. Do we? Jesus prayed and called us to pray that the Father would protect us from the evil on. Do we?

"Father, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one."

End Notes

¹ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*, p. 51

² Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*, p. 120

³ *Ibid*, p. 129 and 127

The Lord's Prayer Paraphrase

Matthew 6:9-13

Take the time often to pray as our Lord taught us. Meditate on each petition and put your prayer in your own words. Come to the Father – He is ready and able to respond.

"Our Father who art in heaven"

You are not just my Father, but "Our" Father, and not just the transcendent, sovereign, creator Deity but our ever-present, intimate "Father" who truly exists and is the sustainer and lover of our souls. To you we pray because on you we are dependent.

"Hallowed be your name"

Make your name holy, give your name the highest place and honor, and make your name known and experienced by everyone. Be God, in all your glory, power and sufficiency, so we may be your children.

"Your kingdom come"

Father, make your kingdom come. We need you to act. Revive your people, save us from ourselves. Bring in the full authority, power and presence of your kingdom rule and let it begin with me! Father, break down my "kingdoms"; show me how bankrupt they are, and let me see my desperate need for you to act.

"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"

Father, do what you have planned and promised. Work your gracious will in such ways that we will be saved and that history will move to the end that you have in mind — a total transformation of this world. Do it God! Do it! And make me open and responsive to your will in my life today.

"Give us this day our daily bread"

Father, meet our physical needs today. We are dependent on you in every detail of life, and content with and grateful for what you provide.

"And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"

We ask your forgiveness of us even as we ask you to enable us to forgive those who have sinned against us. We know that only our openness to forgive others opens our own hearts to receive your forgiveness. Help us, Father.

"And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil"

Father, keep us today from succumbing to subtle but evil temptations that wage war on our souls and Father, keep the evil one from overpowering us today.

"For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen."

You are the One who is worthy (it's your kingdom), and able (it's your power) to do what we have requested, and to you alone (not us) belongs the praise (glory) forever. To you we pray because on you we are dependent.

