

WHY PRAY THE LORD'S PRAYER?

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Have you wondered why we pray the Lord's Prayer so frequently? Prayer, of course, is genuine communication with our Father in heaven, whereby, in faith, we bring our adoration, thanksgiving, confession and petitions to our Father through our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. But if prayer is to be genuine communication, does the Lord's Prayer fall into that category? Is it really necessary to pray these words each week? Won't this practice simply lead to a form of cold, dead religion? Perhaps, you have asked similar questions and doubted the wisdom in such a practice. For this reason, let me offer a few answers in defense of what many – both today and throughout the history of the Christian church – have understood as a wise and biblical practice.

Why then pray the Lord's Prayer?

Because Jesus taught us this prayer.

In his "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus instructed his listeners not to "heap up empty phrases as the heathen do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this..." (Mt 6.7-9a). Jesus goes on to give us that prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer. God is not impressed with the quantity of words we heap up; rather, he desires prayer that is done in faith and emphasizes the worship, kingdom, provision, grace and protection of the Father – all of which are contained in this prayer given by Jesus.

Yet, someone will object: "Ah! But Jesus said to pray 'like this.' That doesn't mean we should actually pray these very words." It is interesting that this objection is rarely made of the Psalms, which is a whole book of prayers and songs. Who would object to singing or praying the very words of a divinely inspired psalm? But more to the point, we should remember that the gospel of Luke records another occasion when Jesus taught us this prayer. On that occasion, "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' And he said to them, 'When you pray, say...'" (Lk 11.1-2a). Again Jesus goes on to give us that prayer (albeit in a slightly different form) we know as the Lord's Prayer. But here, Jesus lovingly commands them with a simple imperative: "When you pray, say..."

He commands us to use these words because it is a model prayer and easily memorized. In his compassion and pastoral concern for his own, the Son of God supplies us with a prayer that is helpful in our weakness, a fact that he himself knows by experience. As the writer to the Hebrews said, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4.15). Jesus knows that, due to our frailty and

sinfulness, we find prayer to be hard work in this life. It not only requires faith, but humility and concentration. We often find our prayers to be disorganized in thought and lacking in fervency. Sometimes we do not even know what to pray! When that happens, we have the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is not full of empty phrases; rather, it contains the most important aspects of our communication to our Father in heaven, namely, adoration, confession and petition for body and soul. When we pray this prayer in faith, we should not be concerned that we are offering up vain repetition; rather, we should be comforted to know that we are praying the very prayer that the Son of God – our Prophet, Priest and King – taught us to pray. As John Calvin noted, "For he prescribed a form for us in which he set forth as in a table all that he allows us to seek of him, all that is of benefit to us, all that we need ask. From this kindness we receive great fruit of consolation: that we know we are requesting nothing absurd, nothing strange or unseemly – in short, nothing unacceptable to him – since we are asking almost in his own words."

Because this prayer provides us with an outline for our prayers.

When we pray this prayer regularly (such as each week in worship), a form becomes fixed in our minds. An outline of how we are to pray is established in our memory so that life's priorities are underlined and brought into focus. Often, our personal prayers are grossly out of focus. Because of our sinful nature, we are given to put more thought into our personal concerns than the glory of God. Thus, we frequently pray in a manner something like this: "Our Father in heaven, give us this day our daily bread" (!) Because we instinctively think about ourselves first, we can easily skip the place in which our prayers should begin, namely, in adoration of the Father and petition for his kingdom. It is not that God is unconcerned about our personal needs – indeed he is infinitely concerned! But in prayer we must have our priorities straight as we approach the sovereign God of eternity. To that end, praying the Lord's Prayer regularly should assist us. We should become so familiar with this prayer that we easily and naturally use it to structure and shape our personal communication with our Father in heaven. The order of the Lord's Prayer should bring order and priority to our devotional praying so that our prayers are not scattered and disorganized in thought. Each petition of the Lord's Prayer is like a box that can be unpacked in adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition and intercession.

Because this prayer allows our children to participate in public worship.

Like confessing our faith in the creed, praying the Lord's Prayer in unison during the service allows our children an opportunity to be involved in worship. From their earliest years they will become familiar with the practice of uniting with God's people in one voice on the Lord's Day. Of course, some parents may object to this: "But I don't want my children to pray in a meaningless, mechanical fashion. I'm concerned that they will

think worship is merely jumping through hoops.” But here is where parents must be diligent to take up their responsibilities of catechizing and discipling their children (Deut 6.4-6; Eph 6.1-4). Teach your children what it means to pray, “Hallowed be Thy name,” “Thy kingdom come,” “Lead us not into temptation” and so on. Use the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer to teach them about God and his kingdom, about the nature of the Father and our dependence on him. Use the Heidelberg Catechism as it expounds the Lord’s Prayer in questions 116-129 to help you in your instruction. Be diligent – especially you fathers! – to teach them what they are praying. Over the years, this can have a tremendous impact on our children as they learn the great value of this prayer our Lord taught us to pray, allow it to shape and structure their own prayer life, and develop a heart that worships with understanding.

Because this prayer gives us continuity with the historic Christian church.

As we look at the liturgies (orders of worship) of the historic Christian church, we find that the Lord’s Prayer has always been a regular part of the worship service. For some, the weekly practice of praying the Lord’s Prayer evokes frightening images of Roman Catholic ritualism. But we should remember that this is an historically Protestant practice. In all of the liturgies of the Reformation – the liturgies drafted by Martin Bucer (1539), John Calvin (1542), Thomas Cramner (1552), John Knox (1556) as well as others – the practice of praying the Lord’s Prayer was included as a regular part of public worship. At no time was this practice (nor other practices such as confessing the Apostle’s Creed and reading the Ten Commandments) deleted from the service. In reforming worship, the Reformers sought to remove superstition and idolatry, but they held fast to those things that they believed were biblical and useful – they did not throw out the baby with the bathwater! Instead, they sought to maintain the biblical practice and instruct Christians on the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer through useful catechisms which were written, published and used for the benefit of the people. Moreover, the Reformers not only found this practice to be biblical, but also, like everything they included in the worship service, they found evidence of this practice in their study of the ancient church fathers. Whole expositions and treatises on the Pater Noster (Lord’s Prayer) appear in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian and others. The Reformers sought to maintain the continuity of worship in the church, passing down to future generations the good and biblical practices of previous generations. This wisdom continued in the seventeenth century with the Westminster Assembly’s Directory for the Public Worship of God, in which we find these words: “And because the prayer which Christ taught his disciples is not only a pattern of prayer, but itself a most comprehensive prayer, we recommend it also to be used in the prayers of the church.” In the Reformed tradition, this practice of praying the Lord’s Prayer in public worship has continued down through the ages up to the present day. Sadly, however,

this is not the case in many evangelical congregations today. Influenced by the revivalism of people like Charles Finney (1792-1875), much of the modern church has abandoned useful, historic practices in cavalier fashion. The fact that so many evangelical churches have jettisoned the custom of praying the Lord's Prayer in public worship reveals the "chronological arrogance" (to borrow a term from C.S. Lewis) prevalent in our contemporary culture. We must be careful, however, not to conform ourselves to that way of thinking. Rather, we must recognize the wisdom of those saints from generations past who, in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, made diligent use of this model prayer. May we too, as disciples of Christ, pray this prayer in faith and allow it order and give shape to our communication with our heavenly Father.