

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

This message begins a series on the Lord's Prayer. No collection of words could possibly be more familiar to all of us than this one. I presume and assume that all of you have known and prayed the Lord's Prayer for as far back as you can remember. What could I possibly say on the subject that you do not already know?

However, and as usual, I keep discovering in my own life that Scripture passages and other things very familiar in the Christian Life keep taking on more and more meaning and keep bringing me exciting new surprises. Therefore, I suspect the same thing happens with you. We have discovered also that the most familiar things – the things closest to us – are often the greatest treasures of all, yet we come to take them for granted. Occasionally we have lost their true significance through casual familiarity. Such things can even happen with a spouse – the person we once thought to be the most wondrous person in the world. Many of us have discovered that in some seasons of life together, we can lose this perspective for a while. In similar fashion, we can forget the very importance of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Even with a prayer of power and truth like the Lord's Prayer, we can sometimes fall into mere recitation – hearing and feeling nothing but the dull cadence of familiar noise.

Once, some years ago, for reasons and circumstances I have no time to go into here, the Lord withdrew presence and support from me for a few days. It was the most surprising and appalling experience of my life. Three times I have stood and watched my whole life crumble before my very eyes. That was nothing in comparison to this. This was something like having the wind knocked out of you, only on many layers and in many ways all at once. It felt like I could not breathe. I could not feel. No thoughts made any difference. Nothing mattered. It was like being alive, only in the “void,” in the abyss – no pain, no pleasure. Therefore it was worse than pain, and yet even that did not matter. I was completely amazed! I had no idea – no comprehension – of how much power, providence, affection and support were being put forth to keep and sustain me in life every moment of every day. I had taken it for granted. I had thought some of that energy, some of the caring, some of the thoughts and aspirations and accomplishments were coming from me. I had never been without the Lord's presence before, and I did not know what it was like to have the hand of God

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

---

withdrawn. I believe that most people do not know, or they would not feel the way they do about religion or God.

I am simply saying that sometimes we take things for granted. And getting a fresh appreciation for what sustains us can be a rare and great blessing. It is my hope that we can all get a fresh appreciation for the Lord's Prayer.

There is no prayer in this world greater than the Lord's Prayer. It can pick us up on any level of spiritual awareness and carry us as far as we are willing to go. It is timeless, in that ages come and go and circumstances change but the prayer is undimmed. We all have our own word preferences. I wish, for instance, we would all switch from "debts" or "trespasses" to "sins." But such things are minor. The prayer translates into any language, and it crosses all cultural and economic barriers. As E.F. Scott has written: "There has never been a time when it was not daily repeated by all Christians, alike in their common worship and their private devotion. It is the watchword by which they recognize each other, whatever may be their race or calling or their plane of culture. They learn it as children and hold fast to it, through all changing experiences, until they die."

It is true, is it not? Nothing is more common, more shared, more claimed between all Christians than this prayer. We have some slightly different versions, and different groups add or subtract a phrase – as one would expect of anything used so much by so many. But there has been very little fighting over it. Rather, for a change, we accommodate each other's small differences and feel no rancor. Creeds and doctrines divide us, but this prayer constantly draws and unites us – and it has down through the ages (with rare exceptions).

Already, just thinking of such things, being reminded of such things – and the tradition and heritage behind it all – sends chills up my spine. How many thousands of my fellow Christians, brothers and sisters of the Faith, have turned to this prayer for solace; have breathed it in their dying; have leaned on it in times of temptation; have turned to it when they needed inspiration or clarity? Some vast, if quiet, army of souls has continually marched through this life – carrying all their joys and sorrows and victories and defeats with them, just as I do mine – and this prayer has been both watchword and bulwark of their living. And they are my people, my heritage, my tradition – and yes, this is my prayer too. So I would love it also, and learn it and pray it as they did. Each time I do, it reminds me

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

---

that I am part of Jesus Christ, and part of His people. Sometimes that realization is delightful and sometimes it is appalling – if I do not feel like I am living very well at the moment – but always it is wonderful to be reminded, to have it come clear again.

Perhaps I should confess that the Lord's Prayer has not always been this meaningful to me. I can even remember a period of time when the Lord's Prayer seemed like an empty and foolish ritual. It seemed to me that we had all said it so many times that none of us were still paying any attention. We mouthed it but did not *pray* it. We rattled it off whenever the bulletin said to or whenever the situation punched the "ritual button." In a group this size, there are probably several people who feel approximately that way about it today. Well, take heart. The Lord does not seem to get especially angry about it. I remember other parts of my spiritual life that were very dynamic and deeply committed at the time. So please do not mistake me for trying to raise up some new guilt or lay on some new obligation. The Lord's Prayer needs no defending, certainly not from me.

I also remember having a certain scorn for the way Catholic priests would send their people from confession with instructions to say so many "Our Fathers." How unimaginative and stupid, I thought. But I was the one who did not understand. I thought the priests were sending their people to recite words, like our teachers used to make us write silly phrases on the blackboard fifty or a hundred times. But the priests were sending their people to contemplate who they really were – and to whom they belonged. They were sending their people to meditate on the primary precepts of the Christian Life, and to recall what their lives were dedicated to. If some of the people were too spiritually asleep to know what they were being asked to do, well, what can you do with people who are still asleep? You keep sending them to the drill, in the hope that one day they too will awaken.

So I learned years ago that not everyone was just going through the motions. The prayer has a way of winning us over – or winning us back – as life goes on. There are few gifts in life to match it. When once our minds finally open to it, familiarity only enhances what lies within. "*Deep calleth unto deep ...*"

\* \* \*

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

---

Now, to some technicalities that are very important. The Lord's Prayer appears in two different places in Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. Matthew's version is longer and more familiar. Most scholars suspect that Luke's shorter, crisper version is closer to the original. We will use them both and notice the contrast at times, but there is no reason for a fight between the two. Remember, for instance, that the longer versions of the prayer were developed and used – meaning, tested and found satisfying – for hundreds of generations, by thousands of people. They found the additions helpful to their understanding of what the prayer was calling them to. We defer to Jesus' authority, but in this case that is not at issue. Jesus did not carve these words in rock. He gave the prayer to the disciples to be used, and no prayer has ever been more used by a wider array of people over so long a time. The source is of great importance, but the usage by the church is also quite impressive. Perhaps most startling is that the variations are as minimal as they are.

Between Matthew and Luke, however, it seems clear that the giving of the prayer is more likely to be in the setting Luke provides. Matthew puts it in the Sermon on the Mount, where he has collected all of Jesus' most impressive teachings. Luke says that after having watched Jesus pray – having finally discerned that prayer was the core and source of His inspiration and power – the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. They also mention that John the Baptist had taught *his* disciples a prayer, and they now want a prayer from Jesus.

This brings us to two very important items that will have considerable impact on everything else we say or understand about this prayer. We would not pick up either of them without the help of scholars.

First, scholars tell us that it was customary for prominent teachers in Jesus' day and time to teach their followers – their disciples – a prayer. This prayer embodied the special wisdom and approach of the teacher. This prayer was memorized by all disciples of the teacher. Knowing and reciting this prayer identified you as a disciple of your particular teacher. If you ceased being a disciple of that particular teacher, you ceased using the prayer. Also, you had no right to start using the prayer until the teacher deemed you worthy. That is, you were “given” the prayer by the teacher when he finally accepted you as a true disciple. Knowing and using the prayer was the mark of your discipleship, and it was a bond you shared with other disciples of the same master. So we have an identity issue, a disciple

thing, and a bond between master and pupil that are inherent parts of this Lord's Prayer and that linger around its meaning, but not always with sufficient clarity in our day.

How can I say it? Even if we could forget everything about the content of the Lord's Prayer (which we cannot, and do not want to), the mere act of saying it has far-reaching and profound significance. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we are also saying: "You, Jesus, are my Master Teacher. I have put myself under your discipline. I will strive to learn what you teach me as quickly and thoroughly as I am able. I am under the yoke of your discipline. What you teach me by word, example or assignment, I will also obey to the best of my ability." To even speak this prayer is a reiteration of all these things.

You see, the relationship between teacher and disciple was one of great magnitude in the past. Our use of the word "teacher" is, for the most part, an anemic and insulting caricature by comparison. It was once like a complete apprenticeship, and the subject was LIFE. Right at the core of this bond between master and disciple (discipline = yoke = yogi) was the prayer, which was both identity (sign of belonging) and a summation of the "way of life" that was being taught.

Second, we are told that Jesus' prayer was scandalously short, in comparison to the expectations of the day. That would seem typical of Jesus. We are also told that, at first blush, the prayer sounded terribly simple, common, "humble." Such prayers were usually at least attempts to point to the grandeur, vision, glory, terrific commitment and high aspirations of the spiritual life and calling. Jesus plopped out this dirt-poor, three-sentence, incredibly unmagnificent thing about daily bread and forgiveness and temptation.

It was scandalous! It was appalling! It would be humiliating for every disciple of Jesus to have to come out with such a lame-duck prayer within anyone's hearing. We are still working on "typical Jesus," right? But we do not yet understand about the bond between master and disciple. You could quit, walk away and get another master, but you did not do that lightly. A rabbi of any merit would not take you on if you had shown yourself unteachable and undisciplined with others. Some people did eventually walk out on Jesus when the teachings got too tough, but not this time. The disciples knew it might be a test, or perhaps a new teaching with a hidden point. So they started saying the prayer, swallowing their pride, claiming their identity. If the Master wanted to shame them, that was His business; their business was to be disciples.

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

---

Eventually, of course, as they prayed, they began to get suspicious, then startled, then dumbfounded. Jesus had a little “Abe Lincoln flavor” about Him – a little Gettysburg Address Syndrome when He chose to use it. The prayer was dynamite. It was not much to look at; it was not very impressive as a literary masterpiece; it did not have any length, flair, brilliance or flowery language. But if you started praying it – whammo! You can look at it, think about it, turn it around and around, and it is not much. But the minute anybody takes it into God’s presence and starts to *pray* it, align to it, let it nuzzle up to their motives and methods and inner being, then it becomes the very essence of prayer. Then its eloquence is unmatched, and it even flows as much in what it does not say as in what it does say.

Today I have tried to focus your attention on the Lord’s Prayer. I have reminded you of the key place this prayer has held in Christian circles from the very beginning. I have tried to inform or remind you of the setting of master and disciple out of which it comes, and how that links this prayer to our identity as Christians and to our belonging to Jesus. Finally, I have suggested that the prayer is more than it seems – that it is full of power and mystery, and may even hold a few surprises for those of us who have been using it faithfully every day for years.

I hope you will pray this prayer with renewed awareness and appreciation every day. The Didache (teaching of the twelve apostles, early second century A.D.) gives the prayer approximately as it is found in Matthew and then adds, “Pray thus three times a day.” That was the tradition for most Christians in our early history. I have only asked for once each day. So you see how reasonable and lenient I am with you, despite the rumors you sometimes hear from those who do not want you to live the Christian Life at all?