

**Matthew 6:9-13**

<b>New International Version</b>	<b>Holman Christian Standard Bible</b>	<b>English Standard Version</b>	<b>English Text Original Manuscript</b>
<p><sup>9</sup>“This, then, is how you should pray:</p> <p>“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup> your kingdom come, your will be done,     on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts,     as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation,     but deliver us from the evil one.’</p>	<p><sup>9</sup>“Therefore, you should pray like this:</p> <p>Our Father in heaven, Your name be honored as holy. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]</p>	<p><sup>9</sup> Pray then like this:</p> <p>“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come, your will be done,     on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread, <sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts,     as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation,     but deliver us from evil.</p>	<p>Our Father in the heavens Make holy your name Bring your kingdom Bring about your will As in heaven also upon the earth Give us this day our daily bread And forgive us our debts As we have forgiven those Indebted to us And lead us not into temptation But deliver us from evil</p>

## **From God's Struggle to Our Struggle**

With the petition for daily bread, the Lords Prayer shifts our focus away from God to human beings and our needs. The first thing that is striking about the petition is that it asks God to give us bread. This is odd because when you think about it, God does not really provide us with bread. Even more, bread then, as it is now, was symbolic of more than just a product of flour, water, and yeast baked into a loaf. In our day, if not meant literally, bread often is a metaphor for money. In Jesus day, bread often symbolized all the things necessary to make life possible. In this case, food was at the center of those needs. One way then to understand this request is that God provide us with all those things we need to survive. If we accept this idea, it still does not give us, though, complete insight into what the petition is envisioning. This is because God does not provide us directly with all those things we need for survival.

This petition for daily bread calls us to recognize that there is a problem. Notice that it is “give us this day our daily bread” not “give me my daily bread.” In other words, we are not talking about simply ourselves as individuals. We are talking about how the system that provides for the needs of everyone works. And that can be uncomfortable for us. More often than not we prefer to insulate ourselves from the reality that there are far too many people in our world whose daily struggle is just to survive. When we make this petition we are, in, effect, asking for two things. First, we are asking God to ensure that human beings cooperate in a process that brings about the distribution of food and other necessities to all. It reminds us, even if uncomfortably, that our sustenance is not self-created or self-sustained, but dependent upon God and others. Second, we are interceding for those most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life and reminding ourselves of our own need to practice generosity. In this, it is important for us to remember that this bread is our bread. It does not belong to one particular group or any nation, but to all of God's creatures. And so, we ask God in our request for bread to oversee the entire social order in a way that brings about the feeding of all. It is an appeal to God to be benevolent to all.

If you reflect on it for a minute, the idea of asking for God benevolence appears misguided. Why would God not give us what we need to survive? If it is true, as we believe, that God is loving and good by nature, is it not absurd to ask God to provide something, such as food, which is of unquestionable importance and benefit to us? If we must ask God to do this, then how can we say that God is benevolent? Jesus addresses this question directly right before he gives us the Lords Prayer in Matthew. He says, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that 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 6:7-8). The implication here is that God knows and acts always on behalf of the good. In other words, God is benevolent. So then why the request for bread?

It is a matter of justice and equity. This petition reminds us that God is concerned about the daily struggle for existence, and that God provides for us and works toward God's vision for everyone's needs being met. This petition is an appeal to God for justice to ensure the equitable distribution of all material things necessary for human survival. It is an appeal to the highest individual in our cosmic household to look after those occupying the lowest strata in our world.

It also points the finger at those who have an abundance of material things. We are called upon by this petition to practice generosity. The distribution of material things is not simply a matter of markets, or the byproduct of this or that economic system, it is a spiritual matter.

### **The Difference between Economics and Greed**

You see, people in Jesus' day understood that here was a difference between "economy" and what they called "wealth getting." The purpose of the economy was to make sure that everyone in the household, everyone in the community, received what they needed. Once those needs were met, then there was no demand for more. The idea behind "wealth getting" was to get as much as you can until you died or someone else stopped you. It sounds innocent enough, but wealth in Jesus' day- was accumulated always at the expense of someone else. It was an attitude that even captured people in the church. We sometimes overlook that fact that when First Timothy speaks of "the love of money" being "a root of all kinds of evil," it is talking about how this attitude seduces believers into thinking that we are justified in our unbridled greed (1 Timothy 6:10).

The goal of life in Jesus' day, as it is often in ours, was self-sufficiency. The problem, however, was whose self-sufficiency? Should I only be concerned about myself and maybe my household, but no one else? Or should I be concerned about the self-sufficiency of the entire community? Add to this, that people could easily move into a wealth getting mindset by mistaking the acquisition of good things for the good of life itself. As First Timothy also says, "[The rich] are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life" (1 Timothy 6:18-19).

So this petition for bread cautions us to be careful. We pray that God will provide all of us with our material needs. This means that in practice we must be attentive to our material concerns. God's vision for us is that we get our needs met. This is clear from the Lord's Prayer. God wants us to have what we need to survive. Beyond that, it calls us into a stewardship of resources. And so, the petition for bread calls us to join as co-workers with God in fulfilling this request. It is through our generosity that we play our part in fulfilling God's vision.

In our liturgy of Holy Communion we act out this petition for all to see. The revolutionary aspect of Christian Communion was that all who came to the table received the same amount of bread and wine. Those who were wealthier or considered more important, like men, received more food than those who were considered less important, like women and children. At the Lord's Table, however, all receive equally because God loves and provides for all equally. What is more, through the bread and wine we demonstrate in a tangible way our memorial and experience of Christ. Communion reminds us that our spiritual experience translates into physical acts like the giving of bread and wine. Thus, by being generous toward others we demonstrate our own experience of God's generosity, and our desire to respond in our own way.

### **The Spiritual Gift of Generosity**

The purpose of generosity is to transform the lives of flesh and blood individuals. It is a form of discipleship, and is at the core of the Gospel. For example, when Jesus speaks a few verses earlier in the Sermon on the Mount about giving alms he is expressing something quite profound. Many people, even some biblical scholars, misunderstand what almsgiving was about because

the forget that what Jesus was expressing in his statement was a Jewish understanding of how we practice our faith. Jews saw giving to others as an expression of the worship of God. We see giving as a moral issue somewhat removed from what we consider to be worship. If we were to adopt Jesus' perspective on this, it would change our understanding of how we conduct ourselves as Christians. When we worship we glorify God and demonstrate our allegiance to God's vision for the world. This includes acknowledging when that vision has not been realized. So we give because we recognize that there is something wrong with the world. God's vision for a society in which all have what they need has not been realized, and so we give to those who have nothing as a way of transforming the world into what God wants it to be. In fact, it is an obligation that is just as important as going to church on Sundays.

### **Stop Making It About Bad Acts and Start Making It About Liberation**

We would not be here today if it had not been for the kindness of others. Whether it was the woman at the financial aid office in college who found a few extra dollars to pay for your tuition, or the church member who took a liking to you in college and brought you food when you needed it. None of us could have achieved what we have without the support of others. To many times we think the "forgive us our debts" is about being forgiven for past ungodly acts; when this piece is much more than that.

It is interesting then that in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer we are asking that our "debts" be forgiven rather than our "sins," as we do in Luke 11:4. We know from our experiences that debts are obligations for repayment that we owe others. It is puzzling then that the Lord's Prayer would take this idea that comes from the social realms of law and commerce and make it a spiritual concern.

### **The Chains of Debt**

In Jesus' day, the problem of debt was widespread. People in the ancient world found themselves indebted for various reasons. The type of debt they complained about most often was taxes. Again, this is one of those places where the Roman social ordering system put a great burden on some and not on others. Roman citizens were exempt from paying many types of taxes. The bulk of the tax burden fell on the people who lived in the lands conquered by Rome. We know from our sources that, say, a tenant farmer could easily pay half of his income the others (the landowner, the government, the millers, and the shippers). And as you can imagine, such a burden created a volatile situation. The government soon realized that you can't just push people further and further in debt without some relief. So periodically they offered amnesty and other forms of economic relief. What they refused to do was change the system that created the problem in the first place. Keeping people in some form of debt served their interests.

You could go to jail for not paying your debts, and so it was a very serious matter. And you may not know this, but it was a particular worry for women and children. We have letters from women to their husbands, fathers, and brothers pleading with them to pay their debts. This is because women and children were considered less productive members of the household, and so their imprisonment was not considered as detrimental to a family's income as that of a man. The government regarded men, if they remained free, as more capable of repaying their debts than women. The same was true of children. In the account of the ministry of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:1-7) a widow was in jeopardy of losing her children due to debts. And so, when the

Lord's Prayer speaks of release from indebtedness it is speaking in a language many in Jesus' day, especially the poor, would have understood far too well.

But the Lord's Prayer is not simply talking about economic debt. It views debt or obligation as a way of understanding our relationships with each other. The prayer calls us to see our relationships to all those around us- and even beyond- as bonds of mutual obligation. People in Jesus' day understood this idea as well. They saw the everyday occurrences of life as a system of debts incurred and repaid. Because they lived in a society where the poor relied on the wealthy to look after them, those at the bottom always owed something to those up the ladder. It was really a society of interlocking obligations. The poor owed the wealthy, but the wealthy owed something to the poor as well. It is difficult for us to imagine such a world, where the commodity of greatest value was honor. Your honor could be destroyed by overlooking or refusing to act on your obligations to others. Losing your honor was a fate worse than death, because now your word meant nothing. This is why, for example, Herod had John the Baptist beheaded (see Matthew 14:1-12). His honor was at stake. He didn't want to do it, but he had given his word to honor the request and that meant more than whether he agreed with the request or not.

From the perspective of the Lord's Prayer, if we added up all that we owed to others, then we would quickly realize that we owe much more than we could ever repay. (This doesn't even take into account those people we owe that we don't even know we owe.) All of the little things people have done for us along the way, all of the times we behaved badly, all of the times we neglected to do what is right so that we could continue to survive, when totaled amount to a debt that we cannot repay. We can't even keep track of them all. As a consequence then, our debts to others remain unpaid. The early Christian Bishop Polycarp, told the church at Philippi that "we all owe the debt of sin". By this he meant that the sum total of our inability to repay others what we owe amount to and constitutes human sinfulness. What is more, this debt limits our ability to do other thing. Think about what you could do with your money if you were not limited by a mortgage, student loan payments, a car note, credit card bills, utilities and such. In other words, we know that debt limits our choices. It limits our opportunities. The same is true of the "debt of sin." Sin limits us. Sin Keeps us from being the men and women God calls us to be. As long as we keep trying to repay past debts, we can never take advantage of the new opportunities that God provides.

The Lord's Prayer recognizes that this problem can never be fully corrected through human actions. Some debts may be able to be repaid, but not all of them. And so, the petition for forgiveness is an appeal to God's mercy. It is a declaration of social bankruptcy. I use this legal language of bankruptcy on purpose. What we are looking for here is a balancing of the scales of justice. From the ancient legal perspective, asking for mercy was only appropriate when no other recourse was available. We understand this when we speak of "throwing [ourselves] on the mercy of the court." By asking for divine mercy, we are asking for our freedom to be restored. We are asking to be redeemed from our obligations to others.

### **The Power of Spiritual Bankruptcy**

When we are freed from our obligation to others, we can be open to the new possibilities that God has for us. Yet, notice that the request is balanced. In order to be released from our obligations, we must agree to release those indebted to us first. Otherwise, the scales of justice

cannot be balanced. Asking for forgiveness without granting release creates more injustice that it overcomes. We cannot ask God's mercy and refuse to be merciful to others.

By practicing forgiveness, we are formed in the image of God. By practicing forgiveness, we advance God's vision for the world. As a response to our own experience of forgiveness the Lord's Prayer calls us to transform the way we live and act in the world. We become imitators of God because we display in our own way the depth of God's love and mercy. Paul Tillich, a famous theologian, said it poetically that God accepts us in spite of our own unacceptability. The fact that we are in no position to argue for our own acceptability is an experience that is supposed to transform how we are in the world.

I often think about this vision of the world when I come across people who mistakenly think they are responsible for their own success. There is no such thing as a "self-made man according to the Lord's Prayer. Any success that we have achieved has been through the support of others, seen and unseen. In this way, the petition for forgiveness strengthens the point behind the petition for daily bread. If it weren't for others doing their parts, we would not be where we are today.