

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

Matthew 6:9-13

It All Begins with a Relationship

We begin our prayer by saying, “Our Father”. The first thing that is striking when we reflect on this phrase is that it begins by putting us in relationship. The technical term for this part of the prayer is the invocation (from the Latin, invocation). When we call upon God, we do so as members of a community. The word “our” in the prayer is short, but its meaning is rich. It is important to recognize the significance of this pronoun for the prayer’s vision of reality, if for no other reason than it is missing in the version of the Lord’s Prayer found in the Gospel of Luke 11:2.

God and human beings are in a basic and indestructible relationship with each other and the world around us. In Jesus’ day, this made perfect sense. People understood themselves to be part of a vast web of relationships with nature, God, and other human beings. In our modern world, we often overlook our relationship to non-human life. Although we are beginning to understand in greater detail why plants, animals, the environment, and so forth are important for our continued existence, when it comes to our spiritual lives we seldom mention these relationships at all. Thus, the Lord’s Prayer reminds us of the importance of these relationships. We cannot be the individuals God desires, unless we acknowledge that our relationship with non-human life is a spiritual matter and not only a physical one.

What the pronoun “our” also opens up for us is a deeper understanding of our relationship with other human beings and the corporate vision of the universe that the Lord’s Prayer provides. Unless you are in ministry, when you pray you probably pray simply for yourself, your loved ones, and at times for others. The Lord’s Prayer sees this practice differently. This inclusion of the word “our” in the prayer means that when we call upon God we are doing it for ourselves and all other human beings as well. To put it another way, the Lord’s prayer is both petitionary (on behalf of myself) and intercessory (on behalf of others) at the same time. Of course, some Christians understood the “our” in the prayer to refer only to Christians. This does not appear to be how Jesus uses it in the Gospel of Matthew, however. Here in Matthew it is used in a way that includes all humanity whether individual human beings recognize that they have a relationship with God or not. What is profound about this way of addressing God- in the dual mode of petition

and intercession- is that it trains us that when we ask for good things for ourselves we do so for others as well. To put it another way, the Lord's Prayer teaches us that what we ask for ourselves is what we ask for others also.

Seeing Beyond Petition to the Vision Behind Intercession

Petition may be at the heart of prayer, but intercession is its sympathetic goal. This is because we are always individuals-in-community. Or, to put it another way, we are communal in our individuality. Either way we have never, nor will we ever, experience the fulness of what it means to be human all by ourselves. And this is why we need intercessory prayer.

Intercessory prayer makes us mindful of the extent to which we are influenced by our relationships. Every relationship we have, even one with God, is an always unfolding dance of influence. Energy influencing energy in a grand, although mysterious, creative becoming. We are continually influenced by things personal, societal, and environmental. Likewise, we influence these things as well. It is, as I said, a dance.

It is during times of intercession that we realize the realistic limits of our humanity. We are accustomed to exercising what we believe to be power. It is always a limited power, however. Power as we normally construe it- coercion really- only succeeds to the extent that the object of our influential exercise submits to our desires. We can fool ourselves into thinking our power is definitive, but reality tells us, if we are brave enough to admit it, that we are not really the masters of ours or anyone's fate. We may punish, but that is not true submission. We may even kill, but death should not be confused as submission. In the end, the only real power we have is to exercise our relational power, our influence.

The same is true of God. Since God doesn't desire our mere compliance but our love, God meets us where we are in order to "call" or "lure" us to where we can be. Nevertheless, the stark reality is that God works with any situation as it is. We see this most dramatically, I think, in times of intercession. Why won't God just make the victim of domestic violence leave the abuser? Why won't God just expunge the desire of the smoker? It gets even more complicated when we interject complex problems like poverty, human trafficking, epidemics, famine, racism, sexism, and a host of other "isms" and societal dysfunctions into the conversation. God doesn't

act as we wish things were, but how things are. God deals in reality and not fantasy. As theologian Marjorie Suchocki once wrote, “In faith, we do not know enough to be specific, for the fullness of another’s circumstance, even those we most deeply love, is more than we are capable of knowing. But God knows.

The gift of existence is that all things relate to all other things. We are truly united in a single “garment of destiny”. We can “weave” new experiences, including well-being, into the lives of those we love and care for. We weave our very selves into their lives. We become part of each other. This is the gift of our human experience. It is the anchor that validates what we instinctively know to be true about our lives. We meet each other on common ground of the “isness” of existence.

Prayer changes the “isness” of the world. This often is not self-evident to us. We think our prayers crash against the indomitable fortress that is the will of God. The positive way of saying this would be to quote the refrain made famous by the Miami Mass Choir “What God has for me it is for me.” The shortsightedness of the negative form of this – God’s will is unfathomable and unchangeable – is that it overlooks one of the core characteristics we know and affirm about God, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). This means that God is not working for our destruction, but for our good. The same is true for those we love and pray for. Our prayers of intercession are one of our own ways of joining in the loving activity of God, and God invites us to give ourselves to the positive outcome of this activity. Prayer creates a channel in the world through which God can unleash God’s will toward well-being.

Intercessory prayer can also help us move beyond the limitations of our human pain toward participating in the healing that accompanies living into the vision of God. In fact, to be human is to live with the inescapable reality of suffering. As much as we may want to , we cannot pray the suffering away – neither theirs nor ours. What we can try to do is redeem that suffering in light of the redemptive resurrection of Christ.

When we are victims, especially of crimes, we tend to will the punishment to the violator(s). In fact, the more egregious the violation the easier it is for us to get caught in our pain. This is a normal human response. We want the perpetrator to

suffer as much as, if not more, than we have suffered. This is most definitely true when the victim is innocent.

We are called to pray for our enemies. This can be one of the most difficult aspects of intercessory prayer. And why should we do it? Isn't it easier just to leave this person to God? Why should we be involved at all, especially when the pain is still fresh? Sometimes we try to use a method called "psychic murder", treating the aggressor as if they did not exist. This is not praying for our enemy, in failing to do so we miss the healing that can come from this painful recognition.

In an odd way, by continuing to avoid the pain we only perpetuate the act done against us. It never gets integrated into our emotional life. Of course, some crimes violate us in ways where we'll be forever transformed, as in the tragic death of a family member or the betrayal of a spouse. This does not mean, however, that healing is not possible.

Hatred holds us hostage to the bad acts of others. It puts us out of alignment with the vision and character of God. Pray for our enemies? It is a courageous act of intercession. It may be through gritted teeth. It may be crude, but it must be honest. "Yes I want him to rot in hell, but, God, touch each of us with your finger of healing." Healing is the transformative power of God. By praying for the one who hurts us, we ask God not only to deal with the violator, but ourselves as well. We give God the space to perform the dramatic transformation, one that allows us to become a reflection of God's will.

Often when we pray intercessory prayers, we are praying for those with whom we don't have a direct connection. When 911 happened all of America was asked to turn to God. We all felt sadness for the loss of life and those families affected. It's called the rule of reciprocation. It's amazing how God uses strangers to intercede on behalf of the lives and situations of others.

The great opportunity provided by intercession is that it calls us to accept quite directly God's vision for the world. Moving beyond the limitation of petition, the act of intercession is a form of divine imitation. Moreover, in interceding for others we open up the opportunity to become our prayers. "Be careful for what you pray," writes Suchocki, "for God may use you in addressing those things for which you pray, even though you are at a distance."

The Vision of God's "Family"

Another way the Lord's Prayer underscores the idea that our relationship with God is a communal one is by calling God Father. When people in Jesus' day called God their father they knew that this meant that they were joined together in a household. The household was not limited to what we would call the immediate family. What is also interesting is that it was unusual for a child to grow up being raised only by his or her parents. Stepmothers, stepfathers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents raising children was quite common. They saw the so-called family as something much broader than father, mother, and children. A household was father, mother, children, extended relatives, slaves and anyone else who depended on the head of the household to survive. The household then was a unit of people that went beyond blood relationships. It was in fact, a web of relationships. At the center of these relationships was the father. Because of the way society was structured, being a father meant that you were the one upon whom others were dependent. Naming God as our father means that we recognize that (1) we are part of a community that is bound together by more than just blood. We are bound together by our relationships to each other, and (2) we have a common dependence on God for our survival.

That we live in a world made up of relationships even comes across in the part of the Lord's Prayer that locates God as "the one in the heavens". The technical term for this part of the prayer is the rationale, the explanation as to why it is appropriate to call on God. By pointing out that we are calling upon God who dwells in heaven, we are saying that God is not limited by things like geography. Even more, since heaven is above everything else, all of the things under heaven are under God's purview. This again highlights that all things under heaven are included in the household of God. One thing then the Lord's Prayer teaches us is that we are a community- a household- bound together in our common relationship and dependence upon God.

Thanksgiving is Foundational

Another function for the rationale of ancient prayer was its expression of thanks, however terse or indirect such thanks may be in the Lord's Prayer. Other ancient prayers often contained long and somewhat detailed expressions of thanks for past

divine acts. I would suggest that, however cryptic, the phrase “in the heavens” points to an expression of thanksgiving.

Prayers of thanksgiving are more than acknowledgements of past blessings. They say something direct and profound about the God who bestows such gifts. It demonstrates the character of a God who seeks to be in a dynamic relationship with us. The deep recognition we have of God’s ever-flowing giving- what some theologians might call divine benevolence or prevenient grace- is the source of the union we sometimes feel with God.

The God who is “in the heavens” blesses us not only with specific personal gifts, but with the gift of community. We can sometimes overlook this gift because it is a complicated one to receive. Communities have their virtues and their failings. Nevertheless, whether we see it as good or bad, community is an indispensable part of existence. Thus, we thank God for our community or communities, even with their faults, because it is in and through community that we experience the divine gifts of faith, hope, and love. In fact, it is the imperfect character of community that enriches our experience of what God bestows on us.

God Knows Us as We Are

The final thing the rationale tells us is that the God to whom we pray knows us exactly as we are. As Suchocki says, “God doesn’t know the world because He read about it in some book, or because God observes it from some safely distant viewing post. To the contrary, God knows the world because God receives the fullness of its energy, in all its particularities in every moment.”

Thinking of ourselves as members of God’s great household then transforms our very approach to the practice of prayer. We should approach God not only for ourselves but for everyone as well. The same is true for all those who call upon God as “Our Father”. We live in a community- a universe- where we are called to support each other even in the very form of our prayers. This basic teaching of the Lord’s Prayer calls us to interact with each other differently. There are no longer outsiders and insiders. We are all members of God’s household, and we should act accordingly. In other words, we cannot properly call God “Our Father”. If we fail to live and act in the world in such a way that demonstrates this to be true.