

Matthew 6:7- 21

Sitting on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, having just recited the Beatitudes, Jesus was asked by his followers for instructions on how to pray. In response, Jesus gave them a short prayer. In Luke's Gospel the prayer was recorded in its final form about 80 CE, and the longer version in Matthew's Gospel was finalized around 85 CE. Most of us are taught this "Lord's Prayer", or the "Our Father" as the Catholics refer to it, at a very early age.

This little prayer has incredible power in any context, but in the flow of Matthew's story, it becomes something transcendent. The prayer due to its brevity, was unique for first century Judaism. People at that time, were impressed by *battalogia* and *polulogia*, Greek for babbling and long-winded wordiness. These were useful for a Deity that demands grovelling before deigning to respond. Babbling and long-winded wordiness can be useful if what really matters is preening religious practice.

Babbling, according to Jesus is senseless, thoughtless repetition. We are familiar with prayers that are rattled off without touching either the mind or the heart of the one praying. For some, these are the only types of prayers they ever pray. These supposedly 'spontaneous,' familiar yet repetitious, prayers lack life and urgency. Ironically, the Lord's Prayer is often 'prayed' in this mindless repetition. The other variety of verbosity was the practice of needless longevity.

A theologian noted, "The efficacy of prayer was measured by its ardour and its fluency, and not least by its fervid lengthiness.' A Rabbi said, 'Whoever is long in prayer is heard.' And another stated, 'Whenever the righteous make their prayer long, their prayer is heard.'

People actually believed that the effectiveness of their prayers was to be directly related to their length. Were these long-winded men great

because their prayers were so long? Were their prayers answered because they prayed longer than others? This was the mentality of Judaism. Now a Hypocrite in Greek is the word for actor - one who acts religious - who does all the outward signs and actions of his or her religion but doesn't necessarily have the proper inner motivation. In contrast to the oratory of these hypocrites, Jesus gave his followers a simple pattern for prayer. Although, we refer to it as "The Lord's Prayer," in reality it is really the disciples' prayer.

It is both a pattern for prayer and a prayer to be recited. Matthew introduced it with, "Pray, then, in this way ..." citing it as an example of prayer that pleases God. Yet Luke begins with, "When you pray, say ..." Although Jesus did not forbid its repetition, his concern was with its meaningless and thoughtless parroting.

Jesus' introduced this prayer as a model prayer in contrast to the lengthy prayers which tried to impress the onlooker or to perhaps wear down God's defences. So, the major thrust of this sample prayer would be something like this: "When you pray publicly, make it short and sweet," or "Your father knows exactly what you need, even before you ask him! So don't try to snow him."

This Prayer, however, does not preclude our needing to ask, directly and pointedly, that God's will be done on earth, not just in heaven. It was clearly understood that when God created the world, God created it richly so that all life could thrive. The fact that children have to pray for food is a sure indication that God's will is not being done on earth, regardless of how things are running in the heavenly spheres. The Lord's Prayer as a whole constitutes an argument that unless the reign of life holds sway on earth, heaven is quite irrelevant.

This runs counter to the way Christians often talk about God's will. Often, far too often, the evident aim is to silence anyone who has the audacity to protest the way things currently run. People argue that disease is the

will of God, or that homelessness, joblessness, and even starvation are just part of a well-oiled system ordained by God to allow the real stars to shine. People have even argued that God must have had a plan in allowing Jewish children to be slaughtered in Nazi death camps. The same argument was brought forward by Hutu pastors in Rwanda who informed Tutsi parishioners that “God was through with them.” One could imagine Herod and his murderers saying the same thing while slaughtering the babies of Bethlehem.

Matthew’s story knows that the world is not as it should be, that murderous power holds the throne, and there is a real need, not just a pious inclination, to ask God’s rule to come and that God’s will actually be done, for once. Matthew’s Jesus gets earthy and specific, aware that the world is a network of debt and obligation. By asking for forgiveness for debts or trespasses, the prayer is in keeping with the tone and tenor of Matthew’s story, which uses the Greek word *opheilmata*, to refer to those things that are owed. Debt creates a relationship of owing and obligation. The prayer does not intend to have this relationship to be taken as a simple metaphor. Matthew’s Jesus recognizes the reality of debt.

Taking the metaphor concretely, rather than simply spiritually, the petition recognizes that we are all in debt in some way. Farmers put crops in the field with operating loans. Contractors build houses with construction loans. Students and their families build an education with loans and hard work. The prayer knows this, and recognizes it as a basic truth of life together. But the prayer also recognizes that debts are forgiven.

A pastor shares a story of his seminary days. When first married, he and his wife worked at a small meat market. He was in school accumulating debt and building an education. Ends did not always meet, but they could usually get them pretty close. This was possible because the owner of the meat market gave them gifts. Every Saturday evening the

owner and student would inspect the meat case, selecting those cuts that would be ground for hamburger.

It was a regular ritual that allowed them to talk about how business was going and about plans for the future. Every once in a while, the owner would grab a sirloin steak out of the case and claim that it simply needed to be deboned and ground; no question about it: it was destined for hamburger. Sometimes it was even a t-bone steak. Before the student learned the ritual, he would protest that the steak looked fine and would surely sell the next day. He learned that the owner would always insist, and he would then suggest that the student buy it for the price of the cheaper hamburger.

He was giving them a gift. He was giving them a celebration. And the owner was, in a real sense, releasing them from the obligation to make ends meet. This Prayer recognizes the way the gift of release is part of the economy that makes the world work. Maybe one of the points of the Prayer is to refocus our attention: away from our own difficulties, our own debts, and onto the ways we can release other people from their struggles and obligations to make ends meet.

One aspect of Jewish life under Hellenistic domination was that people were being driven off their hereditary land-holdings by artificially created tribute-debt, which was bled from them to build Hellenistic cities that were showcases for the power and wealth of the foreign overlords. The web of debt that Jesus addresses was part of a system of domination put in place by a foreign oppressor. This petition echoes the earlier prayer that God's reign hold sway. This is not a pious abstraction, it is a forceful prayer for release from domination that kept ordinary people from thriving even in the Land of Promise.

The religion of Israel is great theatre. Moses goes up on the mountain, the clouds close underneath him like curtains. He brings down the commandments, and the children of Israel are unimpressed. Solomon

builds a huge temple. Inside behind a great curtain, is the Holy of Holies, where the high priest communes with God, like Moses before him. He returns from this holy communion with a most precious gift, the forgiveness of sins, the healing of the broken covenant.

Jesus takes this theatre for granted. He does not tell his disciples to keep the commandments; he assumes that they will. He also assumes that they will want to go beyond the commandments. Like any observant Jew, they will want to serve their neighbour by giving alms, worship God by praying and live a disciplined life by fasting. Yet, this religion of Israel can easily become the theatre of performance and show, the theatre of appearance and deceit. In this theatre, almsgiving is rewarded by trumpet fanfare, prayer is a public parade, and the discomfort of fasting is a spectacle. The theatre of religion becomes a gaudy charade. Jesus redefines the theatre. This is not a theatre of spectacle or display, but a secret theatre.

Among the Jews of Jesus' time, prayer, almsgiving and fasting, were religious duties that one could perform above and beyond the keeping of the law; their justification was that they were pleasing to God. These, said Jesus, were to be done as private matters; piety, the practice of purely religious duties - was to be a secret service to God.

That piety should be a private matter was a radical, even revolutionary idea, totally against the cultural grain. Traditional piety was something performed for others to see. In Roman culture, *pietas* referred to the public veneration of the gods. Without such a display from prominent citizens, what would happen to the traditional values associated with the gods? Pietas was the cultural glue, holding all things in place. How could there be law and order without it?

So, public displays of piety were quite common. People made a great show of praying, almsgiving, and fasting. It was taken for granted that one would make a show of performing one's religious duties. Men would

stand in the street and offer prayers. In the synagogues announcements were made of gifts to the poor; very large gifts were signalled by the blast of a trumpet. And those who fasted cultivated a lean and famished look, so that others would know the extent of their self-deprivation. Jesus did not condemn the practices of prayer, almsgiving, or fasting. He simply disapproved of their practice as a public show.

The attitude of the heart becomes very important at this point. It is the heart that motivates. All three acts of piety can easily be transformed to be acts of self-gratification. All three acts of piety can be done NOT to glorify God, but to glorify one's self. The issue is one of motivation. Many pious and devout Jews were doing the right thing but for the wrong reason or motive. There is always the temptation for religious people to demonstrate their religiosity in order to receive praise, affirmation, and applause.

So, Jesus is trying to inspire his disciples, and those within earshot, to live a life of **non public, hidden, secret, prayer devotion and giving**. This is not to be a show but an outpouring of love from the heart. Matthew is trying to inspire us to give and act out of our hearts, secretly, without any expectation of reward. When Jesus lives in our hearts, our acts of charity, devotion and love are real and not simply acts of religiosity. They are genuine, not fake. They come from unselfish motives with no expectation of any external reward.

A man moved into a small town and bought a little house across the street from the railroad tracks. Every morning he noticed an elderly woman walking along the tracks picking up something and putting it into a bag that she carried. The man became curious. So he went to the corner grocery store that had been there forever and asked the owner about this woman. "Oh, that's the widow Jacobs. Every day she comes half way across town to pick up the coal that is spilled on the tracks when the early morning train runs through town." "But there hasn't been a steam locomotive using coal on these tracks for years," replied the new

resident. "That's right," said the store owner. "When the steam train stopped running, old Mr. Simpson who runs the hardware store was concerned that the Widow Jacobs would no longer have coal to heat and cook with. He knew she was too proud to take charity, so he decided to get up early every morning, take a bag of coal and drop it along the tracks. The Widow Jacobs still thinks the steam train runs by every morning. I think Old Mr. Simpson has been doing that for about five years now."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been contrasting true religion with that popularly held and practised within Judaism, the religions that dealt only with the outward acts, rather than the inward attitudes and motives. The obvious problem was that of ostentation, something easy to fall into. The devout Jew is a person of prayer. These prayers of the devout Jew are more visible and audible. First, the proper clothing is needed, like the prayer shawl. It is put over the shoulders, the kepa is placed on the head. Then, the proper posture, rocking back and forth, is assumed, and the prayers are chanted out loud. One would be about his affairs and suddenly realize that the time of prayer was at hand. Either he would fail to fulfill this obligation or he must do it where he was. If he were in the marketplace or on the street corner, he would simply stand there and commence his prayers. Of course, this was obvious to the passers-by who would nod to one another, noting this man's devotion to his religious duty. It was easy to accept and seek public commendation.

A fast was a voluntary abstinence from food observed as a religious exercise. It was frequently accompanied by prayer in the Old Testament. It expressed genuine repentance for sin, lamentation over calamity or the death of a loved one. In addition, fasting was observed as an aid to religious concentration and preparation for divine revelation such as Jesus' fasting in the desert. Devout Jews in Jesus' day fasted twice a week.

The two Jewish days of weekly fasting were on Monday and Thursday.

Not coincidentally, these were also the market days when people from the countryside crowded into the city to buy and sell. It was a golden opportunity for the public display of piety. The Jews knew how to wring every drop of self-gratification out of this practice. They left their hair unkempt, their faces dirty, and they wore a gaunt look on their faces that worked upon the sympathy and admiration of the less committed.

The condemnation of such ostentation can be seen in Jesus' remarks. They have received all the reward they can expect – the commendation of their fellow citizens. But in order to please God they need to carry out their acts of devotion in private. Their hair should be combed, they should wash their faces and conceal the fact that they have chosen to abstain from food for a time. The God who knows the secret intentions and motives, the God who observes every deed, will surely reward true piety.

The evil which Jesus highlighted is that of externalism, the effort of religious people to demonstrate their righteousness before others in order to earn their praise. It is based upon the faulty premise that God's approval can be measured by the applause of others. This is the opposite of the truth Jesus made clear. We must either seek God's approval, and therefore the disdain of others, or the approval of others and thereby lose all hope of divine reward.

If one feels compelled to practice his righteousness publicly, there must be some question of God's ability to observe the deeds done in secrecy. The same misconception can be observed in repetitious prayers. It was as though God had to be informed over and over for him to be cognizant of humanity's needs. To this Jesus responded. "Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need, even before you ask him!" The Father knows all. He observes all of our acts, whether done openly or in secret. But beyond this God knows the motives of our actions.

In sum, Jesus calls us to a personal piety that is wholly private. We are

to go about prayer and almsgiving and self-denial as though we were enlisted in the divine Secret Service. It's not easy to let one's piety be hidden! The hearing or seeing by others is not what makes our acts faithful. It is the faithfulness of God that is our validation. To serve such a One is our calling.

There will be some who will want to be rid of piety altogether, be it private or public. When Karl Marx spoke scornfully of religion as the opiate of the people, no doubt he had in mind the practices of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting; these he said, diverted attention from matters of social justice and gave people a good conscience when their conscience ought to be troubled.

It seems that perhaps there is a contradiction for us to ponder. Every time we witness a baptism, we light a candle for the person being baptized and quote the Bible verse that says, "Let your light so shine **before others** that they may **see** your **good works** and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." It does say, "Give glory [not to you but] to your Father in heaven". So maybe there is no contradiction after all. It does say to let others see our good works. Our motive is not to glorify ourselves but to make sure that God is glorified – in all that we do and say – in our almsgiving, our fasting or denying ourselves, and in our prayers. For we can do nothing without God. We can have nothing without God. Without God we are nothing.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR FEBRUARY 5, 2023

People of God, let us lift our hearts in faith to the one who hears all prayers and holds close all those in need.

Our Father, provide the church with your agitating and powerful spirit, that we may boldly proclaim your radical and inclusive love. Lord, in your mercy,

Our Father, provide your life to fields and stream, birds and beasts, that your abundance may be shared with all.

Our Father, provide the nations with wise and compassionate rulers, that peace and justice reign and all the world thrive.

Our Father, provide your comfort to those confounded by worry and anxiety, that the light of your hope break through all darkness.

Our Father, provide comfort to those who are healing, undergoing treatment, or in pain or discomfort, that the wholeness you desire for us be known to all.

Our Father, provide direction and energy to this congregation, that we may leave the doors to our hearts open to love and serve our neighbours as you call us to do.

Our Father, the source of all knowledge and understanding. We pray that you shine your light on us; give us wisdom and guidance in the decisions this congregation needs to make this coming year. Grant us discernment, so that our path is right before your eyes.

Our Father, provide faith and trust in you, that we may join with the saints in praising your glory.

Holy God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as our Saviour. Bring healing to all wounds, make whole all that is broken, speak truth to all illusion, and shed light in every darkness, that all creation will see your glory and know your Christ.

Amen.