

**PERFECT PRAYER**  
**Matthew 6:5-15**

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At its lowest, prayer is shouting into a void on the off chance there may be someone out there listening. At its highest, prayer merges into worship as the presence of God becomes so real that we pass beyond words into a sense of His reality, generosity, delight and grace. For most of us as Christians, prayer usually lands somewhere between those two extremes.

Let's be candid. For many of us, prayer is a mystery, a puzzle. Many of us know we ought to do it, but we're not quite sure exactly how.

The disciples were astonished at Jesus' ability to commune with the Father. They asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. At the very heart of Jesus' greatest sermon, The Sermon on the Mount, we have this framework as Jesus teaches the disciples of old how they ought to pray. His prayer is not an incantation, a charm, or a spell. Rather, it is much like scaffolding around which our prayers can be built. (N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p. 58)

**I. God's paternity.**

Notice how it begins: "*Our Father in Heaven*" (6:9b).

This title, "Father," for the Jews of Jesus' day would represent an image for God that goes all the way back to God's action in the Exodus – when God rescued Israel from Egypt and so demonstrated "Israel is My son, My first-born."

Listen as I read Exodus 4:22.

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is my son, My first-born, so I say to you, "Let My son go, that he may serve Me"; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your first-born.'"

The image of God as Father is, therefore, the image of God as the deliverer – the one who sets us free from that which holds us captive. When you call God "Father," you realize you're calling Him your liberator, your ticket to freedom from the things that hold you in bondage. For the people of God of old, it was Pharaoh, it was Egypt that held them in bondage. For the believer of today, we are set free by our Father from the bondage of sin and death. Our Father, the One who releases us.

Jesus calls God His "Father" in all of His prayers, except for that prayer on the cross when He said, "My God, My God," instead of "My Father," "why have you forsaken me?"

Move just one chapter over to Matthew 7:11.

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

Our Heavenly Father both liberates and provides.

When we say “our Father,” it means something else, too. When you hear the plural pronoun, “our” Father – not “my” Father – we realize we are fellow family members in God’s household. If I am God’s son, then I have many brothers and sisters in the faith. In fact, there is no singular pronouns in the whole Lord’s Prayer.

**You cannot pray the Lord’s Prayer and even once say “I.”  
You cannot pray the Lord’s Prayer and even once say “my.”  
Nor can you pray the Lord’s Prayer and not pray for one another.  
And when you ask for daily bread, you must include your brother.  
For others are included...in each and every plea,  
From the beginning to the end, it doesn’t once say “Me.”**

In Matthew 12:50 we read, “For everyone who does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.”

## **II. God’s priority.**

*“Who art in heaven” (6:9b).*

**If the initial reference to the Father brings closeness, reassurance, confidence, and community, it remains true that God never loses his majesty. The transition from “Our Father” to “in heaven” and, next, “hallowed” interjects a sacred dimension into our response to God. It places our experience of God as Father back within its cosmic context. (Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 128)**

*“Hallowed be Your name” (6:9c).*

“God, make holy, sanctify Your name.” Christ’s followers are asking their Heavenly Father to act in such a way that they, and an increasing number of others, will hallow God’s name. It is saying something like this: “God, work in me and in others that we will acknowledge your unsurpassed and glorious holiness always.”

We hallow God’s name by understanding who He is – at least understanding Him as best we can with our finite minds. Origen said, “The man who brings into his concept of God ideas that have no place there takes the name of the Lord in vain.” Discovering who God is and believing the right truth about God demonstrates a reverence for him. And willing ignorance or wrong doctrine demonstrates an irreverence to God. We cannot revere a God whose character and will we do not know or care about.

## **III. God’s program.**

*“Your kingdom come” (6:10a).*

This is a prayer for the day when the contrast between the heaven and the earth will be obliterated. What is true in heaven will, one day, be true on earth.

John, in the Book of the Revelation, ended with the words, “Even so, come Lord Jesus.” This is a sense that is carried by the words of Jesus’ model prayer: “Your kingdom come.”

Our greatest desire as a people of God is for the rule and the reign of God, to establish God’s kingdom. And we seek not only the kingdom, but the King to return – the resurrected Christ. It’s interesting that this model prayer begins not so much with what we want or need, but, rather, with a worshipful attitude toward God – recognizing God’s fatherhood over us, recognizing the glory of God’s name, and desiring God’s will and God’s way on earth. Our true heart’s desire can never be that we build our own little kingdoms. We desire for the arrival of God’s.

Sometimes we want to put a “when” to our prayer.

“Lord, your kingdom come...when I finish my degree.”

“Lord, your kingdom come...when I’ve enjoyed marriage.”

“Lord, your kingdom come...when I’ve enjoyed grandchildren for a few years.”

The word used for kingdom here is a word that doesn’t refer so much to a physical location but, rather, to dominion and rule. Jesus told us His kingdom ultimately is not of this world. God’s kingdom is not limited to a place or to a time. It is eventually His rule and dominion over all He has created, both heaven and earth.

The word used for “come” is a word that carries with it an idea of a sudden or immediate arrival. So He’s not talking about our using political systems to make our society or world more and more Christianized. That will never work. That’s mixing oil and water. Rather, He’s talking about the sudden kingdom of God as it arrives in all of its authority and power. A kingdom that began in the presence of the Christ.

Sometimes I get amused at those of us who work so hard to try to Christianize this evil world. So heavily involved in political and social activities in order to sanitize our society. But Jesus’ kingdom, ultimately, is not of this world. I’m not saying you shouldn’t be involved. But am I saying you had better realize you cannot legislate the kingdom of God.

The arrival of God’s kingdom is the message that Jesus preached. We learn in the very beginning, in Mark 1, that He preached the kingdom of God. In Mark 1:14-15, we read: “And after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’”

In Luke 4, Jesus tells us that His purpose for coming was that He “must preach the kingdom” (Luke 4:43).

In Acts 1:3 we read that after His resurrection He spent forty days “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”

God's kingdom can come in various ways. It was here in a real sense when Christ was here. And it's here in a real sense now that His Spirit indwells His people. Each time someone is born into the kingdom of light and the kingdom of God, they're transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's Son.

1. The kingdom grows when people proclaim the Lordship of Jesus. We should pray for a great increase in the number of people who repent of their sins, turn to faith in Christ, and fall down at His feet and worship Him.

2. The kingdom also grows when those of us who are already God's children give ourselves to a deeper commitment. Our new life is in the now-but-not-yet, that constant struggle between the two kingdoms – between the kingdom of this world and God's kingdom. We should pray that God's kingdom will be established in our obedience, and that all we do would be to the honor and glory of our sovereign Lord.

3. The third way the kingdom is established is by the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we join John in his remark at the end of Revelation: "Even so, come Lord Jesus."

Not only do we have God's paternity, God's priority, and God's program, we also have

#### **IV. God's provision.**

*"Give us this day, our daily bread" (6:11).*

Laborers were commonly paid each day for the work they had achieved that day. The pay was frequently so abysmally low that it was almost impossible to have any savings. A day's pay purchased the day's food.

Jesus' followers were to learn to trust their heavenly Father to meet their physical needs. James reminds us that every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. God, Himself, is the ultimate source of every good – whether food, clothing, work, leisure, strength, intelligence, friendship, or whatever. We are dependent upon God His daily provision.

Sometimes we are arrogant about the material things that we have, forgetting that God is the source of all. We hoard more and more and refuse to give to Him, to His church, the tithe that serves to remind us that all we really have comes from the hand of God. "God, we're dependent upon you for our daily bread; please give it to us."

There are many places on this globe, even today – in fact the numbers may be rising – where people line up for just that: their day's provision of nourishment, their day's provision of bread. Sometimes it's hard for us to imagine being in a situation where you do not even know where your next meal is coming from. But make no mistake about it – most of the world waits on their daily provision of bread.

I came across an article entitled, "**Nothing but debt**" in the *Boston Globe*. It's about NBA players who have nothing left to show for their fame – no fortune remaining. When the

**playing days ended and the adulation faded, they found themselves with nothing – just mired in financial difficulty. Oh, you put in some unscrupulous agents, poor business investments, large taxes, greedy family members, bitter divorces, paternity suits, and crippling bad habits such as alcohol, drugs, and gambling, and it doesn't take long to work your way through four or five million dollars.**

**One such player, Michael Cooper, says, “All you see is the cash at first. You go out and you buy three cars. Nobody tells you about the tax you have to pay down the road – the registration, the insurance. Little details start to add up and you don't notice it.”**

**Some talked about team members playing cards on the plane, following the game, losing thousands of dollars before they ever get home. The young guys want to fit in, so they play too, although most of them can't afford it. (Jackie MacMullan, “Nothing But Debt,” *The Boston Globe*, 6/26/2005)**

You might have a million today. You might be waiting in line for your next meal the next.

God, may we all acknowledge you as the source of our daily bread.

God's provision.

## **V. God's pardon.**

Unlike some religions in which every single action carries eternal and unbreakable consequences, at the heart of Judaism and Christianity lies the belief that although human actions matter very deeply, forgiveness is possible and through God's love can become actual. Jesus assumes that we will need to ask for forgiveness – not on one or two rare occasions, but very regularly. This is a sobering thought, but it is matched by the comforting news that forgiveness is freely available as often as we need it.

But there is a condition which, remarkably enough, is brought right into the prayer itself. We, ourselves, must be forgiving people. The heart that will not open to forgive others will remain closed when God's own forgiveness is offered.

Look at verses 14-15.

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

If...then.

If you forgive, then God forgives you.

If you do not forgive, then God does not forgive you.

Could Jesus have been any clearer than this? To those of us who hoard and store in our hearts bitterness, grudges of days long past, and some sores as fresh as yesterday – old or new, great

offense or small, Jesus says you must forgive. If you don't forgive others, you have no expectation of the Father forgiving you.

## **VI. God's protection.**

*"Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (6:13a)*

So finally we come to God's protection.

The sinner whose evil of the past has been forgiven longs to be delivered from the tyranny of the future. It might be translated this way: "Do not allow us to be led into temptation that overwhelms us, but rescue us from the evil one."

According to some of the later rabbis, it was proper to place oneself into temptation in order to overcome it. (Babylonian Talmud *'Aboda Zara 17a,b*) Temptations were viewed as spiritual muscle builders for the faithful.

But a petition in the Lord's Prayer takes precisely the opposite approach. "Do not test me. I am not able to hold up." Jesus did not teach us to pray for strength so that we might successfully hurdle all the various difficulties of life that might come our way. But He taught us to pray that we might avoid them altogether. It is a confession of vulnerability that the Spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41) that best arms a person against the onslaughts of the evil one.

## **VII. God's Praise**

Now, when I say God's praise, I don't mean God's praise to man, but man's praise to God. The prayer ends – the doxology (and I know it was probably added by later communities of believers but, nonetheless it seems fitting) – *"For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."*

There is never anything wrong with praising God in your prayers. In fact, when we think about our ultimate position in the kingdom of God, it is declaring with the Divine Beings, "Holy. Holy. Holy. Holy art Thou, Lord God Almighty."

Sometimes to praise God, and not simply petition God for things – that even as we ask for our daily bread, we also praise Him for His greatness.

There you have the points of this prayer:

- God's paternity
- God's priority
- God's program
- God's provision
- God's pardon
- God's protection
- God's praise

That's the framework around which our prayers are to be built, Jesus said to His disciples.

Prayer is opening our life to God – inviting Him and His kingdom to reign and rule in our lives. Have you ever noticed that God never imposes His will upon us. As we yield Him the freedom, He acts in our lives.

To pray is to honor God: Hallowed be Thy Name.

To seek His reign: Thy Kingdom come.

To know His will: Thy will be done.

To acknowledge our dependence upon Him for our daily bread, and to ask His protection in the days ahead.

I was making a pastoral visit with a family. After visiting for a while and spending some time with them, I was gently slipping away. It's not usually like this for me, but for some reason the prayer bit seemed awkward to me that day. Maybe I was too tired. Maybe I didn't want to make them feel uncomfortable. I really wasn't sure they would appreciate it this time, so I simply nodded and headed out the door. "Oh pastor," they said with startled faces, "you're not going to leave before you pray for us, are you?" They knew better than I that prayer was powerful, that prayer made a difference. It was a good thing that I could do for them, and they were not going to let me escape without having accomplished it on their behalf.

I'm going to ask you some candid questions in closing.

- When is the last time you prayed to God?
- What was that prayer like? Was it simply a wish list, like you were talking to Santa Claus? Or was it opening up to the reign and rule of God in your life and in the life of your family?

You'll never know God – you'll never know Him unless you take the time to talk to Him.

Lord, teach us to pray.