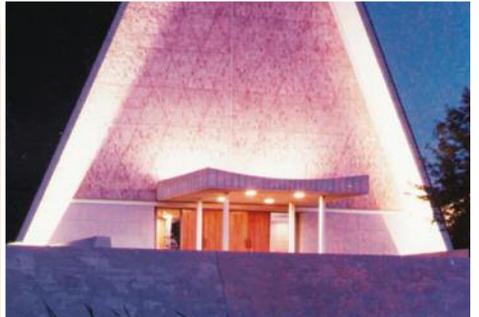
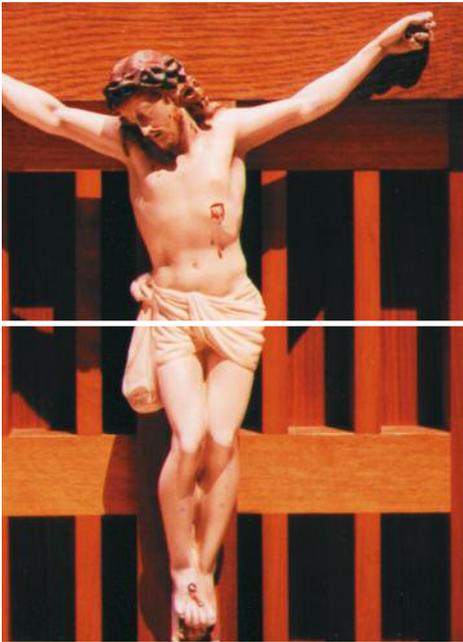


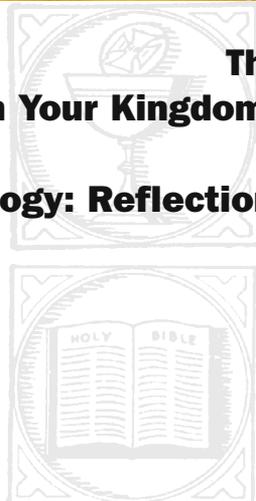
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# LIFE of the WORLD

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By the Rev. Dr. John Nordling

# THE PRAYER THAT JESUS GAVE

The Lord's Prayer is so short that it can be spoken in less than a minute. There is a depth to the prayer, however, which overwhelms everyone. Each word is crammed with meaning and the prayer itself is repetitive, so that minds wander. In so mouthing the vocables without meaning we are at risk of "heaping up empty phrases" (battalogo, Mt. 6.7) like the Gentiles who knew not how to pray. Then there is Luther's marvelous story about St. Bernard who complained that he could not finish a Lord's Prayer without being interrupted by foreign thoughts which impeded his praying. When a friend expressed surprise at this, St. Bernard bet him a stallion that he could do no better. The friend took up the bet and began to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven ... " Yet this thought had crept in before finishing the First Petition, "would the saddle belong to him also, in case he won the horse?" He stopped the prayer and conceded victory to St. Bernard. Luther concludes, "If you are able to speak one Lord's Prayer without any other thoughts of your own, I shall consider you a master. I cannot do it" (What Luther Says, Vol. 2., pg. 1087).

So a Christian learns to pray this prayer by fits and starts over time. The Small Catechism's teaching on the Lord's Prayer (Third Chief Part) is the best place to begin. Like that unnamed disciple in Luke's gospel, so we ask, "Lord, teach us to pray [proseuchesthai]" (Lk 11.1). The infinitive is in the present tense indicating, perhaps, that both the praying, and the learning how to pray, are both ongoing activities in a Christian's life.

## The Overall Structure

Every catechumen learns that there are seven petitions to this prayer. But the very placement of each petition is significant. After calling upon God as our Father in the Matthean version (Mt 6.9-13) we pray that God's Name might be holy, that His Kingdom might come, and that His Will might be done on earth among us. These are the three "You-petitions," the invocation of God directly in the second person singular (verses 9c-10), and there is progression from God's Name, which brings God's Kingdom through the Gospel so that, as hearts are changed, God's Will can be enacted here on earth among His forgiven Christians. Then follow the four somewhat longer "we-petitions" where we ask God for our bread, that He might forgive our sins, not lead us into temptation, and deliver us from evil (verses 11- 13). Luther adds another tremendous insight here, "The best part ... must be, "Thy name, Thy kingdom, etc. If this precedes, then that which is ours will certainly follow" (What Luther Says, Vol. 2, pg. 1095).

## Two Versions of the Abba Prayer

Modern scholars (U. Luz, Matthew 1-7, pg. 371; J.D.G. Dunn, Prayer in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, pg. 617) point out that the original language of the Lord's Prayer was almost certainly the people's Aramaic, or (less likely) Hebrew since many Jewish prayers of that time (cf. the Shemoneh Esreh; the Qaddish) were formulated in Hebrew. At a very early time, however, the Lord's Prayer was incorporated into Matthew and Luke in Greek and these two forms still nourish the Church. Matthew's version (6.9-13) especially retains a liturgical flavor-the three "You-petitions" begin with third person aorist imperatives and end with similar rhythm and rhyme schemes. Such structure might betray an emphasis upon actually saying the prayer in corporate worship or memorizing the prayer in catechesis.

There is final rhyme also in Luke's version (Luke 11.2 b-c), yet

two of the petitions (the Third and Seventh) are missing. Hence the Lucan version has been called the more "abrupt" of the two and possibly there is a more conscious echo here of Jesus' actual prayer style (J.D.G. Dunn, Prayer in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, pg. 620). Both versions are probably slimmed down versions of other Jewish prayers (particularly the Qaddish) which would have been known to contemporary Jews in longer, more ponderous forms. Luke shows (11.1) that Jesus taught this prayer as the model which would be peculiar to His disciples, over against those of John the Baptizer-and, one presumes, other rabbis. So Jesus' prime innovation was to teach His disciples the Abba prayer (Aramaic for "[O] Father!"), which is still reflected in Luke's very direct Pater ... (lacking Matthew's " ... Who art in heaven").

## Such Pressing Need for Prayer!

By now we have considered only the first word of the First Petition in any depth, yet there is so much more to consider. Parish pastors can be of great service here as they teach the Catechism periodically and so "learn the prayer" by constant repetition of it and familiarity. Perhaps they can be prevailed upon to preach the prayer sometimes to the entire congregation, petition by petition, and so allow a few of the wholesome "crumbs" to fall down to the rest of us (cf Mt 15.27; Mk 7.28). Christians need to learn to pray now as our Lord Jesus taught us. Among the more compelling images to emerge from the New Testament is that of the struggling church at prayer-virtually an embodiment of the Holy Ghost as the Word was preached and the Sacraments extended. In this way the Holy Ghost taught those first Christians how to pray, and so they became the new temple, the ones who bore God's holy Name (A.A. Just, The Lord's Prayer in Luke 9:51-24:53, pg. 461, added emphasis). This proclamation, sacraments and reflective prayer activity went on among all the threatened congregations of the New Testament-"the Spirit of God interceding in our weakness" (Rom 8.26a, 27b)-and in proximity to various crises mentioned in the New Testament narratives. Now our desperately godless age has come full circle. Such prayers-and such praying-is of vital significance once again.

## Matthew's Odd Expansion: "... on Earth as it is in Heaven"

We must resist every tendency in ourselves and in our teaching which would reduce the Lord and His prayer to some basic moral impulse. The Fifth Petition ("Forgive us ...") seems the most obvious place to scratch this surface, and once again the placement/order of petitions helps plumb the Gospel depths. Backing up a bit we note that the Third Petition in the Matthean version has been expanded; thus, appended to "Thy Will Be Done" (Mt 6.10b) is the slight expansion, " ... on earth as it is in heaven" (6.10c). Next comes the Fourth Petition (Bread), and only then the Fifth Petition (Forgiveness). And so the following questions arise, "What does "earthly" Bread have to do with "spiritual" Forgiveness?" And, "Does the Bread petition get in the way of or interrupt the flow of the idea that God's Will might be done " ... on earth as it is in heaven?"

However, each component of the Lord's Prayer is important and serves the Gospel, even if we cannot see just how. To be sure, the expansion of the Third Petition in Matthew may signify that "the Father's concerns are earth-wide [and] bigger than [our own]," and that "we should pray more largely than we ... do" (F.D.

Bruner, *The Lord's Prayer in The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, pg. 248). But such interpretation shifts the emphasis from God the Father, who is the Giver of all gifts (Gospel), and highlights instead ourselves and all that we can do (Law). And that would upset the focus and rhythm of the prayer, "First God bestows sonship through Jesus, His Son, and with that gift comes holiness and righteousness. Only then can one call upon God as Father and hallow His Name" (A.A. Just, *The Lord's Prayer in Luke 9:51-24:53*, pg. 464, added emphasis).

Hence, the expansion to the Third Petition must do more than stress the cosmic nature of the prayer (F.D. Bruner, *The Lord's Prayer in The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, pg. 248). Rather, it is some type of statement as to how God has "broken into this age in Jesus" (A.A. Just, *The Lord's Prayer in Luke 9:51-24:53*, pg. 466). We constantly minimize the Incarnation of our Lord, but Jesus Christ the Creator has united heaven and earth in the flesh of His Son (A.A. Just, *The Lord's Prayer in Luke 9:51-24:53*, pg. 468). This insight, then, will have the greatest implication for "our daily Bread" = ton arton hemon ton epiousion, Mt 6.11. Interpreters are at a loss as to what the adjective epiousios means here (cf. Lenski, 269; Foerster; Luz, 380-83); most settle upon the meaning, "Give us today our bread for the tomorrow," and so the material dimensions of Bread are given fullest emphasis-as indeed they are in Luther's explanation to the Fourth Petition. The idea that Bread means "everything that belongs to the support and welfare of the body" is a powerful one which merits the deepest contemplation by the people of God and thus many sermons proclaimed by their faithful pastors! The Catechism is so wonderfully concrete here, "all that we have is ... a gracious gift of God [so that] we may receive it with thanksgiving" (Small Catechism, #228, original emphasis). Thus, that wife, that particular car, that job and vocation are scarcely incidental but rather "on loan" from God by way of Fatherly grace and mercy.

**The Forgiveness of Sins: the "Chief Thing" in this Prayer**

But there is still a dimension which many who pray this prayer never consider. And that is the idea that just as Bread is the staple of all physical life (and the holy Lord's Supper provides sustenance to the communicant which is both earthly and heavenly), so the forgiveness of sins is the essential "food" for the spiritual life of a Christian, and our need for Forgiveness is constant and ongoing (A.A. Just, *The Lord's Prayer in Luke 9:51-24:53*, pg. 469). The longest expansion in the prayer is appended to the Fifth Petition: "... as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Mt 6.12b). This same idea is elaborated upon by our Lord in the verses which immediately follow the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6.14-15) and so, by such emphasis, the "Chief Thing" of the Lord's Prayer must be located precisely here, in the Fifth Petition.

Therefore, this is either the most frightening idea in the world (that we must suffer every one who does us wrong in order to be forgiven ourselves, cf. Dunn, 622), or a great comfort as we come actually to realize the forgiveness of sins in the place where the Lord has located each one of us to bear His Name. For the forgiveness depends not so much upon our Christ-like humility,

and long-suffering (Law), as it is rather done to each of us in spite of ourselves-screaming and kicking against the goads, as it were (Acts 26.14)-first in our holy Baptism into Christ, then in our access to the proclaimed Gospel and the holy Absolution in a specific locality, and only then, to be sure, reflected outward to the other Christians and sinners among whom we have each been set to be a Christian in actual fact.

Here the prayer is so horrifyingly concrete whereas our old Adam prefers abstraction. When we pray this Fifth Petition we should not be thinking primarily about forgiving every bloke in the world who might possibly do us wrong. Rather, God has set each one of us among many fellow sinners with whom there is ample opportunity to experience sin first hand and then give/receive the forgiveness which Christ earned for us on the cross in actual fact. In addition to each one of us individually whom God forgives "daily and richly" (Small Catechism, Creed,



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Third Article) must be set our own particular spouse, with all his/her particular sins which vex us so particularly much. Then there are our children, other family members, and of course the other Christians in a particular congregation where God has called me in particular to hear the Gospel and receive the Bread of Life. In all these horizontal relationships various sins and slights are sure to come and in fact they will continue to sting throughout life. Nonetheless, Jesus has been given for each one of us in particular and He meets us at the communion rail and forgives us vast amounts of sin every day in our baptism. As we contemplate the beauty of His cross, and hear the "He is risen!" from the pulpit, we too enjoy forgiveness and life while in the midst of many sins and problems (Jn 3.14-15). Hence the sinning against and "owing" each other in Christ are hardly incidental intrusions into lives of peaceful repose, but rather flesh-and-blood sinners who have been placed into our paths deliberately by God the Father so that our very limited and imperfect forgiveness comes to mirror and even incarnate the full and complete forgiveness we receive each day in Christ.

Of course, if we refuse to forgive, that is indicative of an unfaith which insists that God deal with us as our sins deserve, not according to His mercy (parable of the unforgiving servant, Mt 18.23-35), "He who will not forgive his neighbor will not obtain forgiveness from God, but will in this petition

call down upon himself the anger of God" (Small Catechism, #234, original emphasis).

**So Much to Learn, So Little Time!**

But enough. We have glimpsed a facet or two of this many splended diamond. Petitions remain untouched, along with the Doxology and the great Amen. But there will be time for them later, in other opportunities to learn the prayer that Jesus gave. Is not our Christian life a constant process of dying to self and rising to life in Jesus, gazing first upon a few humble aspects of the Gospel, then desiring a bit more-and finally hungering and thirsting for righteousness, like castaways in the desert (cf. Ps 42.1ff; Mt 5.6)? So in this matter of prayer, "Lord, teach us to pray!" (Luke 11.1).

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