

The Lord's Prayer
Matthew 6:9-15

Is anyone in charge here? In the light of today's news, that's not an unreasonable question. Our ongoing struggle with COVID is at best months away from its conclusion – and that's if the vaccines and treatments work as they should, and the virus doesn't mutate too much in the meantime. Our Federal politicians continue to be at each other's throats, with our Presidential candidates unable to conceal their mutual contempt. We've had so many hurricanes this year that we're well into the Greek alphabet, with another month of the season yet to go – will we have to start on Hebrew next?

And all that's on top of all the normal struggles of life – handling the daily responsibilities of our jobs or businesses, managing our own sometimes failing health, caring for parents and children and spouses, and trying desperately to stay sane in the process. No, when we are at the end of our rope, when the need for prayer becomes so obvious, we should have no problem with Jesus teaching us how to pray.

And isn't the beginning of the Lord's Prayer just what we need in scary times like these? For to Whom does Jesus teach us to pray? Not to Our God, or Our Lord, or Our King, but to Our Father. Think about that. The God Who is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth is nevertheless the loving Father of all those who have trusted in Christ as Savior and bowed the knee to Him as Lord. Yes, because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ on the cross, all those in Christ have been adopted into God's family. We have not only been washed clean of our sins, but have been made the very sons and daughters of God.

That's the first thing Jesus wants us Christians to think about when we go to God in prayer – not our fears that we don't measure up to God's standards, not our anxieties about all the problems in our lives, but the sure, certain, unshakable truth that God loves us and has made us His own. That's good news, no matter what problems we may be facing today.

But if God is our Father, He is also in Heaven. And that's good news too, for it means He has some serious perspective on all our problems. Because He exists outside of time, all of human history is present-tense to Him - as Peter has taught us, to God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. That means that nothing catches Him off-guard.

Moreover, because God can see and understand everything that happens everywhere at once, He knows how all the seemingly chaotic events of our lives fit together. He knows why everything happens the way it does – even wars and plagues and hurricanes are no mystery to Him. So, if having a loving Father is a great comfort, having a Father Who is in Heaven should give us even more assurance.

But because our Father is in Heaven, that not only means He is high and lifted up, separate from all the problems of this world. He is also separate from sin, inalterably opposed to anything that goes against His good and perfect will. He is holy, holy, holy, perfect in His purity.

And given such a perspective on God, given our assurance of His fatherly love, and of His eternal sovereignty, and of His spotless perfection, Jesus teaches us that the first thing we should ask God is that His name would be hallowed, would be treated as holy. This of course involves a desire that we ourselves would give God the worship and praise that are His due. But this request also includes God bringing other people to an understanding of His power and purity, His might and majesty. Wanting God's name to be hallowed means wanting a great multitude of people all over the world to give Him the respect and honor that He alone deserves.

But it is not enough for people simply to respect God in this way. Let's say, just for example, that you happened to be driving a bit too fast, going east on I-20 from Monroe to Rayville to Delhi to Tallulah. Now, you know that the Louisiana state police take a dim view of speeding. You know they have the power to stop you and even to arrest you. But once you make it across the bridge to Vicksburg, they can't touch you. Their power and their principles are unchanged – they still have their fast cars and their sidearms, but they have no authority over you in Mississippi, no matter how fast you may be driving.

In the same way, lots of people, from Pharaoh in the time of Moses to Nebuchadnezzar in the time of Daniel to Simon the sorcerer in the days of Peter were willing to admit that God is powerful. But that didn't mean that any of them worshipped the One True God, or submitted themselves to His law of love. They recognized God's power, but not His authority over them.

That's why Jesus next teaches us to pray that God's Kingdom would come. This of course refers to our desire that Christ would return, putting down all opposition to His righteous rule, rendering perfect justice to His enemies and making all things right. But until that day, desiring His Kingdom to come also expresses a longing that more and more people around the world would not just admit that God is powerful and holy, but that they would recognize His authority over every part of their lives.

But even this is not enough – for as we all know, it is possible to admit someone's power and authority and still not obey him from the heart. Let's think again about our purely hypothetical motorist, recently arrived from Louisiana. Now, he's heading down Highway 61 toward home. On this side of the river, he knows the Mississippi highway patrol has the power and the authority to stop him for speeding. But that knowledge alone isn't enough to make him observe the speed limit, is it? No, he

probably won't slow down until he catches sight of one of their patrol cars – but by then, he may be seeing the blue lights flashing behind him.

That's why Jesus teaches us to pray, not just that God's power and holiness would be acknowledged, and not just that His Kingdom authority would be recognized, but that His will would actually be done, that people all over this world would obey Him as freely and eagerly from the heart as all the angels do in Heaven.

And so, before we move on to the part of the prayer that is frankly the most familiar and comfortable to us, we need to take a quick peek in the mirror – does this sort of humble submission characterize our own view of God, our own relationship with Him? Sure, we love to hear about how God is our loving Father. And it's comforting to realize that He knows everything and is completely in charge of all the circumstances of our lives. And I suppose we are ready to acknowledge His power and authority over us. But are we really obedient to His Word? Do we submit ourselves to His will in all things? Are we willing to accept His timing where it comes to our most urgent requests?

Oh, we might think we are, but don't our own prayers call our humility into question? For isn't it easy, in the face of all our truly urgent problems, to begin our prayers not in verse 9 with a burning desire for God's glory to be revealed to everyone in the world, but in verse 11 with pushy pleas for things we need from God? Isn't it all too easy, even when we pray, thus to be focused on the creation rather than the Creator, on the gifts rather than the Giver, on ourselves rather than on God?

And isn't it easy for us to be impatient in our prayers, insisting that we know what's best, that we know what we need and when we need it? But when we pray this way, are we really humbling ourselves before God's power and authority? Are we really submitting to Him, wanting His will to be done, or do we just want our own way?

For think again about how Jesus teaches us to pray for ourselves – "Give us this day our daily bread." That means that just as we pray that God's will, and not our will would be done, we are to pray that God would meet our basic needs, not that He would satisfy all our desires. And we are to pray this prayer each day – not straining forward, wanting God to give us some sort of guarantee on His provision for us in the months or years to come. Instead, our prayers should reflect a childlike trust in our loving, powerful, Heavenly Father to provide for us and our loved ones in His way, according to His timetable.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I get to this point in the Lord's Prayer, it's clear to me that my heart is not where it needs to be. Not only do I get things out of order, being more concerned with my wants than with God's glory. I'm also not very good at trusting God to take care of all my problems. In the midst of this increasingly crazy, mixed-up world, it's so easy to give myself over to

anxiety and fear. In the face of my own weakness, my own inability to set things right, it's so easy to become frustrated or discouraged, or even to fall into despair.

And that's why Jesus points in verse 12 to our greatest need: forgiveness. We need God to forgive us for not paying Him the debt of love, devotion, trust, and obedience that He deserves. But we can ask for God's forgiveness with the same confidence that we can pray for His provision, and for the same reason – our all-powerful Heavenly Father loves us and in His mercy He has provided the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, an atonement sufficient to cover all the ways in which we have been and all the ways we continue to be out of accord with God's good and perfect will.

But if Jesus' death covers all the sins we've ever committed, wouldn't His atonement be just as sufficient to forgive our enemies' sins as well? So, if God can forgive us for the ways that we have rejected His will and defied His authority, if God can forgive our sins against Him, sins that required the Son of God to die on a cross, doesn't it make sense for us to extend the same sort of grace to those who have hurt us in much less serious ways? For no matter how badly any of our enemies may have hurt us, they have only offended another unworthy sinner, not the divine majesty of God. Their sins against us pale in comparison to our sins against God.

And that makes this kind of mutual forgiveness such a clear test of our hearts, doesn't it? It's such a good way to determine if we really are submitting ourselves to our loving, Heavenly Father, to our holy Lord and King. For if we are unwilling to extend the same grace to others that Christ has shown to us, can we really say that we belong to Him? Can we truly claim that His loving, forgiving, cleansing Spirit lives within us?

No, given how weak we are, given how prone to sin we remain, it's no wonder that Jesus next encourages us to pray that God would keep us away from trials and temptations in this life. For even after Christ has forgiven us and washed us clean from sin, it's so easy for us to slip back into those old, hateful, selfish ways of thinking, isn't it? It's so easy for us to lose sight of our loving, Heavenly Father, giving ourselves over again to anxiety and fear. It's so easy for us to listen to the lies of the evil one, to resist the will of our Almighty King, to refuse to love others in the same self-sacrificial, unconditional way Christ has loved us.

And that's why Jesus ends His prayer the way He does. For if we begin the Lord's Prayer by getting our focus right, by remembering that God is our loving Heavenly Father, but also our all-seeing, all-knowing, Almighty King, the end of the prayer reminds us of these great truths in telling us why we pray. For no matter how urgent our worldly needs and those of our loved ones may be, and no matter

how great is our need for cleansing from our sin as well as for protection from temptation in the future, at the end of the day, neither our prayer nor our life is about us. It's not even about our loved ones.

No, the reason we pray to God is because He is the focus, the reason for all of life. That's why, as we close in prayer, we should acknowledge once again that God is the One Who is the King – not us. God is the One Who has all the power – not us. And that's why God deserves all the glory, even for faithful prayers that we pray, even for faithful works that we do.