



Reflecting on the Lord's Prayer

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The Lord's Prayer has shaped the lives of Jesus' followers ever since he first taught it to his disciples. Rooted in Jesus' relationship to the Father, the prayer encompasses the whole of life, inviting us to pray for God's presence and power to change the world and to change us.

The Lord's Prayer is found in two versions in the New Testament (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). In Matthew's Gospel, it sits alongside Jesus' teaching on giving and fasting, while in Luke's Gospel, it is followed by Jesus' teaching on the importance of persistence and faith in prayer. Although Luke's shorter version may be closer to Jesus' original prayer, Matthew's longer version fills out the details and is closest to that used in churches today.

For those familiar with the Lord's Prayer, it is easy to rush through the words without always grasping what they mean. This short guide, then, briefly explores its meaning and offers prompts for praying with each clause.

Praying to the Father

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your Name"

Jesus encourages his followers to pray to God as "Father", with the Greek word probably translating the Aramaic term 'Abba', a familiar term for one's Dad. God is not a distant deity but a compassionate parent. This Father, however, is also "in heaven" and so - unlike earthly fathers - rules over all things and all people. The Father is also "our Father", a God who calls us into community and invites us to share our needs and prayers with others.

"Hallowed be your name" seems an odd request, since isn't God's name - God's character - already holy? But the request is about God becoming known and honoured by all as the one true God, 'set apart' as holy in a world of competing idols (Ezekiel 36:16-23).

- When praying, recall that you are in the presence of a God who is your Father but also the ruler of all. Dwell on the gift of God's presence with you.

Praying for the kingdom

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven"

Jesus' central message is that the kingdom of God is coming in and through his work, and so here he invites his followers to pray for its growth. To pray for the kingdom is to pray for the will of God to be done on earth, as it is perfectly in heaven; for the poor to be fed, for the captive to be set free, for the sick to be healed (Luke 4:16-18). It is to pray that all would come to know the reconciling love of God, who forgives the sinner, restores the broken, and heals the sick.

- When praying for the kingdom, bring your prayers for others to mind. You might pray through the various 'circles' of your lives: your close relationships (family and friends); your neighbourhood; your workplace; your country; the world.

Praying for ourselves

"Give us today our daily bread"

Jesus encourages his followers to pray for their sustenance each day, bread being the staple food of the ancient Mediterranean. God is interested in sustaining our bodies as well as our hearts, giving us food as well as faith. Some have also seen spiritual needs embraced within this prayer for sustenance - the 'bread' of God's presence and grace.

- When praying, bring to God your physical needs - food, shelter, work - as well as your spiritual needs.

Praying for ourselves

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”

Jesus assumes that we will often fail and fall, and so includes a prayer for forgiveness for when we do. Like a Father who loves his wayward child, God is always ready to restore us (Luke 15:11-32). And yet a sobering qualification is also included; our forgiveness is linked to our forgiveness of others. If we hold on to bitter resentment, this can hinder the flow of grace in and through our lives (Matthew 18:23-35). Realising the depth of God’s forgiveness of us, however, can help us extend such forgiveness to others, since the one who is forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:47).

- When praying, ask for God’s forgiveness in those areas in which you fall short of the call to love God and love others.

Praying for deliverance

“Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil”

Jesus encourages his followers to pray for deliverance in those situations that go beyond what they can bear. The “time of trial” may refer to a period of tribulation in the end-times, or may more generally be times of extreme difficulty. “Evil” may be an evil circumstance or the evil one. Either way, this part of the prayer is about asking God for protection. Like grass in a field, we are easily moved by the winds of circumstance, but God is the steadfast presence who gives us grace in our time of need.

- When praying, know that God is present in the struggle and temptations of life. God will give the grace to survive the trials that come your way.

Praying to the God of the kingdom

“For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever”

The prayer begins where it started – by turning our eyes on the God whom we address, and so orientating our lives around that reality. The acknowledgement that the “kingdom, the power, and the glory” belong to God puts things in perspective. Although it is a mystery why some prayers are answered and others seem not to be, God is ultimately in control. God can be trusted.

- When praying, give thanks that God is ultimately in control, and that – however mysterious – God can bring good out of evil, hope out of adversity, and life out of death (Romans 4:17).

Going further

- Why not consider praying the Lord’s Prayer as a daily practice, joining Christians around the world in praying it each day at noon. For further information, see www.24-7prayer.com/prayer/lordsprayer
- For some great resources exploring further the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer, see Archbishop Rowan Williams and Sister Wendy Beckett, *Living the Lord’s Prayer* (Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2007), chapter 14 of Eugene Peterson’s *The Word made flesh* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), and the modern classic N T Wright, *The Lord and his prayer* (London, SPCK, 1996).

For a range of resources on engaging spiritual practices, visit www.deepeningdiscipleship.org.uk.