

"Teach us to pray"

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning comes from Luke chapter 11 verses 1 to 13. One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.

When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples. He said to them, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation. Then Jesus said to them, Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, Friend, lend me three loaves of bread.

A friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him. And suppose the one inside answers, Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed.

[1 : 14] I can't get up and give you anything. I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, Yet because of your shameless audacity, he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

So I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened to you. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?

Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

In the middle of May, The Telegraph reported that online searches for prayer have experienced a 50% surge in recent months at the highest levels that have ever been recorded.

[2 : 35] Perhaps it's unsurprising that at times of global crisis, we look for answers. We look to a higher power. Many of us don't know how to pray, so we turn where we turn when we want the answer to any question.

We turn to Google. And I certainly hope that in doing that, people have found useful answers in those searches. But what about you? Do you know how to pray?

Maybe some of you have never tried to pray on your own. Maybe for some of you, your only experience of prayer has been, well, me praying a few minutes ago, or prayers at a wedding or a funeral.

And here, one of Jesus' disciples asks him to teach them to pray. And you and I, we get to listen in to Jesus' answer.

So I hope that if you don't feel like you know how to pray, I hope by the end of this, that you will feel like you know how, even if you never have before. Or maybe some of us, we feel like we ought to know how to pray.

[3 : 37] We should be able to pray. And yet, if we're honest, we find we're struggling. We're not at all confident that we're doing it right. We try on our own to pray, but we get distracted thinking about 16 other things.

And maybe we try praying out loud with others. But when we do, we find we're stumbling over our words and we're getting tied up in knots. And it's all very uncomfortable. Folks, if you were writing a job description for a church minister, well, praying definitely ought to be on that list of responsibilities somewhere, shouldn't it?

But I feel these kinds of struggles. I find these things difficult. I get distracted. I stumble over my words. So I trust that this guidance here in Luke chapter 11 will equip and encourage me and you in

those kinds of situations.

But maybe for some of you, maybe you do feel like, well, you know what you're doing with prayer. You have got some experience. You're feeling fairly confident. Well, if that's you, I want to point out that many of Jesus' disciples knew how to pray.

They had been praying for years and yet they asked to be taught how. Because they asked for Jesus' ways of praying. They wanted to pray in his way. And I wonder if perhaps for all of us, however confident we might feel, if perhaps there's merit in kind of holding up our pattern of prayer and comparing it to what Jesus proposes here.

[5 : 08] Suspect that most of us could benefit from a fresh consideration of the method that he lays out. Now, we're not going to have time for all 13 verses that Jesus says here about prayer.

We'll not have time for all of that this morning. So we're going to focus on the prayer itself in verses one to four. And we'll look at the rest of this section next time. And today, I certainly don't have an earth-shatteringly clever structure of headings.

But I have three quick introductory points that are worth noting. And then the prayer itself breaks down into an opening address. Two requests concerning God himself.

And then three requests for ourselves. So our headings are things to note at the opening address, requests about God, and requests about ourselves.

So the first introductory thing to note, this prayer does not exist in a vacuum. I don't know what he's doing on my screen there.

[6 : 08] He's not meant to appear yet. Sorry about that. Anyway, this prayer is not abstract. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. Luke records this incident along the road to Jerusalem.

And it's here for a reason. Remember, we said when we started this section, looking at the journey to Jerusalem and Jesus' journey to the cross, we said that this journey through the geography of Palestine, that this provides the opportunity for Jesus to teach about our journey alongside him. Disciples following in his footsteps. So this is precisely a prayer for those who follow Jesus on what? Tom Wright, that's him down there. That's why he's appeared. He's meant to appear now. This is what Tom Wright calls the kingdom journey. So the requests of this prayer aren't chosen at random. Jesus is heading for Jerusalem because there he's going to act on behalf of God's name. His name that has been besmirched by his people's rebellion. Jesus is here on earth bringing in the kingdom of God and achieving the new exodus that makes it a reality.

[7 : 14] Jesus has provided the bread for the journey already and he's soon going to institute the breaking of bread as that ongoing sign of his presence and memorial of his death. Jesus is offering forgiveness and will go to the cross where that will be accomplished.

He's shown that he expects his own disciples to have a forgiving attitude and he's at war with the powers of evil and will win a decisive victory on Calvary.

So this is a prayer that grows out of the mission of Jesus himself. It is ideally situated both as it stands and as a framework for wider praying.

Ideal for his followers ever since. This prayer is not abstract. Secondly, notice that this is primarily a corporate prayer. Whilst it's one disciple who asks, the response is plural.

Every first person pronoun in this prayer is a plural. Us, not me. We, not I. Now folks, I certainly wouldn't want to discourage you from praying this prayer on your own or discourage you from any time spent praying alone.

[8 : 23] But I wonder if maybe we've swung the pendulum a little too far in that direction. That perhaps we're suffering from an attempt to make faith too private and individualistic.

And I think in that we are following an increasingly individualistic culture. So perhaps we would do well to prioritise more family worship rather than an individual quiet time.

Maybe we should more prefer the corporate gathered worship of the church over either of those things. Because the Lord's Prayer says, us, not me.

Now that means, if you find it easier to pray with other people, then rather than spending your time berating yourself for the fact that you find it hard to play on your own, well maybe you'd be better off planning some time to pray with other people regularly.

And I think that is something that we probably could all manage to do, whether we live alone or whether we live with others. After all, if we've learnt anything over the last couple of months, we've learnt that it's possible to have genuine connection with people over a video chat.

[9 : 29] And for that matter, possible to have genuine heartfelt times of prayer. Perhaps many of us would do well to spend more time praying with other people.

Third, don't be worried about the variation. Maybe, maybe some of you, as Shona started reading verse five, maybe you looked down at your Bibles in confusion thinking, has she missed a bit out here?

Because this isn't the Lord's Prayer as you learned it at school, is it? I mean, never mind the thou's and the thine's, that there's whole chunks of it missing. Now, don't worry. No, Shona didn't miss anything out.

But we're, most of us, we're more familiar with the version that Matthew records in his gospel. It's not a problem. There's two possible explanations for why we have these different versions.

Either, Jesus taught similar things twice. This is very plausible. Maybe he taught kind of on his own initiative, as it's recorded in Matthew. And then at this later point in his ministry, he responds to a question from a disciple who wasn't present on the previous occasion.

[10 : 34] And whilst Jesus teaches broadly the same thing, he doesn't use exactly the same phrasing each time. Trust me, as a minister here, when somebody asks you similar questions, you get similar but slightly different answers.

This is very plausible. Alternatively, Jesus taught this kind of just once on one occasion, but the disciples felt free to record the general sense of what Jesus said, rather than to record the precise words that came out of his mouth.

I incline to think the former of these explanations. But either of these explanations is possible, and neither of them is a threat to the accuracy of God's word.

And both of these possibilities have a clear implication. That's why I bring this up. See, either Jesus taught the prayer in two different ways, or the divinely inspired, spirit-guided evangelists who recorded what Jesus said felt free to vary the phrasing.

Whichever, whether it was Jesus himself who varied it, or them who varied it, whichever it is, the point is, the exact words don't matter. Jesus is teaching here a pattern, a framework, some themes for prayer, not a magic formula, or a spell, or an incantation.

[11 : 56] You absolutely can pray it exactly as written here, or for that matter, exactly as written in Matthew. That is a good and valid thing to do. And especially if you're feeling like you have no idea what you're doing, well, getting started by praying this word for word is good.

That is a good thing to do. We don't have to stop there. And the next step, perhaps, is to pray the prayer using each line as a heading, using it as a prompt, a spur to expanded prayer in those particular areas of life and thought.

And it's in that sense that we're going to dive in to the prayer now. So, Jesus said to them, when you pray, say, Father.

And most people commenting on this prayer, most of them are agreed that this opening word is the most distinctive new element in how Jesus teaches his disciples to pray.

Because praying isn't a new idea. This isn't a new thing that Jesus suddenly introduces. The disciples have been praying before. In fact, the opening question there asks Jesus to do just as John did for his disciples in teaching them to pray.

[13 : 10] And most of the things that come up as things to pray for, most of them have their roots in Jewish prayers recorded in the Old Testament. And in fact, the idea of God as Father to his people, that's not a new idea either.

If you were around for our series in the book of Exodus, you might remember that in chapter 4, verse 22, Moses is commanded to say to Pharaoh, this is what the Lord says, Israel is my firstborn son.

And I told you, let my son go so he may worship me. But you refuse to let him go so I will kill your firstborn son. If Israel is God's firstborn son, then God is Israel's father.

And this isn't the only place. So the relationship isn't new. But addressing God in this way is new. Nowhere in the whole of the devotional literature produced by the ancient Jews, nowhere do we find anyone addressing God as Abba, as Father.

This is stunningly intimate. This is not groveling before a despot. This is bringing simple requests to a loving Father.

[14 : 33] And disciples are being assured of God's loving care for them. They can ask with a certainty of being heard because they approach a loving Father. Now folks, for you and me, this

means we do not have to be scared to pray.

See, God is not like a genie. He's not looking for ways that he can catch you out and technically fulfill what you pray for, but in a way that makes you wish you'd never asked.

No, no. God is a loving Father. And a better one than even the best of fathers here on earth. We could spend more time on this, but we're going to move on not because this is unimportant, but because this idea of God as Father is going to be expanded in verses 5 to 13.

So we'll come back to these themes next time. Next up, the rest of verse 2 comprises two very simple requests about God himself.

Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Now, hallowed, it's not an everyday word for us, is it? If you don't know it from here in the Lord's Prayer, well, either Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows or maybe the 2015 horror film, maybe that's where your mind goes when you hear the word hallow. [15:55] But the idea here isn't actually terribly complex. Other translations opt for your name be honoured as holy or may your name be kept holy or regarded as holy.

See, the actual holiness of God is not subject to change. God does not become more or less holy. But how he's treated by people on earth, well, that varies massively, doesn't it?

We have a tendency, we have a tendency to drag God's name through the mud, to blame him for everything that goes wrong, to treat his name as a curse word that we barely even pay attention to saying.

A tendency to profane him by treating him as though he were a man like us. We whittle him down and we chip bits off so that we can wrap our heads around an idea of God, so that we can make him safe and tame.

We remake God in our own image. Well, this prayer stands opposed to that. This is a prayer that God will be God, that he will protect his reputation, that he will be spoken of with appropriate reverence and honour.

[17:11] Perhaps we do well to note that this stands at the head of the prayer, that this is the first concern for God's own honour, that our first focus perhaps should not be for our own benefit, whether practical or spiritual.

Those things will come, but they follow along after a focus on what God is rightly due, the honour that is due his name.

Now, a natural follow-on from praying for the honour of God's name is to pray for the increase of his kingdom.

Well, that's definitely not the next slide. It's one of those days, folks. The technology is not on my side.

A natural follow-on from praying for the honour of God's name is to pray for the increase of his kingdom. Now, theologians like to tie themselves up in knots over whether this second line is a prayer for the kingdom to come now in the sense of God's will being done, or whether it is praying for the end of days, for God's kingdom to come fully and completely.

[18:26] That's only going to happen when Christ returns in power as he promised to do. Well, maybe it's a cop-out, but on this occasion I don't think we need to pick one or the other of those two, but rather we can and we should pray for both.

For both the reality of God's kingdom right now and for the fullness of its coming in the future. See, Jesus spoke of the coming of the kingdom as a present reality during his ministry on earth.

Jesus sent the twelve in chapter nine and the larger group of disciples in chapter ten. He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God has come near. And when we look at the world around us, isn't it natural that we pray for God's kingdom to come?

Surely we want more people to recognize his authority. We want more people to be living his ways rather than living according to their own standards. And we want this not only because it's glorifying to God, but also because we know it will be for the good of humanity as well.

We pray for the here and now, for God's kingdom to grow across the world and in our own hearts. But we also know that it will not grow to its full extent here and now.

[19:47] We know Satan's rule will not be wholly brought to an end until God acts finally and decisively. And so in this same phrase we pray also for that day to come.

It's the penultimate sentence of the Bible. Come, Lord Jesus. And then in Revelation chapter 6 the martyrs cry out to God how long until you judge the inhabitants of the earth.

It is right and proper that we pray for that day to come. So we've had these two requests about God himself.

we turn next to our own lives. Three requests in verses 3 and 4. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins for we also forgive everyone who sins against us and lead us not into temptation.

Daily bread. We're not going to explore this in massive depth but here's a few quickfire points on this one. First, when you hear bread don't just think of a sandwich.

[20 : 51] This word is frequently a reference to food more generally. So if you're gluten intolerant and you want to pray for rice instead that's okay. And don't think that this is meant to be limited to a sort of minimum necessary.

The idea here is not praying for an allowance of gruel but rather praying to God for our everyday needs in the broadest sense thereof.

Second, notice this is a prayer for a practical physical need. One might even say a prayer for a mundane thing. Folks, don't think that your prayers need to be abstract and esoteric.

Don't think God is only interested in your mind or in your soul that you can only pray for spiritual things. No, no. God knows all that you need and he invites you here specifically to pray for such things.

And that would extend to praying for shelter, for bodily health, and so on and so on and so on. We pray for our physical, practical needs. Thirdly, notice this is daily bread, that it is given each day.

[22 : 04] That's what we're invited to pray for. Now, this doesn't mean that there is some bizarre virtue in being paid your wages daily instead of monthly or something like that, but rather the point is that we require ongoing continual provision.

That we're not going to be people who ask for provision for a lengthy period so that then we can proceed to forget all about God while we enjoy the results of it. Now, our lives are meant to be lived in a state of continual dependence upon God.

It's beneficial to us to pray daily for our practical needs because it reminds us that whilst our practical needs are met, mediated to us by our employer or by the government or whoever, that they come from God via these other places.

We do well to thank God for the food on our tables at each meal and for the beds that we sleep in each night. Nevertheless, man does not live by bread alone, and so we continue into two petitions concerned more with spiritual well-being.

Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. Suddenly, this isn't quite such a comfortable prayer to pray, is it?

[23 : 26] We don't like to be reminded or to remind ourselves of that matter, we don't like to be reminded that we're sinners, that we're indebted to God, that we owe him restitution. It's not comfortable to be reminded of that, and yet one wonderfully in this prayer, whilst it does remind us of that, wonderfully we're invited to pray for the forgiveness of those sins.

God doesn't demand that we bring restitution. We stand beneath a debt we could never afford to repay. Our sins are many, each and every day, and yet his mercy is more.

His mercy is greater than we can comprehend. Daily, indeed more than daily, we are going to fail. And as often as necessary, we're invited to come and to pray, Father, forgive us our sins.

We're invited to come and pray that confident in the promise that he will indeed do so. But maybe harder to think through is the second half of this one.

For we also forgive everyone who sins against us. thinking this through, Walter Liefeld, he helpfully points out that the person who's praying this, he's already called God Father.

[24 : 43] So the person saying this is already a believer, already justified and without guilt through the death of Christ. And therefore the forgiveness that he must extend to others, it is not the basis of his salvation, but rather a prerequisite for daily fellowship with the Father in the sense of 1 John chapter 1.

Friends, let's be entirely clear, your forgiveness springs only from the mercy of God himself, from his grace, not any human merit, not any merit from our willingness to forgive others, not any merit from supposed good works, no, from God's grace alone.

Let's be clear about that, but let's not think of it in a way that renders this section toothless. Matthew 18 reminds us that if we're unwilling to forgive others, we demonstrate that we haven't understood, we haven't appreciated forgiveness from God.

Indeed, we may very well be showing that we have not really known his forgiveness at all. Luke chapter 7 verse 47, Jesus says, whoever has been forgiven little, loves little.

So our forgiveness from God is not here made conditional upon our forgiveness of others, but we are invited to pray, to declare to God that we have indeed forgiven others.

[26 : 16] Well folks, let's not lie to God in our prayers, shall we? we do well to pray for forgiveness of our own sins at least daily, and in that context to consider also whether we need to ask forgiveness from others, and to whom we ought rightly to be extending forgiveness ourselves.

Finally, lead us not into temptation. Again, actually this is at first perhaps slightly confusing, isn't it? Because we point to James 1 verse 13 and say God does not tempt anyone.

Just so. So when we pray, lead us not into temptation, it shouldn't be because we think that unless we pray that, God is going to otherwise entice us to do evil.

He categorically will not do so. Now that's not necessarily a barrier to praying such a prayer, because the Bible is fine with encouraging us to pray for God to act in accordance with how he's already promised to act.

But I don't think that's quite what's happening here. See, the same Greek word that means temptation also means testing or trial.

[27 : 31] And it gets used both of temptation, temptation to sin as we normally think about it, and trial or testing. It gets used both ways in the New Testament. And I think it's the latter here.

And this isn't trial so much in the sense of a law court. This isn't the testing that reveals the truth, but rather, as John Noland puts it, trial here is that which puts pressure on one, that which is trying.

And in this sense, we are not constantly under trial, but periodically in life the pressure mounts. And that is what we're praying about here.

If that's what we're praying, then we're praying, we're praying, Lord, let me not be like the second kind of seed in the parable of the sower. Let me not be someone who, Luke 8, 13, who receives the word with joy, but has no root, who believes for a while, but falls away in the time of testing.

Let us not be like that man. Lord, keep us from being put under pressure, not so much in the abstract, but rather that which might buffet us and create a pressure upon our loyalty to God, that in our frailty, perhaps we might not be able to withstand.

[28 : 55] Well, I don't think we can say that we've plumbed the depths of this prayer, do you? But whatever your past experience of prayer has been, I hope this has been an encouragement and a challenge to you.

Whether that invitation to pray confidently to a loving father, or the reminder to set as your first goal God's own honour, or the assurance that it's good and proper to pray for our bodily needs, or the call to pray for our spiritual well-being.

I hope some of these things have spoken to you. Let me conclude with some words from J.C. Ryle again. He says, let us use the Lord's prayer for the trial of our own state before God.

Its words have probably passed over our lips thousands of times. But have we really felt it? Do we really desire its petitions to be granted?

Is God really our father? Are we born again and made his children by faith in Christ? Do we care deeply for his name and will?

[30 : 05] Do we really wish the kingdom of God to come? Do we feel our need of daily temporal practical mercies and of daily pardon of sin?

Do we fear falling into temptation? Do we dread evil above all things? These are serious questions. They deserve serious consideration.

Folks, is this what you really want? Do you recognise that these are your true needs? Let's pray.

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us and lead us not into temptation.

Amen.