

# The Lord's Prayer : AN INTERPRETATION

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The disciples said, "Lord, teach us how to pray." Then he taught them what is now known as the Lord's Prayer. This is the most repeated prayer in the world. It is repeated probably more often than all the other Christian prayers put together. You hear it in church at least once every Sunday, and sometimes even two or three times in one service. It is the most repeated, but it is the least understood.

In the first place, people are thinking primarily of themselves and their immediate neighbors when they pray that prayer--if they think at all. But it is far more than a prayer for our locality. It is a world prayer. It begins with the letter "O," and that "O" is the world. "Our Father" is the father of the whole human race. When we think only of ourselves or our friends or our community, we are not praying the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is not an American prayer alone. Jesus never came to the United States--unless the Mormons are right! This prayer was first uttered in Palestine, at the east end of the Mediterranean where the world is at this moment in greatest danger. But Jesus was not thinking just of that area. "Our Father" included every country and every race.

"Who art in Heaven." He was the Father of all heavens as well as all the earth, the creator and the king of the universe.

"Hallowed be Thy name," means "May thy name be honored and held sacred and loved." The first thing that one notices is that this is not a prayer in the sense of asking God for something that we want; it is agreeing with God in something that he wants. It is a prayer to help God and to help us.

God's name will not be honored and loved unless people believe that he is loving and lovable. Where they have not seen God in Jesus, they have a much lower conception of him than we do who have seen him in Jesus.

If God is as good as Jesus, as loving and as compassionate, then it is easy to love him, and revere him, and hallow his name. But if God is like the demons that one reads about and

sees pictured on the walls of the temples of other religions, it is difficult to hallow his name, or to love him. And so, if we really mean "Hallowed be thy name," we must help the world to know Jesus and to see God in him.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This again is not asking God for something that we want; it is offering to help God with what he wants. It is enlisting; it is saying, "God, I am back of you, and I will help you bring your kingdom upon earth."

We begin to see that the Lord's Prayer is not merely a petition for something; it is offering ourselves, dedicating ourselves to God to help him.

"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." How much is his will done in heaven? We never knew until we saw Jesus who came down out of heaven. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says forty-nine times in forty-nine different ways, that he never does a thing, never says a thing, never thinks a thing, excepting what the Father asks him to say and do and think. That is the way God's will is done in heaven, perfectly, totally, endlessly. Heaven is not a democracy; God does not run for election. It is absolute, far more than any kingdom on this earth ever was. Everybody wants to obey the will of God because they know that he is perfectly wise and that he is perfectly loving. The slightest deviation from his will would be less than right and less than good, and less than loving and less than perfect. The Lord's Prayer says, "I will help you, God, to bring your will to pass on earth as completely as it is done in heaven. And that of course means that I will begin in myself. But it does not mean I will end in myself. It means that I will dedicate myself to helping his kingdom and his will wherever he needs me most."

Everyone of us must make a tremendous decision in his life. The natural man in us seeks comforts and satisfactions; he wants the world to serve him. But when he understands the call of Christ, he abandons this quest of self-satisfaction and devotes himself to helping save the world. All of us have to make the same decision that Jesus asked the rich young ruler to make when he said to this good young man, "You lack one thing. Go and sell the home where you are so comfortable, and help the poor. Then come and follow me out where I am trying to help the world up toward the kingdom."

Now let us examine the next part of the Lord's Prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread." Is not that asking something for ourselves? If it is, then in the United States we might as well cut it out of the Lord's Prayer, because our problem

in America is not to find our daily bread, but how to have will-power to stop eating so much bread. We have a surplus of eight billion dollars worth of wheat and corn and other food products that we cannot consume; and we do not know how to get rid of it. The problem of nearly everybody in America is how to keep down overweight. We buy books on how to stop eating too much! But on the other side of the world, in Asia and Africa, they are hungry. "Give us this day our daily bread" is needed then. Half the world goes to bed every night hungry because their cupboards are bare. The little children moan all night for food which their impoverished parents are not able to give them. In Asia where Jesus first uttered this prayer for daily bread it still has tremendous meaning. The world is in danger today because of this enormous imbalance. We have half of the world's wealth. We have enough surplus food to feed all the hungry people for a year; and they are obsessed every day of their lives with the problem of getting something to eat.

For every American, therefore, who says "Give us this day our daily bread" it means a promise to help God get daily bread to the underprivileged destitute half of the world. This request for daily bread brings out sharply the truth that it is not God's fault that men do not have daily bread; and it is not God who needs to work harder. It is we who need to love our neighbors in Asia and Africa as we love America enough to help them farm as well as we do.

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." When we understand Jesus it is not God's forgiveness that needs to worry us. Jesus died on the cross to show us how anxious God is to forgive. But what we need on this earth is to forgive one another. Jesus said, God cannot forgive us for holding hatred. Hate is the world's worst sin. We can never have a good world until we wipe the slate clean, forget our resentments, and start afresh. And so this is an enlistment of ourselves again. We say, "God, I will help you to get rid of a world that is festering with ill-will, and to bring in a world of love instead of a world of greed and hate. I enlist behind love, and I begin in myself. "

"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Again it is not something we are persuading God to do. James says that God tempts no man. It is men who tempt one another. In almost every magazine and almost every newspaper, on television, radio and in motion pictures, one may hear lies told to young people about liquor that tempt them to become alcoholics. How many of us Christians ever write to our congressman to pass a bill forbidding such lies. Congress can stop it all, and

will, the moment the people demand it.

"Deliver us from evil." What evil? War, greed, hate, poverty, crime. All of them are human evils, not God's evils. And we promise in the Lord's Prayer to help him get rid of the evil first in ourselves and then in our world.

If this is a world prayer, then where in the world is the evil greatest? Where in the world is the greatest danger? In the eastern hemisphere on the opposite side of the world from the United States. If we could by some tremendous surgery cut the western hemisphere free from the eastern hemisphere and float a few million miles away, we might let the continents of Asia and Africa and Europe blow themselves up. But we are tied closer to the East by ever faster planes. The main place where we need to help deliver men from evil is the eastern hemisphere.

So we see that the Lord's Prayer is a world prayer, not a prayer for ourselves or our own country. We see that it is a pledge to give ourselves in God's redemptive cause. It is not asking God for anything; it is offering God everything. If we do not back that prayer with deeds, we are either a fraud or we are repeating it like magic without knowing what we are saying.

I hope that never again will we be able to hear the word "Our Father" without remembering that it begins with the letter "O," and that that "O" is as big as the world. And that never again will we be able to see the letter "O" anywhere without seeing the world in that "O" and remembering our promise to dedicate ourselves to helping his kingdom come on earth.

For it is a pledge, as truly as our pledge to the American flag. It means, I pledge myself to God, to help his name be hallowed, his kingdom come, his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I pledge myself to help have enough bread for the whole world, to bring forgiveness and love to the world, to prevent temptations and to stop evil wherever I may be needed most.