

The Lord's Prayer II

Last week we looked at the first part of Jesus' teaching on how to pray: the first three requests all had to do with asking God for things that honour God: "Hallowed be Your Name", "Your Kingdom come" and "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Those are the first three petitions of what is famously called "The Lord's Prayer". Today we'll look at the next three petitions, the things that deal more closely with human need, with the things we strive for: food to eat, forgiveness from God, deliverance from the evil one.

So, let's look at the text (New Living Translation):

Give us our food for today

And forgive our sins just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us

And don't let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

(Matthew 6:11-13)

Jesus goes right on from the prayer to say some further words about forgiveness:

If you forgive those who sin against you, your Heavenly Father will forgive you.

But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins. (6:14,15)

Let's look at that first phrase: "Give us our food for today." You might be more familiar with hearing this verses translated, "Give us this day our daily bread". The point is that we are to ask for what we need today. Jesus doesn't tell us to seek the Father for something that will endure for years, but to ask for what we need today.

The example, the visible picture of what Jesus is saying here comes from the Israelite journey through the wilderness after their escape from Egypt. When they ran out of food, God began to provide them with something called *manna*, which translated means, "what is it?" Here are the LORD's instructions from Exodus 16:4:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow My instructions."

Then, after the manna had appeared on the ground and had been gathered up by the people, Moses told them that they were not to keep it until morning.

However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. (16:20)

In an important twist on this story, God gave the people the instruction that on the day before Sabbath, they were to gather twice as much because none would be provided on the Sabbath. The people did gather twice as much and it didn't go bad or get maggots in it when they kept some over for the Sabbath. But a few people went out on the morning of Sabbath to look for more manna and there was nothing there for them to gather.

What's going on? Why does the manna spoil overnight on five nights of the week and on the sixth it doesn't spoil? Why do both God and Moses get angry with the people over their failure to carry out the LORD's instructions to the letter? What are they supposed to be learning that they're messing up on?

1. They're supposed to believe what God tells them. That means that when He instructs them not to save manna overnight, they should not do it. When He instructs them to gather twice as much so they'll have some for Sabbath as well, they need to follow His instructions.
2. God is trying to teach them to depend on Him. If He gave them a year's supply of food, they would soon forget who had given it to them and would move into independence mode. God wants them, and us, to learn to depend on His provision.
3. The anger comes because the people miss the whole point. They ignore God's instructions given through Moses and Aaron because they trust their own senses more than the word of the LORD. And they don't understand yet the importance of the Sabbath, which God has given them as a gift, as a blessing, so they can enjoy rest. God didn't want them to have to gather food on the seventh day; He wanted them to be able to enter the rest that He was providing for them.

All of that background helps us understand what Jesus is saying in the Lord's Prayer: Give us today our daily bread; give us our food for today. Not that we would say this in our prayers, but our thoughts might be, "God, please provide for all my needs throughout this coming year, so that I don't have to keep asking for You to meet my needs. Give me the winning lottery ticket, a job that pays unreal money or an inheritance from some rich relative that I don't know about - anything but having to pray about my needs every day." And God answers, "But I really like to hear from you every day and I'm afraid that any of these big provisions will keep you away from Me."

Just like Israel in the wilderness, God wants us to be growing in our dependence on Him, praying more and more, not less and less, seeking Him in every area of life, instead of just a few that we treat as crises.

The next thing we're taught to pray about is to ask God for forgiveness, but this one has a twist to it as well. "Forgive our sins" would be enough for us, but it wasn't enough for Jesus. "Forgive us our sins just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us."

We're supposed to say, "Look at me, Lord; observe that I am freely forgiving those people in my life who have wronged me. Now, I ask You to show me that same grace and forgive my sins." The request for God to forgive us comes after the action of forgiving others. Jesus says, "... just as we HAVE forgiven those who have sinned against us." When I read that carefully enough to see what Jesus was saying, I thought, "That must be wrong - I'll check another translation." But it wasn't wrong. When I checked another translation, our forgiveness of others was in the past tense - it had already taken place - before we come to God with our request that He forgive us.

Now, obviously this isn't the beginning of the process. God initiated grace towards us before we were able to extend grace to others. But now, somewhere in the middle of the process, it's clear that we are not to go to God in prayer and ask for forgiveness for the things we have done wrong if we haven't taken care of the ways in which other people have hurt or offended us.

Why do we need to pray this prayer? Because, even though we are saved by God's grace and filled with His Spirit, we continue to act, to some extent, in sinful and selfish ways. These things that we do that God calls sinful act as a barrier in our relationship with Him, so to keep that relationship open and honest we need to continually come to Him in humble confession and dependence, asking for and receiving His grace.

There's an important passage in John's first letter where he explains why this ongoing forgiveness is needed:

If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that His word has no place in our hearts.

(1 John 1:8-10)

The famous verse is in the middle - "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive" - but this verse is bracketed by verses 8 and 10 which both emphasize the untruth of saying we're not sinners. This is a letter written to Christians and it states that we are not in line with the truth if we claim to be without sin. That claim is described as "refusing to accept the truth", "calling God a liar" and "showing that His word has no place in our hearts". The bottom line is that maintaining a close relationship with our Lord requires that we maintain a humble posture before Him. The text doesn't mean that we must daily recite a list of our sins and that if we overlook something we can't be forgiven for it. It means that we need to be confessing that we are not able to measure up to God's standard of love, of holiness or of goodness. We confess our sinfulness and He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us, to purify us, from everything we have done wrong.

The wrong thing to do, the thing John is writing against, is to say, "Well, I might have been a sinner when I first came to faith in Jesus, but I'm good now, and I never do anything wrong." And John tells us that making that claim is refusing to accept the truth of our condition, calling God a liar and showing that His word has no place in us.

So, that's why we need to be a confessing people, and it tells us what we need to confess in order to receive God's forgiveness, but the other condition for forgiveness is that we are forgiving others as often as the need arises.

What's the assumption here? Jesus is assuming that we will be hurt by the words or actions of other people. When we get hurt, not IF, but WHEN, there is a necessary action that we should enter in on as soon as possible: we are to forgive the person who has hurt us.

Let's say, for example, that someone says something about us that's both unkind and untrue. Our first instinct might be to defend ourselves, to "right the wrong" as it were, by setting the record straight. And there may well be a time and place for taking that kind of action, but that shouldn't be the first thing we do. Our first response should be to ask ourselves what we might actually have done, or failed to do, that provoked that person to say the unkind, untrue thing in the first place. Own as much as you can. I remember in one case where a person said some things about me that were unfair. I had confronted that person about deceiving the church. I think they had felt exposed and needing to defend themselves and so lashed out in their hurt and anger. And Jesus tells us in this Sermon on the Mount that He wants me to look past my own embarrassment or hurt or anger ... to see that other person as He sees them, and to do what He does, which is to forgive.

Forgiveness is setting the other person free from any right to revenge. It is saying, "I will not judge this person, but will allow the One true and honest Judge to handle the case." It is releasing a person from your anger, your judgment, or any obligation to make things right. It is a word that expresses "release" as much as any word could. In fact, the root of the word means, "let go", and when we forgive someone we are "letting go" of the offence they have caused, to the point of letting go of our emotional attachment to the event that caused us pain. And in the process of setting the person who wronged us free, we become free ourselves.

The final request in the Lord's Prayer is "don't let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." You may be more familiar with the translation that says, "And lead us not into temptation", which might make us wonder if God actually is the One behind the temptations we face. But James puts that one to rest when he writes, in James 1:13, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God' . . . He Himself tempts no one." But the word that is here translated temptation is best translated 20 out of 21 New Testament uses, with the word 'test' or 'trial'. Does God test us? Oh, yes. In our men's Gratia group we read a couple of Mondays ago in Judges 3 that God left some of the Canaanites in the land to test the Israelites to see if they would remain faithful to Him. They failed the test.

But here is Jesus telling us to pray that, somehow, in the midst of temptation - and we'll all face temptation - that God will give us the strength to stand. "Don't lead us into a test that we won't be able to resist," is the sense of this prayer. "Don't allow Satan to have the victory in our lives." To grow to maturity in Christ, we need to know and use this prayer. We need to be able to call out on a regular basis and ask God to give us a victory over evil that we don't have the strength in ourselves to win.

What's the big deal if we fall and then ask for forgiveness? We do that all the time anyway - why should we be concerned about failure if we've got a "Get Out of Jail Free" card that we can use any time?

1. Sin doesn't only hurt us - it hurts others as well. God grieves over the sins we commit because they introduce more pain into an already grieving world. Even if

you've managed to keep your sin a secret from the people in your life, there are still ways in which their lives are affected.

2. When we don't resist the evil one, we cooperate with his schemes for our life, and his main plot is to destroy us. So, yielding in any way to Satan and his demonic forces results in a loss.
3. Whether we want to admit it or not, our sins cause a separation between us and God. Why else would Paul encourage the early church to not grieve the Holy Spirit? Grieving the Spirit is causing disappointment and pain to the One who is working in us to create the new person who knows how to live and how to love to the full.
4. Jesus asks us to pray this prayer so that we can grow into greater maturity, into what Paul would later call, "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Eph. 4:13) There is strength that comes from resisting temptation, or from standing firm during a time of testing. The things that try us make it possible for us to push back, to gain strength from the effort and, through that, to be better able to help others on the journey of faith.

Let's look at some applications from this second half of the Lord's Prayer.

1. Many many times I have heard or read of God doing something miraculous to provide a person with their "daily bread". People lined up at the baggage check at the airport with no money to pay for their ticket and someone rushes in with a gift of the exact amount of their need. Someone with a sudden bill or a financial crisis they weren't expecting and someone comes up and says, "I think God wants me to give you this." And, again, it's exactly what they need. This kind of thing happens every day to people and it happens when people are praying, "Give us today the things we need for today" and it happens when someone else is praying, "Who do You want me to bless today, Father?" In this verse, Jesus is talking about need, not greed. He says that we are to ask our Father for the things we need. That list goes beyond bread, but bread is a great symbol for the things we need. So, whatever your need is, ask your Father to supply that need.
2. The second application has to do with the prayer of forgiveness. I wonder how often this prayer jumps right up to grab first place in our time of prayer. I know it does for me: "Father, forgive me". But the second part of the prayer seems to get left out. I don't get to the part where I say, "Just as I have forgiven anyone who has wronged me or hurt me in any way." So, here's an application that I think you will find helpful. Before you ask the Father for forgiveness, ask Him to show you anyone who needs - and I'm not saying 'deserves' - your forgiveness. And take that person to the Lord and ask Him to help you set them — and you — free. Unforgiveness is a prison that you hold yourself in, even as you imagine you are holding the unforgiven person. "I won't let go" is refusing to let go of the very thing that torments you, that robs you of joy and denies you access to God's forgiveness. C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

No part of His teaching is clearer: and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are

to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated.

3. Finally, make it a consistent part of your prayer life, your regular prayers, not just your emergency prayers, to ask God to deliver you from the evil one. His is the only strength that has ever completely overcome the enemy. Jesus is the only person who ever resisted all temptation and lived a sinless life. He knows what it's like to be tempted and He knows how to resist that temptation, to completely trust His Father and to refuse to yield to things that could be called compromises with Satan. That means that He's our only hope for overcoming in life's daily battles - so we must turn to Him and ask Him to lead us away from the tests that are too great for us and to give us victory in the tests He allows. "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one."

When we think of temptation, maybe we think of Satan trying to get us to do something really big and really bad - but when we pray this daily, we'll see more clearly how the enemy tries to use the little challenges in our relationships ... with believers ... to trip us up and make us bitter or resentful. Pray hard and love generously.