

The Disciples Prayer In Matthew 6:9-13

An Insight

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June 21, 2024

Introduction

The passage found in Matthew 6:9-13, which tradition has passed down to us as, “The Lord’s Prayer,” encapsulates key theological themes and provides a model for personal intimacy with our Lord. The passage places a large emphasis on the Christian’s relationship with God, while at the same time, it exposes profound theological principles, such as worship, divine provision, forgiveness, and divine protection. Examining the passage within its Matthean context offers the reader deep insights into the purpose and power of prayer. In addition, it may prevent the reader from falling prey to the error of shallow recitations, as if God was not aware our situation,¹ but instead, by displaying God's expectation of prayer.

Teaching on the Christian Life: The Role and Significance of Prayer

This section addresses the cruciality of prayer in the life of a believer. It is a didactical passage that provides the believer of Jesus Christ with an unfailable blueprint² for calling out to heaven at all times. The passage tackles at least six primary topics in the form of petitions:³ relationship with God, Worship to God, God’s sovereignty, Divine providence, forgiveness, and relationship with others. Furthermore, the grammatical composition of the text indicates an imperative command to prayer.⁴ Our Lord knew just how crucial prayer is for a vibrant Spiritual life (Mk.

¹ John MacArthur, *The Disciples’ Prayer*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press 1986), 4.

² Wesley Hill, *The Lord’s Prayer : A Guide to Praying to Our Father*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press 2019), no page available.

³ Alistair Wilson, “The Disciples’ Prayer: A Fresh Look at a Familiar Text,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 57, no. 3 (December 1998): 140-141.

⁴ Wilson, “The Disciples’ Prayer: A Fresh Look at a Familiar Text,” 148.

1:35)⁵. Previous to its systematical approach to prayer, the passage educates the reader about the source of this divine privilege. The provenance and efficacy of communication between God and man does not come from the eloquence of the subject (verse 7)⁶, nor from his/ her elevated social status (verse 5). Rather, it comes from God, whom alone has the ability and authority to train the human heart to elevate petitions according to His will (Lk. 11:1; Rom. 8:26-27). In summary, the passage guides the believer on where to obtain wisdom for prayer as well as how to formulate it and apply it.

Exegetical Analysis

οὕτως οὖν προσεύχεσθε ὑμεῖς

Our Lord did not provide technical details on how to tailor a good sermon, how to execute exorcism or perform miracles. He provided technical details about that which is vital to the spiritual health of a believer, prayer. While tradition has passed down this section to the Church as “The Lord’s Prayer,” the passage can be more accurately labeled “The Disciples Prayer.”⁷ Christ is clear in emphasizing that this is the manner in which ὑμεῖς (you plural), should pray. We do not encounter “The Lord’s Prayer” until the night He was betrayed (John 17). It is also of special importance the conjugation of the verb *προσεύχομαι*, which is employed in the imperative form. Christ is communicating to His followers that prayer is expected from them. This idea is bolstered by verse five, which states not “if you pray” but “when you pray.” The prayer is not a

⁵ John MacArthur, *The Disciples’ Prayer*, 4.

⁶ Wilson, “The Disciples’ Prayer: A Fresh Look at a Familiar Text,” 140.

⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. Epub ed., Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series, New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2010), no page available.

fixed formula,⁸ but rather a foundational principle that guides His disciples on what to have in perspective when approaching God in prayer. It must be kept in mind that our Lord had just rebuked the Pharisees for making their prayers a set of hypocritical repetitions. Therefore, what the Lord is about to show His disciples is not a monotonous procedure, but a model “in contrast to the empty prayers of the ‘hypocrites’.”⁹ For “God is a hearer not of words but of the heart.”¹⁰

πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς

By professing “Father,” the disciples “confess themselves to be sons”¹¹ and by stating “our,” they profess themselves to be brethren¹². It must be noted that the term “our” excludes Christ. For He is the Son of God, not a son of God. In addition, when addressing God, Christ uses the singular possessive pronoun “my,” rather than “our.” This difference “posits a unique filial relationship for Jesus and a derivative relationship for God’s other ‘children’ into which Jesus introduces them.”¹³ In simple terms, we must not boast about our position as sons of God, for we have the privilege to participate in this relationship solely to our relationship to our first Brother, Christ (Romans 8:29).¹⁴ The most important lesson about prayer is not that we have a relationship with

⁸ Christopher A. Hall, *Worshipping with the Church Fathers*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 100.

⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2007, no page available.

¹⁰ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, Translated by Thomas P. Scheck, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 87.

¹¹ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 87.

¹² Jurgen K. Zangenberg and Hubertus Waltherus Maria van de Sandt, eds., *Matthew, James, and Didache: Three Related Documents in Their Jewish and Christian Setting*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 180.

¹³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, no page available.

¹⁴ Ashish J. Naidu, *Transformed in Christ: christology and the Christian life in John Chrysostom*, (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications 2012), 111.

God, but that we have a relationship with the Father and our brethren. “He teaches, moreover, to make our prayer common, on behalf of our brethren also. For He saith not, ‘my Father, which art in Heaven,’ but, ‘our Father.’”¹⁵ Therefore, though there is a place for prayer about the self, prayer should have in scope the body of Christ holistically¹⁶ (Eph. 6:18), lest we become selfish in our prayers (Jas. 4:3). As it is oftentimes the tendency our flesh to detour praying for others by using the excuse that much prayer is needed about our sinful hearts. However, this worry would not be so if we had the certainty that other brethren are fulfilling this command and praying on our behalf. Prayer is a “community prayer, meant for the life of the Church.”¹⁷

ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου

The second phrase of the prayer summons the disciples to pray that the name of God be made holy. Such a request does not imply that the holiness of God’s name is contingent on the prayers of His people. His creation sings “Holy” to Him not for Him to acquire this attribute, but because He already is holy (1 Sa. 2:2; Psa. 99:9; Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8, etc). Hence, this is a call for people to “recognize and acknowledge [His] Holiness, by giving to [Him] the reverence which is due.”¹⁸ The hollowing of God's name extends from the realm of words into the one of actions. Christ's disciples can only call others to recognize the holiness of God through their daily lives.¹⁹ “For if

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume 10, St. Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110/npnf110.iii.XIX.html>.

¹⁶ Wilson, “The Disciples’ Prayer: A Fresh Look at a Familiar Text,” 140.

¹⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, no page.

¹⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, no page.

¹⁹ Naidu, *Transformed in Christ*, 115.

on account of sinners the name of God is blasphemed...then, on the contrary, it is hallowed on the account of the just.”²⁰ This is the reason for which the verb *ἀγιάζω* stands in its aorist passive imperative form, implying at least two things, “that God will make his holiness manifest throughout the world, and that we will honor his name in everything that we do.”²¹ That is, the name of God must be exalted not only during our time of prayer but it must also be kept Holy by the way in which we live.²² This is a practical prayer. Performed in secret (verse 6), but lived in public (1 Pet. 1:15-16). “He commands him who prays to seek that He may be glorified also by our life.”²³

ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς

The model of prayer crafted by our Lord is so wise in such a way that only those with clear consciences can make use of it genuinely. By petitioning God to assume autocracy and execute justice, His disciples are declaring themselves to be on peaceful terms with the King (Matt. 18:23-35) and the Judge (Lk. 12:57-59). They are not declaring themselves innocent, for they are guilty of offenses (verse 12), but they are declaring themselves justified because their offenses have been forgiven (Rom. 5:1). Therefore, “it pertains to the one with great confidence and pure conscience to ask for the kingdom of God without fearing judgment.”²⁴ Yet, by asking God to bring His kingdom to earth, the disciples are not stating He is not already King. He is (Rev.

²⁰ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 87.

²¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, no page.

²² Hall, *Worshiping with the Church Fathers*, 98-99.

²³ Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume 10*.

²⁴ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 87.

19:16). “Rather, as with the ‘making holy’ of God’s name, this petition...[is asking] that His²⁵ actual kingship *de jure* may be fully implemented *de facto* as people submit to His sovereignty.” The Kingdom of Heaven is a central topic in the Gospel of Matthew. In this particular prayer stance, the believer ought to link the Kingdom of Heaven with God’s will on earth. “For he who hath this fondness, can neither be puffed up by the good things of this life, nor abashed by its sorrows.”²⁶ The stance ultimately acknowledges the eschatological plan of God for His creation. Hence, “while this second petition includes a desire that the kingdom come upon unbelievers (i.e., evangelism) and that God’s people experience the kingdom in a new way (i.e., spiritual growth), it primarily centers on a desire for this world to end.”²⁷ It emphasizes that His will for humanity will surely be brought to completion.²⁸ As the heavenly hosts bow down and worship in adoration, so every knee shall bow in full surrender to His sovereignty (Phil. 2:10-11).

τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον

Three main thoughts must be emphasized. The believer must pray as if the bread was already in his/her possession, for it states “τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν” not “τὸν ἄρτον ὃν ἐσόμενον ἡμῶν.” The bread is already ours. This resembles the attitude of our Lord, who, before multiplying the loaves, thanked God as if He already had enough resources to feed the multitudes (Mat. 14:19).

Secondly, the focus of our prayers should be limited to the present day, for tomorrow will bring its own troubles (verse 34). In the same manner, God instructed the Israelites to collect quail for one day only (Exo.16:4), so are we, believers, instructed “to make our prayer...for ‘daily bread,’

²⁵ Capitalization mine.

²⁶ Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume 10*.

²⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, no page.

²⁸ Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press 2009). 225-230.

so as not to ‘take thought for the morrow.’ Because of this, He added, ‘daily bread,’ that is, bread for one day.”²⁹ The last point to recognize is that Jesus, being fully God and fully man, knew about biological necessities and provided us with the assurance that even these are within His care (verses 25-26). The proof is within creation itself,³⁰ for never has He failed to make the sun rise since He set it in motion. “This is a prayer reflecting total God-dependence... [it] means, ‘I rely on you for my daily needs.’”³¹ Thus, “even in things that are bodily, that which is spiritual abounds.” When we thank God for our meal we recognize that even “the most basic survival rations, come from God’s daily provision (cf. Ps 104:14-15, 27-28) and is thus a proper subject of prayer rather than to be taken for granted.”³² When giving thanks for our meal we acknowledge that God has heard our prayers for providence and this should increase our faith in our Father. For this reason “saints should care only about the present day’s food, for which reason it is also commanded in what follows: ‘do not think about tomorrow’.”³³

καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν ὥς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν

“This and the next petition show that while earthly needs are important, spiritual needs are paramount.”³⁴ For this reason, Jesus makes it impossible for a believer to pray while holding a grudge against another in his/ her heart. We cannot beg for God’s forgiveness at the same time we refuse to forgive those who have aggrieved us, lest we suffer the same fate as the evil servant

²⁹ Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume 10*.

³⁰ John Chrysostom, *On the Providence of God*, trans. St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1998), 62-54.

³¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, no page.

³² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, no page.

³³ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 87.

³⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, no page.

(Matt. 18:23-33). “He who both brings sins to remembrance, and bids us ask forgiveness, and teaches how we may obtain remission and so makes the way easy; it is perfectly clear that He introduced this rule of supplication, as knowing, and signifying, that it is possible even after the font to wash ourselves from our offenses”³⁵ If we call God our Father, forgiveness should characterize our actions³⁶ (Eph. 5:1-2). It is in the nature of a child to follow in their parent’s footsteps. If we are confident that our Father has forgiven our offenses, it is only right that we forgive others. However, “we should note that it is the debtors rather than the debts which we have forgiven; our concern, like God’s, is to be with personal relationships.”³⁷

καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν ἀλλὰ ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ

This verse expands on the previous one by stressing who the enemy is. The enemy is not the one who has wounded us, for He does not say “‘deliver us from the wicked ones,’ but, ‘from the wicked one;’ instructing us in no case to entertain displeasure against our neighbors, for what wrongs soever we may suffer at their hands, but to transfer our enmity from these to him, as being himself the cause of all our wrongs.”³⁸ Moreover, the verse highlights God’s providence even amid temptation. Therefore, no man can say God has tempted them (Jas. 1:13-14), and no man, after being tempted, can say that temptation not natural to humanity, has overtaken them (1 Cor. 10:13). Therefore “‘Deliver’ means ‘save us from’ and connotes the idea of both protection and removal from [the enemy’s] power. So the final petition asks God for strength and

³⁵ Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume 10*.

³⁶ Naidu, *Transformed in Christ*, 148-149.

³⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, no page available.

³⁸ Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume 10*.

deliverance from the temptations wrought by Satan.”³⁹ But this is no license for unrestrained sin. Paul warns Christians against abusing the grace of God (Rom. 6:1-2). The Christian must live in continuous repentance before God but not in continuous willful disobedience. Hence, when we pray for forgiveness, it must not be with the intention of sinning again. It must be a desire to be closer to Christ with the hope in mind that one day we will be as He is (Eph. 4:13). We have a constant longing to be delivered from offending our Lord and thus we ask for His protection from falling again.⁴⁰ “After a petition for the forgiveness of past sin comes one for protection from future sin.”⁴¹ Christ is commanding us to anoint our hearts⁴² lest we may live in constant offense towards God.

Relevance for Today

This Matthean passage known as the Lord’s Prayer has been subjected to heavy theological scrutiny over the years by countless theologians. But the relevance of the text must not stop with its exegetical analysis. There is a reason why the Holy Spirit led the writer to write it down in the form of a list of empirical statements. Christ expects our reading to be followed with actions (Jas. 1:23-24). The patristic theologians placed a sumptuous emphasis on the practical dimension of Scripture reading because they affirmed that through the practice of the body, the shape of the soul was formed.⁴³ We must not forget that we have not been saved from perdition only (Rom.

³⁹ Osborne, *Matthew*, no page available.

⁴⁰ Wilson, “The Disciples’ Prayer: A Fresh Look at a Familiar Text,” 147-148.

⁴¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, no page available.

⁴² Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 90.

⁴³ Hall, *Worshiping with the Church Fathers*, 209.

6:18) but saved unto good works also (Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 2:14). Significant attention must be paid to how the passage commences. The first half starts by defining our relationship with God because this is the basis of the Christian life. It is only through the love for the Son that the other sons are enabled to purify themselves⁴⁴ and subsequently lead to love each other. It is only proper that the Matthean passage closes, then, by exhorting us to live in peace and with one another by learning forgiveness. The prayer is closed in a manner that only those who have truly forgiven from their hearts, will be able to echo the last phrase “as we have forgiven our debtors.” Unless we learn to forgive those who have wronged us, we will not be able to say “our Father” (1 Jn. 4:8).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Matthew 6:9-13 offers a profound framework for understanding and experiencing prayer. By examining the different clauses separately and their implications we may have a clear understanding of the purpose of prayer and the importance of approaching God with a clear conscience. Prayer calls us, Christians, to a deeper and more genuine prayer life, that in return, will result in a holier way of life. May God grant us His undeserved favor, Amen!

To Jesus Christ be the glory!

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⁴⁴ Naidu, *Transformed in Christ*, 210.

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