

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 35

Prayer 3: The Lord's Prayer

Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 6:7

by Maurice Barratt

There is a lot of good teaching on the Lord's Prayer. Many fine Christian teachers have written verse-by-verse studies on this prayer. I want to look at it from a different angle.

The Lord's Prayer is in the Sermon on the Mount. That may seem an obvious statement, but it is a very significant one. The whole meaning of the Lord's Prayer must be seen in the context of everything Jesus is saying about prayer in this chapter, and everything he is saying in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus says we are not to be like the hypocrites. He says that they love to pray in public for the attention of other people, but we should pray privately to our Father, in secret. But then Jesus tells us in what "manner" we should pray (verse 9). Now this prayer, which we call "The Lord's Prayer", cannot possibly be intended for our private, secret prayer. I do not believe that Jesus is instructing us here how to pray to God in secret. That may surprise you, but let me give my reasons.

Christian or pagan?

1. Jesus is contrasting the heathen's public prayer with the Christians' public prayer.

In verse 7 Jesus says, "When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." It is the public prayers of the heathen that Jesus is talking about, as in verse 5, so Jesus now gives alternative guidelines to his followers for public prayer.

2. There is nothing private or personal in this prayer.

In private we can confess our sins and weaknesses, we can be intimate and speak our secret thoughts and feelings. Our private prayers are not for the ears of others. But there is nothing like that in this prayer. How could there be? Jesus cannot tell us our personal thoughts.

3. Jesus would never tell us how to pray in secret, because it can't be taught.

No more can you teach a person how to fall in love. There are no rules and formulas and "how to's" for private prayer. You can't teach intimacy, and Jesus isn't trying to here.

4. Everything in this prayer is in the plural.

It's "Our Father ... give us this day ... forgive us ... lead us not ..." It all sounds like a corporate prayer, not the prayer of a single person; a prayer of the church, of the Body; a public prayer to be prayed together with others, not a private prayer.

The Pharisee who stood up in the temple prayed in public, for the ears of others, but he prayed "I, me, mine". "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men ... I fast, I give of all that I possess..." (Luke 18:11-12). Jesus condemned that sort of prayer. This was prayer for the ears of other men. It certainly wasn't for God's ears; God already knew what the Pharisee gave and fasted. The Pharisee was trying to be educational. He wanted the publican at the back of the temple, and anyone else who might be listening, to follow his example, to learn how to be a good Jew, to keep God's laws, so he prayed an "educational prayer". We all do that to some extent. Our public prayers can never be the same as they are in private. We're always conscious of the presence of others. Our private prayers need no guidelines, but our public prayers do, and that is why Jesus says "After this manner therefore pray ye".

So I believe the Lord's Prayer is a guideline for corporate, public prayer. I believe it is a prayer of the Church, the body of Christ.

After addressing God as our common Father, Jesus first tells us that we should make a corporate pledge to "hallow" God's name. "Hallowed" means holy, which simply means different, separate, peculiar, set apart. It is not commonly realised by Christians that it is by our actions and lifestyle that we hallow God's name — or conversely, that we profane or defile it. God's name denotes his character. When we by our actions say or do something that is out of character with God, we misrepresent him, we slander his character and actually blaspheme his name. Paul writes that older women should teach younger women "to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:5). Likewise he says, "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed" (1 Timothy 6:1).

By our attitudes, words and actions towards our bosses at work or husbands at home, we either hallow or blaspheme God's name — we either show God's character or we misrepresent it and profane his name. This is the church praying, remember, and we are the bride who should give glory to her husband.

Thy Kingdom Come

When we pray "Thy kingdom come", we are the church asking God to bring his own kingdom to earth. We are not offering to bring it in for him. It is his kingdom, his power, his glory, and it is in the future, not now. In Revelation 6:9 "the souls of them that were slain for the word of God" cry out, "How long, O Lord?" They are waiting expectantly for the kingdom to come, for Christ to come and judge, to avenge their blood, to reign on earth. But they are told to wait a while longer. Others must be killed and join their ranks. Now is not the time for honour and glory, power and position. The kingdom is not yet.

We should remember again that we are in the Sermon on the Mount, which is the gospel of the kingdom; the sermon which began by talking about the great reversal which will take place when

Jesus comes again in his kingdom, the first shall be last and the last first, those who mourn shall be comforted, those who are persecuted will receive a great reward. In this light, if we are following Jesus and walking as he walked, if we are also “men of sorrows and acquainted with grief”, we also cry out “Thy kingdom come!” His kingdom and his coming are a great deliverance and a “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13), and the answer to our prayer.

The church prays for its “daily bread”; but this is not a prayer for physical food. Jesus makes it quite clear later in this chapter that we are not to pray for our physical needs. “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink” (Matthew 6:25). This is a prayer for spiritual food. It is the church, the Body of Christ, that needs its food to keep it spiritually alive, and Christ will feed us. We are to “grow up into him”, and he “nourishes and cherishes” his body (Ephesians 4:15, 5:29).

Forgiveness

Again, we pray for forgiveness corporately, as a body: “forgive us as we forgive others”. We are not talking so much about personal forgiveness, though that is vital. What about the larger rifts and splits, the churches which have never forgiven each other, the denominations which still hold animosity towards one another? This is a serious prayer, because it is conditional. If we will not forgive others, God will not forgive us. Jesus sends letters, not to individuals, but to churches, and warns them that their candlestick could be “removed out of its place” — that they could not only lose their testimony but their life. (See Revelation 2:5)

“Lead us not into temptation” is a strange prayer, particularly if it is the prayer of an individual, because elsewhere in the New Testament we are told to “count it all joy when you fall into all kinds of temptations” (James 1:2). Even in the Old Testament David asked God to “Try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me” (Psalm 139:23,24). So why should we ask to be kept from temptation? Because this is the prayer of the church, not the prayer of an individual, and there is a temptation coming upon the church in the last days, an “hour of trial”. Jesus often spoke about his “hour” (for instance, John 7:30, 12:27, 17:1) as being a specific time of temptation and trial, and the church will also face an hour of temptation. In Revelation 3:10 Jesus tells the church in Philadelphia about “the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” It is the hour when the antichrist seeks to deceive and destroy the church. Those who he cannot deceive he will destroy. Many will be deceived (as Jesus warns in Matthew 24:4,5,11), and many will join the “souls under the altar” as martyrs. The church shall not be destroyed, but it will be removed from the face of the earth by this wicked mixture of persecution and deception. This is the hour of temptation that the church prays to be delivered from.

Escape

It may be asked, But if it is going to come, why pray to be delivered from it? Because Jesus tells the Philadelphia church, “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation” (Revelation 3:10). And in Luke 21:36 he counsels the disciples to watch and pray, “that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.” There is an escape from the hour of trial, for some, a remnant in the

church. The church needs the purification of judgement, suffering and humbling in order to be prepared as a bride for Christ. But if we have humbled ourselves already (1 Peter 5:6), if we have already “suffered in the flesh” (1 Peter 4:1), if we have already “judged ourselves” (1 Corinthians 11:31), then we have already passed the test; we may be “accounted worthy to escape these things”.

The “evil” that the church prays to be delivered from is also this last hour of temptation. The prayer finishes with the church acknowledging that the kingdom does not belong to us. It is not the church’s kingdom, neither are the kingdom and the church the same thing. The kingdom is the victorious physical reign of Jesus on earth for a thousand years, ushered in by his coming. Only then will the kingdom, the power and the glory be his, in the sense that only then will he come into his inheritance. When he comes, he will share his glory with his servants, his bride. Then we too will have the kingdom, the power and the glory. But not until then. “Now the cross and conflict; then the perfect day”. Now we take up the cross and follow Jesus; then we exchange the cross for a crown. It’s all part of the gospel of the kingdom, the church’s great prayer of hope in the future.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Un-vain Repetitions

Starting school in 1957 I was very fortunate to receive some religious education. I can vividly recall the whole class of 43 children reciting from memory passages from scripture such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, Psalm 23, etc., and every morning before class work began we would attend an assembly in the school hall where we would sing hymns, say prayers and have a talk from the headmaster on morals and behaviour. I don’t ever remember a school day passing without the Lord’s Prayer being verbally spoken by the whole school. Somehow, something happened in my life as my little heart responded to God through this routine Christianity which our country once practised.

Searching

Even during my tender years I was searching for something to capture my awakening desires. I tried the Brownies but found this both boring and silly, and quite out of my reach as members were required to wear uniforms which my parents couldn’t possibly have afforded. I tried Sunday School at the Church of England church where I had been christened as a baby, but this too was not to my liking as the church smelled horrible because of the incense that was burned, and the Sunday School teachers seemed so lifeless and just couldn’t keep my attention. Fortunately, at the close of school one day, I was approached by someone from the local Brethren Church who gave me an invitation leaflet and asked if I would like to attend some children’s bible meetings. Of course I did! I was

always looking for something to occupy myself, and not many of the parents wanted their children to play with me so this looked promising. My parents didn't raise any objections at all, and I'm sure that they would have happily let me go every single evening of the week if possible, just to get me out of their hair.

Response

From the very first of these meetings my little heart responded to the whole environment. I loved every moment spent in that church. The people seemed alive and vibrant when telling stories from the bible and they captured my imagination so much that I soaked in every scene they described as though I were watching it on video. What a capacity children have to learn about God! We had quizzes each week when we would be asked questions about what we had heard. If we answered correctly a sweet would be thrown to us. I was so keen that not only did I acquire a brilliant memory, but my ability to catch improved 100%! I always returned home with a pocket full of sweets and an eager anticipation of the next weeks meeting, which never seemed to come soon enough for me.

Crisis Prayer

When I was about 8 years old, my brother, who was 4 years my senior, together with some of his friends, took me to Styal Woods where we often played as children. We were climbing an embankment when I lost my footing and began to slip. I was terrified as the River Bollin was directly beneath me and I couldn't swim. It was a very foolish thing for me to be doing but fortunately my brother was right behind me. He stopped my fall and began to push me up again. Instinctively, I prayed over and over again the 'Lords' prayer' with tears streaming down my face. He didn't stop pushing me until I had reached the top where I very emotionally thanked God for saving my life.

The Ten Commandments

Not long after this, The Ten Commandments film starring Charlton Heston was being shown at our local cinema. My father thought he would treat me and took me to see the 3-hour epic. There was one scene in it which absolutely overawed me. It was where the children of Israel were cornered at the Red Sea. The mountains were on either side of them, the Egyptians were pursuing them from behind and the sea was right in front of them. There was no escape. Then God did a tremendous miracle by parting the waters. My eyes couldn't believe what I was seeing as the film directors tried to recreate this miracle. The clouds in the film began to swirl around and around until they plunged into the waters, dividing them and rolling them back on either side to make a pathway of dry land through the midst. The waters towered above the Israelites on either side as they began to cross the sea and the sight of this incredible miracle brought out a spontaneous 'Lords' Prayer' yet again as I recited it over and over with tears streaming down my face and heart pounding, until they had all crossed the waters onto dry land and every one of the Egyptians, who were pursuing them, were drowned.

Expanding Knowledge

Without realising it, my knowledge of the bible was expanding rapidly week by week. This created a problem for me at school, though, as when I began to attend the senior school my tutors tried to indoctrinate me with evolution, which just didn't go down well at all with my church education. No matter how often my teachers tried to drum this theory into me my little spirit resisted it, and I can even remember writing on one examination paper that if my teacher wanted to believe his uncle was an ape that was fine by me, but mine wasn't! This contradiction between what I was being taught at school, and what I believed in my own heart, constantly caused me to get into trouble because I just didn't know how to 'play the game' and respond how they wanted me to just to please them. Life changed radically when God allowed me to have a Brethren school teacher who made it very clear to all the children in his classes what he believed to be true, even though the educational books we were using said something entirely different. He even led a Scripture Union group during lunch breaks where we could pray and read the bible together with the other believers amongst the children, and in this way were encouraged to hold on to our personal convictions.

Pluralism

Times have radically changed. A few years down the line I remember Maurice's girls coming home from school showing their R.E. textbooks. It made us very angry to see that they were not only being taught evolution, but every other religion under the sun - Buddhism, Hinduism, witchcraft, etc. - and Christianity was just regarded as another religion which received a brief mentioned in a different chapter in the book! Not so long ago there was a newspaper article advocating that multi-faiths should not be taught in our schools because to tell children that there were different ways to practice our beliefs eventually destroyed faith altogether. And this article was actually written by a Muslim!

Which God?

A few years ago I was holding an open air meeting and in between songs would speak about God. A young girl of about 14 years of age asked very respectfully which god I was talking about as she had been taught about so many gods in school. On another occasion I was again singing in the open air when someone else asked if Jesus Christ as a pop star. The question didn't seem cheeky as at that time there were quite a number of pop groups with names which sounded very religious. What has happened? We used to be a Christian country! No longer do schools hold assemblies as we used to know them. Nowadays every faith is accommodated and our Christian children who attend secular schools are being encouraged to dress up and join in the festivities to celebrate Eid and Halloween! The special days we used to hold sacred, like Whitsun and Pentecost, have been removed from our calendars and have been replaced with those of other religions. Because we have stood back and allowed these changes to take place, God has handed our country over to a reprobate mind and crime and godlessness have increased radically. At one time we had a Christian standard and moral code to live by, but because these are no longer taught then sexual abuse, abortion, drug abuse,

violence and all manner of evil practises have run riot, and none of us are safe anymore, even in our own homes!

Time For Prayer

If, as Christians, we had banded together in unity and prayed as Jesus instructed us, instead of fighting each other over our silly differences in doctrines, things in our nation could have been so different. We have lost so much ground in our now 'unchristian country' that it will take the mercy of God and a miracle to turn back the tide. Surely it's time we prayed with fervour the "Lord's Prayer" ... "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth", for there will be no real peace until Jesus sets up his kingdom. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20)