

Matthew 6:9-13 (NIV)

⁹“This, then, is how you should pray:

“ ‘Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us today our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’

Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

We return to the Lord’s Prayer, coming to God in thankfulness, humility, and need.

We seek a life filled with the persistent presence of God in an on-going, everlasting conversation of love.

We return this week to the Lord’s Prayer and the larger topic of our own prayer life. As we’ve seen, the first half of the Lord’s prayer is focused on God and the marriage of heaven and earth, the coming of God’s kingdom wherein God’s will is done on both and heaven for they will have indeed become one. In the second half of the prayer, we turn more to ourselves, at least in so far as we live in relationship to our Creator.

Give us today our daily bread

My Tuesday class has been making our way through Exodus for a couple of months. It is quite a story. God rescues the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and defeats Pharaoh. But when Moses and the people begin their trek across the Sinai wilderness, griping and complaining become rampant. We have no water!! We have no food!! So God, who loves them and provides for them, ensures that they have all they need to survive in the harsh desert. The food God provides is a white flaky substance found on the ground every morning. The Israelites call it *manna*, which means “what is it?” in Hebrew (yes, really). This manna won’t keep overnight but must be collected every day.

It is this story that Jesus draws on in the Lord’s Prayer. To pray for our daily bread is to acknowledge that all we have comes from God, even our lives – and to be thankful. We humans can be fiercely independent, resisting the very notion that we are dependent on God. But, every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer we acknowledge that God provides for us every single day. He always has and he always will.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive our trespasses¹

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I'd just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. The Lord's Prayer puts this truth right in front us – forgive us, as we forgive others.

Eduard Schweizer put it this way: 'God's forgiveness is not for decoration but for use.' Living, truly God-shaped living, requires that forgiveness be breathed out, not just breathed in. A truly grateful heart is also a forgiving heart.

The History of the Lord's Prayer

In the decades immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers began to use some variation of the Lord's Prayer that we have in Matthew and Luke.

About 150 years ago a manuscript was discovered that turned out to be a "teaching manual" for Christians from the second half of the first century. Called the *Didache* (teaching), this manual instructs believers in various Christian disciplines, including fasting and prayer. The Lord's Prayer is to be said three times a day, probably reflecting Jewish practices regarding daily prayer.

The *Didache* includes the text of the Lord's Prayer – and it is virtually identical to the prayer we say every Sunday! Following Christian tradition of nearly 2000 years as reflected in the *Didache*, we add a doxology to the end of the prayer from Matthew. In the *Didache*, the doxology is "For thine is the power and the glory forever and ever." You will sometimes find a translation of Matthew that incorporates the doxology, but it is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts. But of course, it is very appropriate that we conclude this prayer by offering praise and glory to the Lord Almighty.

Lead us not into temptation

I've been asked whether this phrase is a prayer for God not to tempt us to do wrong. Of course not . . . do we really think that Jesus seeks to make our lives harder, to lead us into the trap of sin and brokenness? No, we do an excellent job of that on our own. This is a prayer for strength to persevere, to avoid temptations when we can and to resist them when we can't.

Both the NIV and NRSV translators tell us that the prayer for deliverance could be rendered as deliverance from "the evil one" or from "evil."² If Matthew had in mind the former, the prayer is for deliverance from the machinations of Satan. If Matthew had in mind the latter, then it is a prayer for deliverance from evil circumstances. Though we always say "evil" when we pray the Lord's Prayer – both translations are worth keeping in view. This is an ever-present reminder that we need God's protection and deliverance every day.

Every single day – the importance of persistence

Even if we've been taught to pray, even if we earnestly pray daily, most of us will, at one time or another, be tempted to lose heart. We might pray day after day, month after month, that an important relationship would be healed . . . but then it's not. How long do we go on praying a prayer that seems futile? We remind ourselves that, of course, God answers

¹ There is no need to get hung up on debts/trepases/sins. The Greek word Matthew uses here is straightforward: the faults we commit against others, including God.

² It is important to remember that Jesus would have taught this prayer to his disciples in Aramaic, the day-to-day language used by the Jews in the Judea and Galilee. Thus, Matthew had to render the Aramaic into Greek, the language used for all of the New Testament. The same would be true if Jesus taught them the prayer in Hebrew.

prayers; a loving father would do no less. Still, it is not always easy to persist. Our passage from Luke is one of Jesus' parables about prayer. It is a parable about persistence. As is true for all the parables, a little background will help to make it more meaningful. The key to this story is appreciating the roles of the judge and the widow.

In ancient Israel, there were no juries and no prosecutors, only judges. A judge in the Jewish law court was to listen to the evidence offered by the plaintiff (the accuser) and the defendant (the accused). The judge was to apply the law to the case, stay impartial, punish sin as it deserved, and protect the powerless, such as widows and orphans. In the end, the judge was to render a just verdict that vindicated the aggrieved party. If a judge did all these things, the judge was considered a good and righteous judge.³

In Jesus' parable, the judge has done none of this! He doesn't obey God and he disrespects the people who come into his courtroom. To make it worse, a widow has come to him seeking justice. Widows were among the poorest, most marginalized people in all ancient cultures, including Israel. Nonetheless, rather than protecting the interests of the widow, the judge has ignored her. Yet, through her persistence, her relentless pursuit of the judge, the widow is finally granted justice. She is vindicated, powerless though she may be.

Jesus' point is clear. If persistence pays off with a cruel and unjust judge, how much more will God, our loving father, the good and righteous judge, hear the pleas and prayer of his children. Our prayers are never futile. We ask, we seek, we knock, we wait, we trust, we get emotional, we get frustrated . . . but we continue praying. Our persistence grows out of our confidence that God loves us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin today by sharing some of your own stories about the power of forgiveness. What do these stories share in common? Have you ever been surprised by the outcome created by forgiveness? How so? Why do we find it so difficult to forgive? Why are we so often insistent that forgiveness must be preceded by an apology? Do you think that forgiveness can create a repentant heart? How might this be?
2. Let's turn to God's forgiveness of ourselves. Few topics in my classes lead to more tears than this one. It seems that many of us have a very difficult time truly accepting and believing that we have been forgiven, that nothing we've done in the past lies outside the power of God's grace. Why do you think that this is so difficult to accept? How can we make God's forgiveness seem more concrete and certain? If we accept that the ground of our forgiveness is the cross, how can we help others to see that there could be no better demonstration of the depth of God's love? The limitations lie in our own abilities to receive, not in God's ability to give. Perhaps forgiving must precede our heart's ability to truly embrace forgiveness, not the reverse. To put it another way, perhaps we can't really experience forgiveness until we have forgiven.
3. In the parable of the judge and the widow, Jesus certainly could have used a different character than a widow. The fact that he uses a widow draws our attention to God's compassion for the powerless and poor. In his commentary on Luke, Alan Culpepper asks, "How does such a God hear our prayers if they are self-centered, concerned only with petty issues, or irrelevant to God's redemptive purposes? . . . To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger but do not, the call to pray night and day is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives." Discuss how prayer could change or has changed your priorities.

³In his letters, Paul often uses the metaphor of the Jewish law court to describe what it means when we speak of God as judge and of our own righteousness before God. "Righteousness" is another way of talking about our status when the court (God is the good judge) finds in our favor because we have trusted in Jesus and his faithfulness to God's covenant on our behalf. In effect, Jesus takes our place in the docket.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Genesis 45:5-14 & 50:15-21 Joseph (of the many-colored coat) forgives his enemies.	Tuesday, Psalm 107 “Consider the steadfast love of the Lord.”
Wednesday, Psalm 128 “Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.” [To ‘fear’ God is to recognize that this is his world and entrust our lives to him.]	Thursday, Matthew 18:21-33 Jesus trains his disciples in forgiveness.
Friday, Philippians 1:1-11 Paul prays for the Philippians.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now beginning 1 Samuel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning this week, February 23

Seven Events That Shaped the New Testament World

Scott’s Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to “worship” and then “sermons.” You’ll find the study with each week’s recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
