

“Our Father” – “The Lord’s Prayer” (Matt 6:9-13): The Emphases of Jesus

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Abstract: *The “Our Father” or “the Lord’s Prayer” is a very important prayer for all Christians, as it is the model of all prayers, taught by Jesus himself to his disciples. But even though it is the most loved and recited prayer by Christians, it may not be said to be really very deeply understood by many of them beyond this surface recitation. This article, therefore, dwells on this prayer so as to throw more light on its different aspects and emphases. The method employed in it is exegetical-theological, anchored especially on the Historical Critical method, in order to unearth properly the meaning of the biblical text as well as the important expressions in the prayer. By the use of these methods, therefore, this paper reveals that the Lord’s prayer is very deep in meaning as it prays for the coming of God’s kingdom in this present world, in anticipation of its final realization in the eschaton. The recommendation is that through the proper and deeper understanding of this prayer and, hence, through its more devotional recitation, Christians would not only pray for the coming of this kingdom from God but also actively participate in its realization through a more active Christian life. Thus, this study becomes very valuable not only to Christians in prayer and life but also to all human beings, including biblical scholars, teachers and students of religion.*

Keywords: Father, heaven, Christian, prayer, ostentation and eschaton

Introduction

The title of this paper is the first sentence of the "Our Father", that model prayer which Jesus taught his disciples (Matt 6:9-13 and Luke 11:1-4). It is also called "The Lord's prayer." That this prayer comes from the very mouth of our Lord himself and that it is one which all his disciples have to look towards regarding "how to pray", make it a very valued prayer by all Christians. Being, therefore, an example of how to pray, it shows also the kind of petitions which a child of God would share with his/her heavenly Father.¹ Hence, not only is it a very prominent prayer in the Liturgies of every Christian denomination, when Christians gather in any ecumenical forum, it is the prayer of choice and importance. In fact, it is "an important piece of liturgical tradition."²

This prayer has been the subject of study in this paper so as to throw more light on its various parts and emphases as these are meant to be known and understood, as much as possible, by Jesus himself. Hence, this prayer has been looked at in its context in the Gospel of Matthew which differs, to some extent, from that of Luke which is also briefly considered – as they are the two Gospel accounts that document this prayer as taught by Jesus. It has also been exegetically analyzed. All this is ultimately aimed at making this important prayer to be properly understood, appreciated and valued, firstly, by all Christians and, then, by every other person concerned.

The Lord's Prayer in Context

As already hinted above, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke record the "Our Father" as the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples. That of Matthew is longer (Matt 6:9-13) than that of Luke (Luke 11:1-4). This prayer is also found in the *Didache* (8:2), that early Christian document, almost in verbatim agreement with that of Matthew's Gospel.

What is, however, remarkable is that in both traditions, of Matthew and Luke, although the settings vary, the "Our Father" was taught by Jesus in circumstances of serious consideration regarding prayer. Hence, Matthew inserts it within his discussion of inward righteousness in Matt 6:1-18, particularly regarding almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-6) and fasting (vv. 16-18) – "all three being areas in which ostentation is a constant temptation."³ The disciples are to avoid ostentation in these matters in order to get

¹ A. LESKE, "Matthew" in *The International Bible Commentary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 1277.

² D. A. HAGNER, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 33A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993) 145.

³ W. F. ALBRIGHT - C. S. MANN, *Matthew* (AB 26; New York: Doubleday, 1971) 77.

the reward from God who sees in secret. The hypocrites act ostentatiously so that "they may be praised by men" (6:2), thereby losing their reward from God. But the Christians are so to act in order that men would "give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (5:16) – as only deeds done for God's glory will receive an eschatological reward.⁴ But particularly, they are to pray not in imitation of the verbose gentiles (vv. 7-8) but rightly – like in the "Our Father" which Jesus then taught them (Matt 6:9-13). Acting rightly in this way, therefore, Christians would be able to realize the will of God for them in their earthly lives, ultimately leading to eternal life (Matt 6:19-21).

In Luke, on the other hand, the disciples watch Jesus praying in a certain place. After he has finished, one of them requests him: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 1:1). In other words, Luke brings it out clearly that it is Jesus' own practice of prayer which is the starting point for the Christian practice of prayer. Hence, the disciples want to pray as Jesus prays and he teaches them the "Our Father". They see their relationship to Jesus as being parallel to that between John and his disciples. John had taught the disciples to pray. They, therefore, seek the same from Jesus.⁵

Matthew's form of the prayer is a more developed one than the Lukan form. Hence, Matthew has seven petitions after the introductory invocation while Luke, four. Those petitions in Matthew are set down as follows:

Invocation:	Our Father who art in heaven
Petitions:	1. Hallowed by thy name
	2. Thy kingdom come
	3. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven
	4. Give us this day our daily bread
	5. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors
	6. And lead us not into temptation
	7. But deliver us from evil. ⁶

Thus, Luke lacks the third petition (the will of God being done) and the seventh (deliverance from evil) above. In any case, there is little scholarly doubt that this prayer comes from the historical Jesus.⁷ The differences are, however, owed "in part to the existence prior to the present Gospel texts of more than one form of the Lord's prayer, but also in part to the editorial activity of Luke himself."⁸

Furthermore, it has become usual in some liturgical quarters, especially among our separated brethren, to conclude "The Lord's Prayer" with the doxology: "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever, Amen." This is certainly a later addition, one that may have been from the liturgy. It may have been particularly influenced by David's prayer of thanksgiving regarding the offerings for the temple in 1 Chron 29:11-13.⁹ Here, David had exclaimed:

Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come from thee, and thou rulest over all. In thy hand are power and might; and in thy hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank thee, our God, and praise thy glorious name (1Chron 29:11-13).

The above is a part of that prayer by David in 1 Chron 29:10-19 which has been described as "one of the finest prayers in the OT."¹⁰ In any case, that doxology, being referred to, is absent in both Matthew and Luke: "Neither Matthew nor Luke has the doxology that often concludes the liturgical use of the Lord's Prayer. While it is found in a few Greek texts of the NT, it is not found in any early texts and is certainly a liturgical development."¹¹

⁴ HAGNER, *Matthew 1-13*, 140-141.

⁵ J. NOLLAND, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (WBC 35B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1993) 619.

⁶ HAGNER, *Matthew 1-13*, 147-151.

⁷ NOLLAND, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 611.

⁸ NOLLAND, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 610.

⁹ HAGNER, *Matthew 1-13*, 144.

¹⁰ H. L. ELLISON, "1 and 2 Chronicles" in D. GUTHRIE – *al*, ed., *New Bible Commentary*, 3rd Edition (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1970) 383.

¹¹ NOLLAND, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 621.

Brief Exegesis

From the outline of "The Lord's Prayer" above, it could be divided into two sections. The first three are often called the "you" petitions, addressing God directly as "you". They also use divine passives. The last four petitions are called the "we" petitions. They ask God favours for "us".¹² These two sections then come after the opening invocation: "Our Father."

Two things are worth mentioning about that invocation. The word "Father", although it could be commonly understood in most cultures from the filial relationship existing between a father and his child, is, in this context, brought out clearly from the background of the original Aramaic word *'vabbā*. It is a term of special intimacy and affection which is used by children to address their earthly fathers. Jesus is the Son of God. Thus, by telling his disciples to call his Father "our Father", Jesus emphasizes a very central Christian tenet: all who follow him also become children of God. In other words, those who do God's will and follow his Son, Jesus, themselves become sons of God (cf. Matt 5:9, 45; also Gal 3:26 and 1 John 5:1).¹³ Secondly, that he is "in heaven" shows God's transcendence. He transcends over all. In praying, therefore, Christians are to call God "Our Father", for he is truly our God and Father who is also omnipotent.

To this end, Christians pray, asking for the coming of God's kingdom in the first three petitions, the "you" petitions. Hence, "hallowed be thy name" (v.9) is an appeal to God to act in order to vindicate his name. In Jewish thought, just like in our own day, a person's name is essentially, so to speak, linked to his person. Thus, God's name is virtually not distinguishable from his person. Hence:

'Thy name' is a typical and round about way of reverently referring to God's person (cf. Jn 12:28; Rom 9:17); and as God has revealed himself in his name (Exod 3:13-14), to know his name is to know him (cf. Gen 32:28-29; Isa 52:6). But only when the kingdom comes in its fullness will God be wholly honoured and glorified as is his due; only then will he be acknowledged by all (Ezek 36:20-3).¹⁴

Therefore, that first petition becomes very closely connected with the second, "Thy kingdom come", and the third, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The three petitions are essentially all one because each, eschatologically, looks to the end of history and each refers to the fitting culmination of God's work of salvation.¹⁵

Furthermore, the petitions help to highlight the role of the person praying. Even though the prayer is for God to act to bring about his kingdom ensuring that his name be hallowed, the disciples of Jesus do not just stand idly by. They have a role, hence the need for them to be taught to pray in the first instance. These disciples are already participants in the reign of God which has been brought by Jesus. They are, therefore, representatives of that reign in this present life. To that end, they are to reflect the good news of the inauguration of that kingdom in Jesus and through him. They manifest the reality of the presence of that kingdom. Consequently, the first three petitions "are also a prayer that the disciples will be faithful to their calling, that they will do their part (in obedience), not to bring the kingdom but to manifest its prophetic presence through Jesus and the Spirit."¹⁶

The remaining four petitions, the "we" petitions, ask favours for "us", as already pointed out. These petitions are still eschatological but they also address present, specific needs of the disciples, aspects which may be seen as also anticipating the end time. To that end, "give us this day our daily bread", is a prayer for needed bread at the present time. But this bread is certainly an anticipation of the eschatological banquet. Also, "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors", prays on our constant need of God's forgiveness both at present and in the eschaton. But this outlook strictly presumes our forgiving other people as well.

The sixth and seventh petitions are linked. They are: "And lead us not into temptation" and "but deliver us from evil". The word translated as "temptation" here, *peirasmos* in Greek, can also mean "test" or "trial".¹⁷ The proper meaning here has to be understood because God does not lead anyone into sin or temptation (cf. Jas 1:13). Hence, serious biblical interpreters think that the emphasis here is that the disciple prays not to be led into a testing situation in which his or her faith would not be able to

¹² HAGNER, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 146.

¹³ W.D. DAVIES - D.A. ALLISON, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew Vol. I* (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 601.

¹⁴ DAVIES - ALLISON, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I*, 603.

¹⁵ DAVIES - ALLISON, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I*, 603.

¹⁶ HAGNER, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 149.

¹⁷ Here cf., W.F. ARNDT - F. W. GINGRICH, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 640.

survive. Hence, Hagner summarizes these two last petitions as follows: "The sixth and seventh petitions together may be paraphrased in the following words: Do not lead us into a testing of our faith that is beyond our endurance, but when testing does come, deliver us from the Evil One and his purposes."¹⁸

Jesus' Ultimate Emphasis

To sum up the thoughts expressed so far, one must now link the evangelist's intention in presenting the whole materials in Matt 6:1-21. In cautioning against ostentation (v. 1) in almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and in giving the proper approach to his followers on those issues, Jesus wishes to elucidate his injunctions, as already hinted, at the end of that section:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt 19:19-21).

In other words, Jesus is here concerned with the obedient response of his disciples to the will of God.¹⁹ In that way, they will be prophetically witnessing to the coming of his kingdom in this world in preparation for their being with him in heaven, in the ultimate eschatological dispensation. In so doing, God's name would always be properly hallowed and glorified.

Conclusion

The Lord's Prayer is a very important prayer for all Christians and, as already pointed out, it is actually the most important of prayers because it was taught by Jesus himself. To that end, all men and women of goodwill who identify with Christians in one way or another also value this prayer as it is the prayer of choice in all Christian gatherings and all ecumenical situations.

Thus, this article has tried to study, analyze and explain it, as simply as possible, highlighting also its biblical contexts of both Matthew and Luke, the two Evangelists who record it as having been taught by Jesus himself. It is hoped that this paper would succeed in its goal of making this prayer more understandable by all those who say it, identify with it or even study it in scholarly circles.

¹⁸ HAGNER, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 151-152.

¹⁹ ALBRIGHT - MANN, *Matthew*, 77.