

The Prayer of Dependence

Matthew 6:7-15

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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Worship: Our Father

Key Sentence: Praying as Jesus taught helps us depend entirely on God

Outline:

Depending on God:

I. Is not about many words (Matthew 6:7-8)

II. Is about seeking his purposes as he meets your needs (Matthew 6:9-13)

III. Is about offering others forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15)

Matthew 6:7–15 “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day 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 evil.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The Prayer of Dependence Matthew 6:7-15

When I was young I read an old book called “Daddy Long Legs,” published in 1912. It consists of letters from Jerusha Abbot, an orphan, to Daddy Long Legs, a tall, rich, but anonymous benefactor who has plucked her out of the orphanage and sent her to college. He thinks she can become a writer, so he requires her to write him letters, telling of her progress and daily life. So she writes, dutifully at first, but then with enthusiasm, shares her blossoming life with him, and occasionally makes a request. He never writes back, but at times his secretary will respond to her requests, with money, permission or occasionally denial of some wish of hers. On other occasions her requests are granted as if by coincidence, frequently by a nice man she has met, Jervie Pendleton. Well, to make a long, fun story short, she ends up discovering that her anonymous benefactor, whom she assumed was old, was really the young Mr. Pendleton. He has not only been providing for her, but he has also become her friend.

That’s the way God works. That’s the way prayer works. God is our benefactor. He is the one who has plucked us out of an orphanage, and continues to provide for us. And like Daddy Long Legs, he desires only that we communicate with him, to tell him our needs and to share with him the details of our daily lives. Sometimes he answers our requests directly, but often he does so through what appear to be happy coincidences, as he uses the circumstances of our lives to draw us close to him. We are dependent on him. But as in the book, communication, prayer is at the heart of our relationship. When we pray the way Jesus taught us, we declare dependence on God. We submit to his will and purposes, while at the same time trusting him to meet our needs both physical and spiritual. The way Jesus taught us to pray, of course, is what we call “The Lord’s Prayer,” Matthew 6:9-12. As we focus today on each element of that prayer, we’ll find that it teaches us to depend entirely on God.

Last week we saw three contrasts between the righteous behaviors of the Pharisees, which were done in public to be seen by people and the way Jesus wants us to behave, acts done in secret to be seen by God. One was prayer. Matthew 6:5-6 “When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Jesus could have stopped there as he did in the other two contrasts. But he didn’t. He went on to teach that prayer is a way to fully depend on God in our lives.

Let's read the whole text. Matthew 6:7–15 *And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day 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 evil. ¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

In verses 7 and 8 Jesus gives a warning about prayer which leads into his model prayer by way of contrast. Simply put, don't use too many words. Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, he says. The most common translation is "Do not go babbling on like the heathen." Another is "do not use thoughtless repetition." Jesus is warning against mindless repetition, empty phrases, prayer which is all words, no meaning, all lips, no heart. Stott points out that every branch of Christianity can fall into this error. He says our Lord's prohibition "would certainly include a mindless use of the rosary in which nothing happens but the fingering of beads and reciting of words." An Anglican himself, he says "formal liturgies permit an approach to God with the lips while the heart is far from him." But he points out it is equally possible "to use empty phrases in extemporaneous prayer and lapse into religious jargon as the mind wanders." Finally, in my experience years back, many of the words vocalized in charismatic worship seem like mindless repetition. Paul says "if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air."

Jesus says "for they think that they will be heard for their many words." What an idea! Is God waiting to answer prayer for a certain number of repetitions, for a certain number of minutes on our knees. "Do not be like them," Jesus says. God knows what you need before you ask him. He is neither ignorant, so that we need to instruct him, nor hesitant, so that we need to persuade him. He is our Father, a Father who loves his children and knows all about their needs. Rather than mechanical and repetitive prayer, Isaiah tells us that "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." Paul says "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." That's type of prayer the Father desires.

So Jesus teaches us to pray without meaningless babble or too many words. Instead, he says “pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day 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 evil.”

This is a prayer of dependence on God. Let’s look at each element. We begin by saying “Our Father in Heaven.” Jesus did not teach us to pray “My Father in Heaven,” but to pray in the plural, seeing ourselves as part of a community. When I, as one follower of Jesus, pray this prayer, I do not pray it for myself alone, but I also pray for others in the Body of Christ. Thus this prayer has been repeated in almost every church in the church age. It is, of course, ironic that a prayer given in contrast to the repetitive prayers of the hypocrites has often, in many churches, devolved to a rote repetition of words. Jesus gave the prayer as a model for our hearts as we submit to God and depend on Him.

Our Father in Heaven. This is wonderful balance. It was rare, almost shocking, for a Jew of Jesus’ day to address God as Father. In fact so cautious were they about God’s name that they used words like heaven as a stand in for God, or instead of using his name they just called him “the Name,” But Jesus called him “Abba,” an Aramaic word used of fathers by children. Don Carson says the phrase is not as familiar as “daddy,” but much less formal than “father”, and he likens it to the word “papa” that is used in so many Old World countries.” In this prayer Jesus is teaching us to address God as children who have become his sons and daughters by faith. Those who repent of their sins and trust Jesus who died on their behalf, are born of God, children of God by adoption. There is, therefore, an abundant relationship between them and the heavenly father. There is forgiveness acceptance, love, inheritance, conversation, discipline. We are a family. He is the loving father. We are the cherished children.

Yet, though he is our father, he is “In heaven” Unlike the Jews of Jesus’ day, many Christians today tend to think of God as exclusively warm and personal. Many have lost the image of God’s majesty, power and glory, and think of him only as a kindly grandfather. This designation “in heaven” reminds us that he is the exalted God. As the hymnwriter says: Immortal, invisible, God only wise In light inaccessible hid from our eyes. Most blessed, most glorious. The Ancient of Days.” We need to remember that in prayer we enter a heavenly throne room, filled with majesty and power, and into the presence of unthinkable holiness. And yet at the center that throne room contains a Father who loves us wholly and tenderly. It is this combination of transcendence and relationship that sets our prayers apart from any other kind of communication.

Our Father in Heaven: hallowed be your name. This is the first petition. We are asking that God's name would be regarded as holy and treated as holy. But since God's name is representative of all that God is, we are really asking that he would be recognized as holy. We are asking that people would treat God with the reverence he alone deserves. And we're asking it for ourselves. He created us for an honest, loving relationship with himself, a relationship that recognizes his glory and perfection, and more and more appreciates who he is and what he has done. "Lord, make us able to see you as you are and lovingly worship you. Do this so all people will be in awe of your name." Personally I find this one of the keys to an authentic relationship with God, yet one easy to skip. Beginning my day, beginning prayer by recognizing the perfection of God is, for me, both energizing and pacifying. It's like stepping from a hot, sweaty dimly lit workhouse or prison into the clear cool light of early morning, to stand on an outcropping of rock over a long green view.

The second petition is equally brief: "Your kingdom come." We are asking God to fulfill His purposes, not ours. What is the kingdom? My favorite definition is still the one by David Mains "Christ's Kingdom is any situation in which Christ is recognized as King, his will is obeyed and obedient subjects reap the benefits of his reign." In one sense the kingdom is already present. We belong to Christ and he rules and reigns over us. But in another sense the kingdom is yet to come: When Christ comes again, he will reign over the whole world.

If you are going to pray this, you have to be willing to participate. Let your kingdom come in me. Let my heart turn from fulfillment of my feelings and desires to finding fulfillment in your desires and your commands. And let me be ready for you to come. Let me not so cling to the things of this world that I'm unwilling to drop them when I hear the shout and the trumpet. Yet we don't pray this just for ourselves. We pray it also for others, and for our church, and for our leaders and for our world. Lord, let them recognize your rule. Let righteousness and morality be upheld. Let people behave in ways that honor you and love others. For me this prayer always has two elements: recognizing Jesus as King now in everything I pray about, and longing for his return, when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

The third petition expands on the second one: Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In heaven, God's righteous will is obeyed immediately and willingly, without grudge, without backward look, without an undivided heart. On earth, presently, this is not the case. Even in those cases where we do God's will, too often we whine and complain, we offer alternatives, and we don't commit ourselves to it wholeheartedly. This is a prayer that we, believers might be entirely submissive to his will, and might obey it with peace and contentment.

This prayer, of course, is the same prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, where he said “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” We are asking that our will submit to his. Martin Luther prayed “Let thy will be done, O Father, not the will of the devil, or of any of those who would overthrow thy holy Word, or hinder the coming of thy kingdom; And grant that our poor flesh may not yield or give way from weakness or laziness.” Or fear. I was walking the dog the other day and noticed that he is entirely submissive to my will, as long as we walk on the sidewalk as he is used to, and go the direction he’s used to going. But if for some very good reason, it is my will to walk out into the street or across the grass, he becomes jumpy and uncertain, looking around, drifting a bit from my side. I think that’s how we are with God. We are willing to follow his will as long as he leads in ways we’ve been before, ways we want to go. But if he pulls us out of our normal pattern, or leads us into something difficult, we become uncomfortable, unresponsive and tend to drift away from his side.

The first three petitions are prayers concerning God’s purposes. It is God’s purpose that his name be set apart as holy. It is God’s purpose that his kingdom come. It is God’s purpose that his perfect will be done. In each of these things, as we submit to purposes, we also declare our dependence on Him. We give him first place in our thoughts, our aspirations and our behavior.

In the last three petitions we recognize explicitly that we depend on God by asking him to meet our physical and our spiritual needs. Verse 11: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Jesus reminds us that God does not provide in excess, but instead provides what we need. In our culture we can’t grasp how critical this daily bread was. In Jesus’ time workers were generally paid by the day, and the payment was barely enough to supply the day’s needs. So each day reminded the people that they were dependent on God for their supply, with no place else to turn. Furthermore, since bread was the staple of the ancient diet, the source of life, then to pray for bread was to pray that God would supply all needs. Give us this day our food, our clothing, our shelter, our physical health, the funds to pay our bills, the people we need to care for us.

The simple truth is whether we live in 30 A.D. or 2000 A.D. we are totally dependent on God to supply our needs. The very air that we breathe, the food that reaches our tables, the beat of our hearts, depends on God. This was brought home a few weeks ago in the big freeze. We saw how dependent we were on the power coming into our homes, the water, the heat we use in winter. We saw again the importance of the fragile supply chain as for the second time in a year important daily needs, from bread to water to toilet paper went missing from our stores. Whatever means he uses, God is the one who supplies our needs.

Here especially we need to remember that we are praying in the plural. We are not just praying this for ourselves, or even our own families, but we're asking God to supply the needs of those in our churches, of believers around the world, of non-believers in poverty, misery or want. It's a prayer of and for compassion.

A tired looking woman entered an old grocery store and asked the owner for a little food. When he asked how much she could afford, she answered, "My husband was killed in an accident. I have nothing to offer but a little prayer." The man was unmoved, but he thought of a clever response. "Write your prayer on a piece of paper and you can have its weight in groceries." To his surprise, she plucked a folded paper from her pocket. "I wrote it during the night while I was watching my sick baby." Without even reading it, he put it on one side of his balance scales. "We shall see how much food this is worth," he muttered. To his dismay nothing happened when he put a loaf of bread on the other side. When he took the loaf off the balance moved freely. When he put it on, it froze. He added other items and it would not move. Finally he blurted out, "Well, that's all it will hold. You can have this much." With a tearful "Thank you," the lady went out. As time passed he pondered the coincidence. Why did the woman come at exactly the time the mechanism froze? Whenever he looks at the slip of paper which bears that mother's petition, he is amazed, for it reads, "Please, dear Lord, give us this day our daily bread!"

The second petition is spiritual, for forgiveness. Verse 12: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." We are utterly dependent on God for forgiveness. Our fallen state is sinful rebellion against God, against his purposes and will. And forgiveness is found only in Jesus. It is Jesus who died for our sins and forgives us as a free gift when we trust in him. In the Lord's supper, in Matthew's account, he says "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." But the reason this is in a daily prayer is that we are not yet what we've been made to be. We continue to sin. We pray for forgiveness not for sins that haven't been paid for, but for sins that haven't been confessed, because God wants us to see that our sins make a relational separation between us and God. Not that He moved but that we stepped away. So by asking for forgiveness we step back toward him and acknowledge anew the forgiveness he so dearly bought.

But this is not just a prayer of confession. "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." This could be translated: Forgive us our debts as we now forgive our debtors. The reception of forgiveness and the willingness to forgive are to go hand in hand in the Christian life. We'll come back to this in just a second as Jesus amplifies it in verses 14 and 15.

The prayer's final petition is verse 13: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," or deliver us from the evil one. Why do we ask God not to lead us into temptation? Doesn't James teach that God does not tempt anybody? Many commentators have tried to resolve this. Some say the verse should read "Let us not be led into temptation," where God is not doing the tempting but is preventing the tempter. That's close, but I'm not sure the Greek supports it. Others, like Don Carson, see something else. Carson says: "I think this is a litotes, a figure of speech which expresses something by negating the contrary. For example, 'not a few' means many; Jesus says "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away," by which he means "Whoever comes to me I will always keep." So, lead us not into temptation means lead us away from temptation, from evil. Deliver us from the evil one. Lead us into righteousness.

Jesus is teaching us to pray for God's help in our spiritual lives. Again, Carson says it well: "This petition is a hefty reminder that just as we ought to consciously depend on God for physical sustenance, so also we ought to sense our dependence on him for moral rescue and spiritual victory." This is my point. The prayer of Jesus calls us to constantly express our dependence to God. I need you, Lord, to meet my physical needs, emotional needs, spiritual needs.

So that's the prayer we ought to be praying. If you don't have this prayer memorized, start now. Not so as to repeat it but to learn this pattern of praying for God's purposes, that his will might be done, and praying for your needs and the needs of others, depending on him for both physical and spiritual provision.

Immediately following this prayer Jesus returns to the subject of forgiving others, as if that subject was the most important or possibly the most difficult in the prayer. Maybe it is. Verse 14 "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Does this mean that our forgiveness of others earn us the right to be forgiven? If this was the only verse on forgiveness we would have to understand it that way. But in light of all Scripture says we can't. Verses like Ephesians 1:7 make it clear that "In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." Forgiveness is a free gift.

But those who have received forgiveness should so treasure the enormity of the gift they've been given that it is unthinkable not to forgive others. Stott says "If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it proves that we have minimized our own." My favorite example is the parable of the unmerciful servant, Matthew 18:23-35.

A king decides to settle accounts with his servants, but one who can't pay owes a huge sum, 10,000 talents. He pleads with the king for forgiveness. The king grants it. Then this unmerciful servant goes out and finds someone who owes him a small pittance, and when he can't pay, he has him thrown in prison. When the king hears of it he says "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." Again, this does not mean that our forgiveness of others earns us the right to be forgiven. Look at the sequence in the parable. But if we cannot forgive others it is very possible that we have never understood the magnitude of our sin. The second man owed a lot of money, a hundred denarii, equivalent maybe to \$12,000 in our terms. But the first man owed his master ten thousand talents, each talent being almost 9000 denarii, for a total forgiveness of six billion dollars. Do you think Jesus didn't know this was an unreasonably large debt? Sure he did. He was reminding us that the debt God forgives in forgiving our sins is incalculably large. A simple sense of proportion should make us long to forgive others.

So what have we seen? Praying like this is how we express our dependence on God. We align our hearts with God's purposes and by trust him to meet our needs, as individuals and as a community, both physical and spiritual.

Ben Patterson, in his writing on prayer, tells of a six week period he spent flat on his back because of herniated disks. He says: "I couldn't preach, I couldn't lead meetings, I couldn't call on people. I couldn't do anything but pray. Not that I immediately grasped that. It took two weeks for me to get so bored that I finally asked my wife for the church directory, so I could at do something, even if it was only pray for the people of my congregation. It wasn't piety but boredom and frustration. But pray I did, every day for every person, two or three hours a day. After a while, the time became sweet. Toward the end of my convalescence, I prayed, "Lord, this has been good, this praying. It's too bad I don't have time to do this when I'm working." And God spoke to me, very clearly. he said "Stupid (that's right, that was his very word. He said it in a kind voice though) You have the same twenty four hours each day when you're weak as when you're strong. The only difference is that when you're strong, you think you're in charge. When you're weak, you know you aren't." Jesus gives us this prayer so we can express our entire dependence on God.