



The Lord's Prayer: A Primer on Mission in the Way of Jesus

HENRY FRENCH

“**P**RAY THEN IN THIS WAY....” SO BEGINS THE LORD’S PRAYER, WHICH MIGHT better be called the Christians’ Prayer. Taught by Jesus to his first followers, this remarkable prayer is a missiological primer on being Christian in a world deeply alienated from and rebellious towards its creator. Within its tightly constructed petitions one finds the core theological and ethical beliefs that drove Jesus and that must drive Jesus’ followers if they are to participate in God’s mission to the world God loves.

“Pray then in this way....” These are not words of friendly advice from a wisdom figure encouraging us to develop our personal piety. Rather they are words of command—the verb is in the present imperative mood—spoken to people who had been chosen to follow Jesus in God’s mission and who had freely accepted that extraordinary calling. We lose the full force and effect of this prayer if we do not hear the words “Pray then in this way,” as Jesus’ first followers did, as a command to people who have been chosen for the mission of God.

To pray this prayer is to accept that we are indeed chosen for God’s mission and to accept all that entails. This is not a prayer for a church in captivity to its culture. It is not a prayer to be repeated Sunday after Sunday to the cadences of rote religion. It is not a safe prayer for the ears of a domesticated God. As Leonardo Boff reminds us:

The Lord’s Prayer calls those who pray it to a life of faith that turns the world upside down. Praying this prayer is a missionary act and thus a subversive one.

The reality encompassed in the Lord's Prayer is not a pretty picture but one of heavy conflict....The prayer that our Lord taught us cannot be prayed in just any way and with just any attitude. It presupposes a perception of this world's tragedy; as we suffer in the passion of history, it promises us liberation.¹

I. OUR FATHER...

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer not to a domesticated God but to the Father of Jesus, to the creator of heaven and earth, to the one whose holiness is wholly other and who seeks the transformation of the world through righteousness and justice. It is a prayer that calls its petitioners to a life of faith that "turns the world upside down," to a way of being Christian that—in the manner of the Sermon on the Mount—transvalues conventional standards of morality and religiosity in a way that the conventional will always find subversive.

Of the infant Jesus it was said, "This child is destined...to be a sign that will be opposed." So it was. And so it must be for those who pray this prayer with the beliefs and convictions of the one who taught it. To pray this prayer, as an individual or as a community of faith, with the mind of Jesus (Phil 2:5) is to align yourself with the holiness of God, wherever that may take you. It took Jesus to the cross.

Here we arrive at a critical point. The beliefs and convictions of Jesus, which are here expressed in the performative language of prayer, are beliefs and convictions about God, about the nature of God, the will of God, the mission of God. That is to say, they are not beliefs and convictions about himself, except insofar as he understood himself to embody the nature, will, and mission of God.

A stumbling block for many to a Christian missiological reading of the Lord's Prayer is the lack of any explicit christology in either the prayer or in its biblical context, the Sermon on the Mount. But this should not be surprising. Jesus' intent in all that he said and did was not self-promotion; it was faithfulness to the will of his Father. This is strikingly clear in Matt 7:21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

When Jesus came to Galilee and began "proclaiming the good news of God" (Mark 1:14) he was not proclaiming himself. Rather he pointed to and embodied the salvific will of God that was opening the kingdom to all who would enter—including particularly those that conventional morality and religiosity would keep out.

The tendency among many Christians to collapse mission into christology and thus see mission as the proclamation of a christocentric gospel reduced largely—if not exclusively—to the proclamation of (individual) salvation through faith in Jesus Christ makes it impossible for them to appropriate the Lord's Prayer as a primer for Christian mission. The gospel that Jesus proclaimed following his

¹Leonardo Boff, *The Lord's Prayer: The Prayer of Integral Liberation*, trans. Theodore Morrow (New York: Orbis, 1983) 5, 20.

baptism by John (Mark 1: 14-15) was not a christocentric gospel except in the sense that he embodied the good news that he proclaimed.

The content of the good news that Jesus proclaimed was theocentric (Matt 4:17), a fact not lost on the early church. As Tertullian, a third-century theologian, once declared, the Lord's Prayer is a summary of the whole gospel (*breviarium totius evangelii*).² The gospel of Jesus is *about* God's mission to the world God loves, about the coming of the kingdom. It is the good news of the kingdom that drove Jesus and that drives those who follow Jesus. It includes, but is not limited to, the story of what God accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—an event with eschatological significance both reflecting and pointing to the coming fullness of the kingdom.

If one can see that the gospel of Jesus is the good news *about* the kingdom of God, then the Lord's Prayer, the *breviarium totius evangelii*, comes into focus as a primer on mission for Christian people. Within this prayer we find Jesus' mission. We find what Jesus prayed for and participated in and, by extension, what Jesus' followers are to pray for and participate in.

"Pray then in this way." Begin by recognizing the priestly character of Christian prayer. Every petition in the Lord's Prayer is simultaneously intercessory.³ When we pray "Our Father" we align ourselves with the community of those who pray "in this way," the community of disciples of Jesus and, more profoundly, we align ourselves with the whole human community. As Hans Dieter Betz puts it: "Finally, the invocation joins the worshipper together with other human beings. Everyone who says 'Our Father' acts as a spokesperson and representative of all humanity."⁴ Or, as Daniel Migliore wrote:

The Lord's Prayer is emphatically a *we* prayer, a prayer that we utter as members of the people of God rather than as isolated individuals. We pray as a community and on behalf of all humanity and, indeed, of all creatures. Not a trace of individualism is evident in this prayer. There is no search for personal salvation apart from the renewal of the life of the whole creation. The Lord's Prayer is thus a prayer not of individualistic piety but of solidarity in suffering and hope with the entire groaning creation.⁵

The petitioner prays on behalf of all persons because all persons, whether they know it or not, are in relationship with God. The petitioner prays as one who knows this to be true and as one who knows that, to the degree that God acts in response to these petitions, all persons will be materially affected. To pray this prayer is to stand in solidarity with all people who experience in their bodies, minds, and spirits the multifarious oppressions of a world where God's name is not sanctified, where God's kingdom has not fully come, and where human wills resist the divine

²Quoted in Leonardo Boff, *The Lord's Prayer*, 10.

³See Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 381-382.

⁴Ibid., 389.

⁵Daniel L. Migliore, "Preface," in *The Lord's Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 1-2.

will. To pray this prayer is to join with Jesus, whose very life was a hallowing of God's name, who embraced and embodied the kingdom of God, and whose will was to do the will of his Father (John 4:34).

II. THAT GOD SHOULD BE GOD

“Pray then in this way.” Be bold to remind God of God's obligations. We call upon God, our Father in heaven, the one who is immanent, intimate, and yet transcendent, the creator and sustainer of all life. And we call upon God using imperative verbs. This boldness is grounded in the Jewish theological notion that the God to whom we pray is righteous (e.g., Isa 5:16) and is therefore under obligation to act righteously. With boldness and confidence, then, God's people can cry out, “Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness” (Ps 143:1).

The very righteousness of God obligates God to eliminate evil. This is an obligation that has not yet been fulfilled, although the promise of its fulfillment has been announced. We are thus free, and by Jesus encouraged, to remind God of the obligations of righteousness—the hallowing of God's name, the establishment of the reign of God, and the doing of God's will “on earth as it is in heaven.” The fulfillment of the obligations of divine righteousness, for which the community of Jesus prays in the Lord's Prayer, would mean the end of oppression, Jubilee, the establishment of God's *shalom* (fullness or abundance of life) for all peoples.

Isa 61:1-2 is an important text here in that it bridges the Old Testament and the mission of Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 4:17-21), and again, by extension, the mission of those who follow Jesus (Matt 10:7-8; Luke 9:2-5). The prophet proclaims:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn....

As long as oppression and captivity to the powers that enslave humanity continue, God's righteousness, and those who hope in God's righteousness, still need to be vindicated. Jesus adopted this text from Isaiah (Luke 4:16-19) as a sign that in *his* righteousness the vindication of God's righteousness had begun: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,” Jesus said, “because he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.” According to the Gospel of John, the resurrected Christ said to his disciples, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Immediately thereafter he said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:21-22). The vindication of God's righteousness continues in the righteousness of Jesus' followers (Matt 5:16).

It is noteworthy, and germane to the Lord's Prayer, that Jesus stopped reading the Isaiah text at verse 61:2a, which proclaimed the “the year of the Lord's fa-

vor.” He closed the scroll without reading verse 61:2b, which went on to proclaim the “day of vengeance of our God.” Why? Because the final “day of vengeance of our God” was *not* being fulfilled in the hearing of those packed into the synagogue in Nazareth. It was coming, but not yet. The full “vengeance,” the complete “rescue,” the final “vindication” of God’s righteousness is a divine eschatological event. It is a matter of divine intervention, a promise and a hope that shape the lives of those who have heard the prophetic (and messianic) proclamation.

III. GOD’S WORK AND OURS

The kingdom will not come in its fullness without divine intervention—for which we pray—but it becomes a proleptic reality through grace-enabled human intervention—for which we also pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Therein lies the missionary thrust of the prayer. Those who pray seek the eschatological completion of God’s mission (the vindication of righteousness) and seek to become agents of its partial and proleptic realization.⁶

We ask God to make God’s name holy within the human community, and we ask for grace to sanctify God’s name ourselves through acts of justice in God’s name. We ask God to bring God’s kingdom to eschatological fullness, and we ask for grace to be agents of that kingdom in the historical context within which we pray. We ask God to ensure that God’s will prevail on earth as it does in heaven, and we ask for grace to end our rebellious resistance to God’s will—the rebellious resistance that profanes the name of God on earth and builds a kingdom of evil to stand against the kingdom of God. And those who pray ask all of this not on behalf of themselves but on behalf of the whole human community.

It bears repeating that it is not “my” Father to whom I pray and ask these things. It is “our” Father. As British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has noted, to say “our Father” is “a mark of grace, one of the first signs of faith.”⁷ To say “our Father” with understanding is to stand together with all people, particularly with those who suffer, yearning for God’s future while anticipating it now by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God (Mic 6:8).

The first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, then, ground mission in the tension between divine and human freedom. They call for the vindication of God’s righteousness through both divine intervention and human intervention in a world of oppression, injustice, violence, and suffering. Like the ancient psalmist, the petitioners call on God to act in ways consistent with God’s righteousness. They also call on God to enable them to act in ways consistent with God’s righteousness. It should also be noted that these petitions are profoundly intercessory, for the fruit of God’s righteousness is salvation for the human community and the fruit of the grace-enabled righteousness of those who follow Jesus is a more humane world (Jer 23:5-6; Isa 45:20-23; Acts 2:42-47).

⁶See Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 389-396.

⁷N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 12.

The second set of three petitions lowers the level of abstraction and provides concrete examples of what the first set of three petitions entails. “Give us this day our daily bread” is an appeal to God to continue to act in a way consistent with God’s nature (righteousness) and human need. The petition expresses humanity’s absolute dependence upon God for both life and for that which sustains life. As in the Jewish theology that provides the ground for Jesus’ prayer, the petition recognizes that God is the source of that which both sustains life and provides it with happiness and meaning. The petition is squarely within the tradition of that marvelous creation hymn, Ps 104:

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. (14-15)

In this petition, God, as the loving and righteous Father, is asked to continue his munificence, to continue to care and provide for his rebellious creation. Daily bread is needed. Daily bread is a collective notion. It represents all that is necessary for existence and which, in sufficient amounts, provides the ground of human happiness and meaning.⁸ The tragedy of human rebelliousness and resistance to the will of God is found in the fact that while a part of the human race, through self-aggrandizement, enjoys far more “daily bread” than would be sufficient, a larger part suffers from gross insufficiency. The mission of God, to which the people of God are called, confronts that disparity not with the ritual obligations of religion but with the moral obligations of righteousness (Amos 5:10-24).

The Lord’s Prayer recognizes that to benefit from the munificence of God’s righteousness places the obligation of righteousness, the obligation to be munificent as well, upon those who pray this prayer. It is God’s bread that is given to us through the bounty of nature and the work of many hands. And because of God’s nondiscriminatory generosity, bread that is hoarded is no longer God’s bread. It is stolen bread, unjust bread, the bread of evil. As Leonardo Boff notes, “God does not hear the prayer that asks only for *my* bread.”⁹ Therefore, those who pray the Lord’s Prayer, who have in the first three petitions committed themselves to the vindication of God’s righteousness, pray for “*our* bread.” If it is *our* bread then it is not *my* bread, and I am obligated as an individual—and as a community of Jesus—to share it.

There are echoes here of Isa 58 where God, through the prophet, castigates the people of Israel for their unrighteousness, an unrighteousness that was cloaked behind the façade of religious observance.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from

⁸Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 398.

⁹Boff, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 77.

your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isa 58:6-10)

The prayer for *our* daily bread places upon us the obligation to ensure that all have the necessities of life. As Boff points out, we are judged by our attitude toward “bread.” That is the clear meaning of Matt 25:31-46, another of Jesus’ teachings with clear echoes of Isa 58.

In theological terms, the human infrastructure is so important that God connects being saved and being lost with a just and comradely concern that we may or may not put into practice. Thus, in the final analysis, we are to be judged by the supreme Judge according to criteria found in the infrastructure: whether or not we have looked after the hungry, the naked, the thirsty, the prisoner. Our eternal destiny is thus ultimately involved with bread, with water, with clothing, and with solidarity with others.¹⁰

Here is the mission of God to which those who pray the Lord’s Prayer commit themselves: radical inclusiveness in the munificence of God; the drawing of all people into the sphere of God’s righteousness; the opening of the reign of God. Of course, all too often we do not practice “a just and comradely concern” for the multitudes that die for want of “bread” and so we fail in the missional obligations to which we have committed ourselves.

In acknowledgment of this harsh reality, the fifth petition asks for forgiveness. “And forgive us our debts....” In this surprisingly transactional language, sin is understood “not as the violation of ritual codes, taboos, and purity laws but as the failure to fulfill one’s general obligations to others,”¹¹ be those others God or fellow human beings. The prayer understands sin in relational terms and locates both human sin and righteousness in the complex network of relationships that provide the context for human life. What is at stake here is human failure to fulfill the “social contract” of the kingdom of God, which gives rise to the cry for divine forgiveness for both vertical and horizontal failures.

The transactional language of the text—as well as Jesus’ inaugural proclamation of the “year of the Lord’s favor”—alludes to the notion of Jubilee, commanded in Lev 25 and as yet unrealized. “It was to be a time of restitution and restoration for all Israel. Debts were to be forgiven....”¹² As Tiede notes:

This vision of divine justice requires a redistribution of resources and assets which challenges private ownership rights. Small wonder that the acceptable

¹⁰Ibid., 75.

¹¹Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 380.

¹²David L. Tiede, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 107.

year of the Lord would remain a religious symbol projected into an uncertain future when God's dominion would be revealed to the whole world.¹³

The eschatological dimension of the Lord's Prayer still looks to God's future intervention to bring about the fullness of divine justice, but the prayer also looks to a proleptic realization of Jubilee in the relationships and actions of those who pray this prayer. "As we also have forgiven our debtors" does not imply synergism or works righteousness. To the contrary, the human impulse toward the forgiveness of debts (and the struggle for a just distribution of "bread") follows from the experience of divine mercy and the concomitant commitment to righteousness freely made by those who pray this prayer. The story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2-9 is instructive here, as is the negative example of the unforgiving servant in Matt 18:23-35.

Forgiveness, received and given, undermines the structures of the kingdom of evil and establishes a new community that prefigures and incarnates, within the brokenness of human history, the coming kingdom of God. Forgiveness is central to the mission of God and the mission of God's people. Participation in the mission of God moves individuals and the community of faith to the intersection of forgiveness received and given. At that intersection everything is made new. In the cancellation of debt that cannot possibly be paid back, God provides the indebted with a new start, a new start characterized by the transformation of the radically forgiven into those who also radically forgive (2 Cor 5:17-19).

The final petition brings the prayer full circle. It identifies the inescapable paradox within which those who pray this prayer live. Luther captured the paradox in his famous *simul justus et peccator*, the paradox of being simultaneously a righteous person and a sinner. Drawn into the reign of God through grace and the response of faith in the commitment to righteousness, the followers of Jesus remain inhabitants of a world where the existence of evil continues to tempt even them to evil.

According to the Lord's Prayer, evil has its origin in and consists of the totality of human failures: profaning the name of God, opposing his kingdom, resisting his will, failing to meet obligations toward fellow humanity, and not resisting the temptations of evil.¹⁴

Eschatologically, the prayer to be kept from trial (temptation) and rescued from the evil one (evil) is the prayer that God would at last vindicate God's righteousness by meeting the obligations of righteousness enumerated in the first three petitions. Temporally, the prayer confesses that the petitioners are completely dependent upon the gracious intervention of God in order to persist in the struggle against the enticements and entanglements of evil while waiting for the eschatological moment.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 381.

Missiologically, the performative language of the Lord's Prayer seeks to effect that which is prayed for. The petitioners are bold to ask God to hasten the eschatological vindication of God's righteousness while also asking with pragmatic realism that, in the interim, God's grace enable them to participate in a proleptic realization of what will only be complete on "the day of vengeance [vindication/rescue] of our God," namely, the sanctity of God's name, the annexation of this unjust world by the kingdom, and assent to the divine will by a previously rebellious humanity. Praying this prayer is a missionary act and thus a subversive one.

To pray this prayer is to place one's self freely under the reign of God while still sojourning in the kingdom of evil with all its inevitable temptations and entanglements. It is, therefore, not a prayer to be prayed lightly. Praying "in this way" may not turn the world upside down—that remains for God—but it will turn the petitioners upside down.

As Karl Barth was known to say, "To fold one's hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."¹⁵ That is the mission of God. And that changes everything for those who pray this prayer and join the uprising. ⊕

HENRY FRENCH, currently a pastor at Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Plymouth, Minnesota, has served a total of twenty years in the global mission of the ALC and the ELCA, most recently as Director for Studies with the ELCA's Division for Global Mission. He has taught historical theology at the Lutheran Seminary in Japan and Christian Mission and World Religions at Luther Seminary.

¹⁵Quoted in Jan Milic Lochman, "The Lord's Prayer in Our Time: Praying and Drumming," in *The Lord's Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 18-19.

The Lord's Prayer: A Primer on Mission in the Way of Jesus Henry French. The Lord's Prayer: Empowerment for Living the Sermon on the Mount Mary E. Hinkle. Trinitarian Prayers for Christian Worship Eberhard J. Angel. Five Ways to Pray Always Brian J. Pierce, O.P. Prayer as Persuasion: The Rhetoric and Intention of Prayer Patrick D. Miller. On Prayer Abraham J. Heschel. The Lord's Prayer is a Prayer Written by Jesus Christ. What was he trying to tell us? The Lord's Prayer is the most important of all the Christian documents. It was carefully constructed by Jesus with certain very clear ends in view. Click on each section to read Emmet Fox's interpretation of its meaning. Undoubtedly everyone who is seeking to follow along the Way that Jesus led, should make a point of using the Lord's Prayer, and using it intelligently, every day. In order to do this, we should understand that the Prayer is a carefully constructed organic whole. Many people rattle through it like parrots, forgetful of the warning that Jesus gave us against vain repetitions, and, of course, no one derives any profit from that sort of thing. The Lord's Prayer, also called the Our Father (Latin: Pater Noster), is a central Christian prayer which, according to the New Testament, Jesus taught as the way to pray: Pray then in this way (Matthew 6:9 NRSV). When you pray, say (Luke 11:2 NRSV). Two versions of this prayer are recorded in the gospels: a longer form within the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, and a shorter form in the Gospel of Luke when "one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught...