



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 1

Our Father in heaven . . .

Scripture Reading

Matthew 6:5–13

Introduction to the Study

Probably most of us can't remember the first time we heard the Lord's Prayer—or the Our Father, as many put it. That's because this prayer seems to be almost everyone's possession. Even in this time of so much biblical illiteracy, the Lord's Prayer is still part of the common possession of several billion people. And for many of us, not only can't we remember when we first heard this prayer, neither can we remember when we memorized it—because our memorizing was not a conscious effort; it was simply the process of hearing the words until they were part of our very persons. Not that memorizing this prayer is a great feat. It is only a few dozen words, so few that even when we speak slowly we complete the prayer in thirty seconds.

But these few words may be the most familiar collection of words on our planet. They have been translated into roughly two thousand languages and dialects, including those for probably 98 percent of the world's inhabitants. On any given weekend they will be spoken in unison in massive cathedral-like buildings and in mud huts and in open fields of worshipers. Every priest or pastor knows, as does many a nurse or hospice care specialist, that this prayer is one of the last statements made by those who are dying. All of which is to say that there is no prayer—indeed, no single collection of words—that can rightly be compared to this one.



In prayer as with all the other major issues of life, ranging from family to international affairs, the foundation issue is relationship.

And yet, with all of that, most of us don't know much about this prayer, and we're inclined to speak it without thinking. Martin Luther, with his penchant for saying things directly, described the Lord's Prayer as the greatest martyr, "for everybody tortures and abuses it." It is mostly, of course, the abuse of familiarity. Because we say it so often and because its words have the flow of poetry, we are likely to speak it without investment of either mind or heart. Jesus warned, "In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen, who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard" (Matt. 6:7 NEB). It's ironic, isn't it, that the prayer Jesus gave us is probably the most frequent instrument of violation for the warning he gave us.

So my aim in these coming weeks is for us to come to *know* this prayer that many of us have recited since before conscious memory. Some will feel this is unnecessary; after all, no prayer could be simpler, really, than this one. But of course that's just the point. It is the simplest words, scenes, and experiences that merit the deepest thought.

Others may be uneasy with the very idea of “learning” to pray. Prayer is instinctive to us, like loving; learning to pray can therefore seem an intrusion on the private places of the soul. Still, Jesus gave us this prayer as part of a time of teaching. Matthew’s Gospel includes it in the Sermon on the Mount, and Luke’s as Jesus’ answer to a disciple who asked to be taught how to pray.

In truth, if through our time of study we are caused to *think* as we speak this prayer, it may that we are loving God with our minds as well as with rote emotions. And if by our study some familiar phrase comes to have enlarged and more significant meaning, that will be a still greater gain.

Where Prayer Begins

A great many prayers begin with *give*. In the nearly forty years as a pastor that I taught confirmation classes, I always asked my seventh-grade students if they prayed, and then I asked how often they prayed. I still remember the boy who answered, “Whenever I need something.” It wasn’t the answer I wanted, but I was grateful for its honesty, and I recognized that this boy was probably describing the prayer philosophy of a majority of people.

But this isn’t where the Lord’s Prayer begins. Nor does it begin, however, where more sophisticated theologians say prayer should begin; that is, with adoration of God. I appreciate the logic of the theologian, and perhaps I am only splitting hairs as I make my point, because certainly there is adoration in the term *hallowed* that comes so early in this prayer. But there must be a source from which adoration, as well as the petition for giving, comes.

That mood, that holy context, is a *relationship*. Everything that follows in this prayer derives its understanding, its strength, its hope, and its responsibility from this relationship. In prayer as with all the other major issues of life, ranging from family to international affairs, the foundation issue is relationship.

Now let me hasten to say that the moment we address any prayer we imply some kind of relationship. And that’s just the point, because the address has so much to say about all that follows. Let me also hasten to say that it is right and proper enough to begin a prayer with “Almighty God,” or “Thou Great Creator,” and that at times such a phrase may best catch up our particular

emotions or needs of the moment. Thus I am not suggesting that every prayer should begin as Jesus began this prayer. Prayer has different forms of address for different moods and occasions, just as our pet names for a spouse, a child, or a cherished friend vary with time and occasion.

But Jesus had a word, and his word was *Father*. Jesus wanted us to know, above all else, I believe, that you and I are God’s sons and daughters. And let me underline again that the relationship with which we begin a prayer has everything to do with what follows in that prayer. What we call God indicates what God is to us. If we think of the concept by which we are addressing God, it will determine what we ask of God, whether we feel we need to repent, and what we think we can expect. This is why the relationship that is implied in our addressing of God is so crucial to the whole experience of prayer.

But of course I have to interrupt myself before going any further to confess that the term of address in this prayer—*Father*—is for some an almost insuperable barrier. I’ve known people who wait until this word is past before they join in the congregational speaking of this prayer. That great Anglican of another generation, G. A. Studdert Kennedy, used to say, “When I try to tell a small boy in the slums that God is his Father, I often wonder what he makes of it when his idea about fathers may be that they beat mothers and are generally drunk.”¹ And of course this is only one possible misshapen image. Others might speak with equal bitterness about a father who was always absent (a dreadful picture to be imposed on God) or one who indicated by his use of time that he considered work, career, sports, or adult friendships much more important than children (again, a dreadful picture to impose on God).

I wish instead that all of us could echo George MacDonald when he wrote, “What are thou Father for, but to help thy son?”² Alvin Rogness said of MacDonald that he spoke to God “as a child to his father,” because his father, though poor, always was so generous to him. I repeat; I wish all of us might have such an image when we speak the word *Father*.

Because clearly this is the picture Jesus had in mind for us when he made this term of address the relationship term for this majestic prayer. We think, of course, of Jesus’ story of a man who had two sons. The younger

asked for an early distribution of the estate so he could enjoy his inheritance—a quite unthinkable attitude in any generation but especially in the ancient world, because it was tantamount to telling a father that he couldn't wait for him to die. Nevertheless, the father generously agreed to the request. The young man soon wasted this inheritance, leaving himself absolutely penniless. Yet when he returned home to ask forgiveness, the father welcomed him with a grand celebration. The older brother found no joy in his sibling's return. He complained that his father had never done anything special for him (though of course he had received his share of the estate), and the father responded to the older brother's unpleasantness by saying, "Don't be unhappy; you can have a party anytime you want it." Jesus said that God was that kind of father, a father who gave generously and forgave extravagantly, showing an astonishing measure of patience and mercy. Obviously this is the kind of picture we're supposed to keep in mind when we pray, "Our *Father*. . ."

The apostle Paul, in teaching the first generation of Christians how to understand the nature of God, instructed them to use a familiar word in addressing God—a word both common and intimate in their world. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15–16). *Abba* is a household word in the Aramaic language; it was so in Jesus' day, and it is so still today. I remember a preschool boy running to his father in an airport waiting room in the Middle East, calling out, "Abba! Abba!" As a village preacher once said, it's the kind of word you can say even if you don't have any teeth, a word for infants or the helpless. Paul understood what Jesus was saying about God when he called him *Father*.

I say this with some measure of caution because currently we live in a culture that is low in reverence and high on chumminess. Perhaps, unlike the first-century world, we don't need encouragement to be familiar with God. But mind you, this is a loving familiarity, not a presumptuous kind. Indeed, true love ought never to be presumptuous, whether it is love for God or family member or cherished friend. But when we speak to God as *Father*, it should be with a sense of confident relationship. We are using the word Jesus urged us to use, and when we use it we should remember the picture that was in Jesus' mind when he used the word.



The immanence and the transcendence of God are equally true and equally important, each so true that their concepts must be blended in one breath.

Our Father

When we address God in this prayer, we don't say simply, *Father*. Jesus taught us to say, "Our Father." Whether we speak this prayer with a congregation of worshipers or alone in some private chamber, at this moment in the prayer—that is, at the very beginning, when we are setting the very mood of the prayer—we are not alone. We are praying as if someone—perhaps many someones—were praying with us.

I believe this is true in two ways. From a theological point of view, the *Our* in this prayer is made up of the one who is praying and the One who taught us this prayer—Jesus Christ. Each time you and I say this prayer, we can rightly sense that Jesus prays it with us. It is he who gave us this plural form of the pronoun, so when we say *Our Father*, we have reason to feel ourselves united to him in our worship and in our petitioning. This realization strengthens our prayer: we are never speaking these words alone but always with the One who gave them to us and who taught us to say them in the plural.

That is the theological mood of *Our*. But there is also a warm, embracing, demanding sense in the word as well, because it has also a social sense. Because of the plural pronoun with which this prayer begins, we dare not allow this prayer to become a selfish prayer. This prayer does not permit us to come to the place of worship alone. We are compelled to stand there with the whole of humanity, putting our arms around the entire human race. You may wonder on what logic I make the *Our* so inclusive. Might it not be that Jesus meant only those persons who believe as we do? I feel the word has to take in the whole human race because the Scriptures tell us that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16). I must conclude, therefore, that God wants the whole world to seek God. The degree to which they do so and the number who do so is not my concern; my only issue is that my embrace never be so small as to shut out anyone whom God would bring in.

When you and I pray *Our Father*, we look to one side and see the One who gave us this prayer and who even now joins us in praying it—all of which is a wonderfully reassuring thought as we pray. Then we look to the other side and see all those brothers and sisters—all the kin in the human race, the wonderfully varied throng of those who reach to the Father, however poorly or haltingly. It is both inspiring and sobering to think of the multitude that is joined with us when we say *Our Father*. Human as we are, I suspect that there are times when we prefer a smaller circle. But the prayer will not allow it. Not if we pray in the spirit of the One who first gave us this prayer, whose name we attach to it.

In Heaven, Hallowed Be Your Name

But something more must be said. This prayer does, indeed, begin with a relationship, but if we stop with *Our Father*, we haven't captured the whole of the relationship—not even when we add the affective quality that comes with *abba*. Listen: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Yes, God is to be understood as our Father, but a Father whose dwelling place is heaven. And while we call God by this family name, Father—or even *abba*, which is equivalent to our use of *Daddy*, or for some, *Papa*—this name is to be spoken with accents of awe, because this name is *hallowed*.

See then what a fascinating tension we have in this prayer. The God whom we address is so beyond us that we identify the residence as heaven, and the name is so eternity shaping that we must acknowledge it as hallowed; and yet it comes to us in the most intimate of language, the relationship of breakfast-table and bedtime stories, of fun shared, and of tears comforted.

Over the centuries theologians have argued about the immanence and the transcendence of God. Some

emphasize that God is infinitely immanent, as close as the air we breathe, while others reminds us that God is utterly transcendent, so much so as to be quite beyond our grasp. This prayer, in its opening phrases, gives us a living answer. The immanence and the transcendence of God are equally true and equally important, each so true that their concepts must be blended in one breath.

So this is where prayer begins—not only this prayer that we call “the Lord’s Prayer” but all of prayer—it begins with a relationship. And while it is a relationship that we seek to capture in a human image, we recognize also that no image can adequately contain it. And no matter how private our place of prayer, we can never speak this prayer in the singular; it is always *Our Father*, because we speak it by the grace of the Savior who gave us the prayer and who empowers it, and because the God to whom we address this prayer has a heart for all humankind; if I shut out others while I speak these words, I deny the One who gave us the prayer and the One to whom it is addressed.

This is where prayer begins. And if we begin rightly and proceed in faith, this prayer touches the ultimate power of the universe—a power that can transform our daily lives and give new hope to our very universe.

About the Writer

Ellsworth J. Kalas is interim president and faculty member of Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as a United Methodist pastor for thirty-eight years in churches in Wisconsin and Ohio and on staff of the World Methodist Council. He has authored more than thirty books, including Grace in a Tree Stump and Men Worth Knowing.

Endnotes

1. G. A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Wicket Gate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 62.
2. George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), 116.



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 2

Your kingdom come. Your will be done.

Scripture Reading

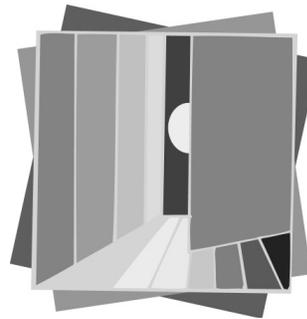
Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

The Prayer of Complaint

We don't usually think of complaining as a virtue. Most of us carefully avoid professional grumblers. Yet we can't speak the Lord's Prayer—this prayer that is a model for all our praying—without registering a complaint. It is written into the prayer.

In one sense, this isn't surprising. Students of the Old Testament often remind us that the basic prayer book, the book of Psalms, contains more prayers of lament and complaint than any other single kind. Good religion produces two moods that seem quite contradictory. On the one hand, good faith makes us grateful people, always inclined to give thanks, always disposed to see reasons for gladness that other people miss. But good religion also teaches us to complain. We sense that the world is not what it should be because it isn't what God meant it to be. Thus, godly people are dissatisfied with things as they are. Mind you, godly people aren't by any means the only ones who would like to see improvements in our world; it seems to me that something of this quality is built into all of us humans, as part of our genetic code. But godly people are more likely to be sensitive to what is wrong and of how to make it right, because they have a standard of rightness by which to make judgment.

So let me pause for a moment to pay tribute to those persons in human history who have become *effectively*



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dissatisfied. If someone hadn't become unhappy with things as they were, we would still be beating clothes on rocks by some passing stream rather than throwing them into automatic washers and dryers. If someone hadn't become exercised about the issue of human pain, we would still have surgery without benefit of anesthesia. And if someone—numbers of someones!—hadn't become unhappy with the quality of life and health, our life expectancy would still be somewhere around thirty or forty years instead of twice that. Thanks be to God for people who complain! Provided, of course, that they give power to their complaints by constructive action.

Do you think that some things ought to be better than they are? Are you troubled that crime statistics in America are measured by the minute?—so many thefts, so many rapes, so many murders every so many minutes? Does it bother you that in almost any American city acres upon acres of land are covered by a jungle of ramshackle houses and poverty? Are you uneasy that the

nations of the world spend literally billions—indeed, trillions—of dollars every year developing weapons to destroy fellow members of the human race and that violence in the Middle East or in Africa is so commonplace that it is often crowded off the front page by the manufactured news of some passing personality? Are you still able to feel shock that every day the newspapers report the mistreatment of infants and children by their own parents, stepparents, or foster parents? Are you content to live in this kind of world, or does it upset you and anger you?

Well, if these things do trouble you, and if you think they shouldn't be this way, then the Lord's Prayer includes a sentence just for you. Listen: "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). This is a prayer of complaint; indeed, it is the ultimate prayer of complaint. This is a cry for a revolution. This prayer says that the powers that now rule our world ought to be overthrown and that a new government should be set up. After all, you can't call for a "kingdom to come" unless you intend for the present kingdom to go. Has it occurred to you that the words we slip through so casually and so routinely each Sunday are in truth among the most revolutionary phrases the world has ever heard?

Let's think about it for a moment. What does this little phrase mean, this prayer, "Your kingdom come"? We pray it week after week—some of us oftener than that—without examining what we're saying. Is it possible, in fact, that we are praying for something that we don't really want?

For many centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Jewish people prayed and looked for the coming of God's kingdom. They believed his kingdom would be a place where God would reign and where therefore all would be well. The Hebrew prophets portrayed it as a world of peace and plenty. In the language of those ancient poets, every person would have his own vine and his own fig tree; that is, everyone would have all that he or she needed—not only the necessities of life but its luxuries and comforts as well. One of those prophets said it would be a place where the streets would be safe for both children and elderly, the two most defenseless elements of society. A place, in fact, of such peace and well-being that even traditional enemies within the animal kingdom would dwell in natural harmony.

What Kingdom?

When Jesus began to preach, it was as a preacher of the kingdom. What kingdom? The kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven. Jesus made this message central to everything that he taught.

Jesus often described this kingdom with succinct little parables. The kingdom of God, he said, is like a mustard seed. This seed is so small as to be lost easily between the fingers, yet it grows into a tree that can lodge birds in its branches (Matt. 13:31–32). And again, the kingdom of God is like a bit of leaven that a woman puts into three measures of meal. Small as it is, that leaven spreads its influence through the whole lump, transforming its size and quality (Matt. 13:33). And this kingdom, Jesus said, is of such worth that it can be compared to a pearl of such great price and perfection that a connoisseur sells everything he has in order to get it (Matt. 13:46).

Sometimes Jesus spoke more directly of the kingdom, not using the picture language of parables. One time, for example, when a man spoke to Jesus in a way that was exceptionally perceptive, Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Then again one day when some religious leaders asked him when the kingdom of God was coming, Jesus answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. . . . For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20–21). And when, on his way to crucifixion, Jesus was standing trial before Pilate, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36).

When you put together these and other statements that Jesus made, you will probably be both baffled and unnerved. It is clear, on the one hand, that Jesus is describing a kingdom utterly different from anything our world has ever seen. And yet, it is also clear that he is describing something we long for, as if it were something in our primitive memory, something we feel instinctively ought to be.

Then, to complicate our feelings still further, we have Jesus' explanations. His subject is a *kingdom*: that word raises images of splendor and power. But Jesus goes on to describe this kingdom as something that is apparently insignificant yet somehow capable of transforming all of life: like leaven, which is powerful out of all proportion to its size. Or like a seed, especially a tiny

seed: it grows and grows and grows. But unpromising as this kingdom looks, when you come to realize its value you know you should sell everything to get it. Indeed, he suggests that you won't get it at any lesser price. And this kingdom, Jesus said, is in the world even now, today. It exists at this very moment, within certain people. Any person can enter into this kingdom at any time. Someday, however, this kingdom will cover the whole earth and will be its controlling power. When that happens, earth's blessed day will have come.

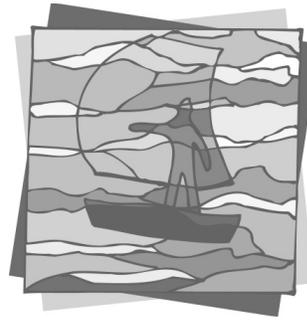
Your Will Be Done

The best way (in fact, the only way) to describe the kingdom of God is with the phrase that follows in the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done." That is, *the kingdom of God is that place where the will of God is done*. It's really quite simple and quite logical. It is the right of kings to rule a country according to their will and wishes. Thus, if this kingdom is the kingdom of *God*, then of course it will be a place where God's will is done.

So here is the interesting part of this prayer as far as you and I are concerned: this kingdom has a kind of "spot" existence today. It exists wherever and whenever a single human being has given up fully to God and thus has entered into the kingdom. And these spot kingdoms are often somewhat larger in size, too. When a family, a church, an institution seeks fully to do God's will, the kingdom has come within that circle of life. The kingdom exists each time love conquers hate, peace triumphs over conflict, or fear and selfishness have been vanquished.

Thus, in a very real sense, Christians belong to an underground movement. We are not satisfied with things as they are, so we are working quietly, doggedly, and unrelentingly for a revolution. It is a revolution unlike any other. Other revolutions deal with geography and with politics, economics, and military power. But the kingdom of God recognizes that the ultimate battlefield of our universe is not economics or politics or social structure, as important as these elements are. Ultimately, the battlefield is the human heart. From the heart proceed the issues of life and death. Change this heart, and you have begun a deep and far-reaching revolution.

So how can we bring this kingdom to pass? We have a variety of weapons. One of the most important (and unfortunately, one of the most neglected) is prayer.



It would seem that Jesus is telling us that we should give our attention to the kingdom—and the will of God that it presupposes—before we ask for anything else.

Doesn't it strike you as profoundly significant that Jesus included this petition in his model prayer? And more than that, that this is the first petition in this prayer? It would seem that Jesus is telling us that we should give our attention to the kingdom—and the will of God that it presupposes—before we ask for anything else.

Consider, too, the style of this petition. In a sense, it is more of an affirmation than a petition. There is no uncertainty about it, no cautious, tentative pleading. It sounds more as if we are simply declaring that we are on the side of this petition: "Your kingdom come." It reads like a pledge of allegiance.

But this leads us to a pertinent question. Why pray for God's kingdom to come, if this is the will of God? If it is something God wants, then what need is there to ask God to bring it to pass? Are we trying to convince God to do what God already wants?

I think two issues are involved. First and foremost, God has put this planet in our control. We humans determine what will happen on the earth. God intervenes at our invitation. Even when God invaded our planet in the person of Jesus Christ, it was an invasion for which generations of godly persons had prayed. And more: it was a peaceful invasion, successful only to the degree that humans permitted. So when we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are making our own commitment to the kingdom, and we are seeking God's help in bringing others to this commitment.

Here is a second issue—an extremely important one, but one that is difficult for our modern or postmodern minds to grasp. We live in a world where there is opposition to goodness. This shouldn't come as any surprise to us; after all, we deal with the conflict within our own souls every day. Each time we say "I shouldn't have done that," or "I wish I hadn't said that," or "I wish I

could take that back,” we are acknowledging that this conflict exists.

It is as if our world is under the control of some foreign power, or as if some foreign power is seeking to take control. This insistent, invasive power expresses itself in so many ways that all of us recognize and cope with—hate, sickness, fear, immorality, prejudice, lying, deceit, brutality, to name just a few; the forces are legion. So how do we fight back against such evil? By deeds of love, by service to others, by our giving, by worthy community involvement—and by *praying*.

Why Prayer?

Prayer is important because evil is not simply an accumulation of events and deeds; it is also a spirit in our world. “For our struggle,” the apostle Paul wrote, “is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). In a sense, this is exotic, mystical language, but at the same time it is a reality that we cope with every day. We may not grasp everything Paul is saying, but we experience the truth of it. It seems so often that a voice in our universe says, “Evil will win,” and we can’t even sense from whence this feeling comes. But when we pray, “O God, your kingdom come!” we are thrusting our convictions and our commitments into the teeth of hell’s claim.

Perhaps that’s why the marching quality of this prayer phrase is so right. We don’t cry, “Will you send your kingdom?” nor do we explain, “We want your kingdom”; rather, we declare our expectation to the whole universe: *Your kingdom come*.

But you and I live in an activist age—or at least, we like to think so. Thus some would say that for those who want to pray, prayer is fine, but the big business of our world is done in the halls of power and in the offices of economic maneuvering. However, the late Wernher von Braun, the premier nuclear physicist, would have disagreed. He insisted that prayer is the hardest kind of work—and the most important, too. The philosopher

George Santayana said that prayer isn’t a substitute for work but “a desperate effort to work further and to be efficient beyond the range of one’s powers.”

Prayer is not the lazy way out. It isn’t for those who want to escape life and its realities. David H. C. Read once wrote that the great men of prayer have also been “great men of action—from Jesus himself right on through St. Francis, and Luther, and Calvin, and Wesley, to Schweitzer and Dag Hammarskjöld.”¹ I want only to add some names to Read’s list, such as Teresa of Ávila and Mother Teresa and some lesser-known saints of my own acquaintance. In truth, we work with new purpose and energy and hope after we have prayed, and we pray with more integrity after we have worked.

So I confess—indeed, I boast!—that I intend to be one of the complaining people. I would be ashamed of myself if I were not. Our world is not all that it should be. We are very sure of that. It is not what God intended it to be. This is even more certain. So Jesus gave us a prayer, a model for all times. Each day you and I walk through territory that ought to be taken captive for the kingdom of God. With this the case, we ought to begin the holy conquest by prayer, by a complaint that rises from our souls: *Your kingdom come*.

Jesus once asked if God would grant justice to those who cried for it. Then he answered his own question: “I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” But then our Lord added a haunting question: “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:7–8). It’s up to us complainers to answer that question.

About the Writer

Ellsworth J. Kalas is interim president and faculty member of Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as a United Methodist pastor for thirty-eight years in churches in Wisconsin and Ohio and on the staff of the World Methodist Council. He has authored more than thirty books, including *Grace in a Tree Stump* and *Men Worth Knowing*.

Endnote

1. David H. C. Read, *Holy Common Sense: The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 25.



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 3

... on earth as it is in heaven.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 26:36–46

The Prayer Perfect

I sometimes wish the Lord's Prayer were not as beautiful as it is. If the words had less rhythm, if perhaps they flowed less easily from tongue or page, we might hear them better. It is partly because of the very beauty of this prayer that we have made it into a ritual in its own right, so that we repeat it as part of a typical worship service or even as part of our personal time of prayer rather than seeing it for what I'm sure our Lord meant it to be—namely a pattern for our praying and indeed a structure for our very theology of prayer.

With that background statement, let me suggest that the phrase from the prayer that we are now about to discuss is the heart of this greatest of all prayers. Listen: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." If the rest of the prayer were lost and this phrase remained, we would still have the life and spirit of the prayer. Conversely, if all else remained and this phrase were taken from the prayer, the heartbeat of the prayer would be gone.

Having said that—and perhaps because this is the case—we can also confess that no other sentence in the prayer is so difficult to speak. We speak it uneasily. "Your will be done." Somehow we find a quality of sadness, even of tragedy, in those words. I suspect that this instinctive negative response says something about our opinion of God. It is as if this is a prayer one speaks only as an ultimate expression of resignation,



Jesus looked upon the woman's affliction as something contrary to God's plan and order and something that therefore ought to be changed.

after one's shoulders have been pinned to the mat of life. Something in us senses that we say, "Your will be done," only after we have said, "All right. You win. I give up." And as a matter of fact, in a sense this is true.

But this is also why I choose to call these few words the Prayer Perfect. This is all of prayer in one sentence. Until we rightly understand—and gladly use—this portion of the Lord's Prayer, all the rest of our praying is small and narrow and unworthy of the Lord to whom we offer it.

There are so many things I want to say about these few words, but first let me suggest to you that this is the *disciples'* prayer. I'm not speaking of the twelve who walked with Jesus; I'm speaking of any of us who profess to be or hope to be disciples of Jesus Christ. That's because these words can come only from a life of belief and commitment. You see, probably everyone prays.

Prayer is the last refuge of even the most irreligious soul. Even those who doubt the existence of God pray when circumstances compel them to do so. Something in our humanity inevitably reaches outward, even among those who don't know why they do so or who resent even their own inclination to do so. But the unbeliever or the skeptic doesn't pray, "Your will be done." And neither does the casual believer. Those who stay at the outer edges of religion are not at all comfortable with this prayer. Only the disciple, the committed believer, is ready to pray, "Your will be done."

This is because this prayer, "Your will be done," is the sublime expression of faith. To speak it in truth, a person has to believe in the unremitting goodness of God; otherwise one can never accept (or, more pressing, solicit) God's will. I remember a young mother who wanted to become a Christian but found herself with a problem. She realized (rightly) that a Christian should commit all of life to God, and this (wrongly) frightened her. She was afraid, she said, of what God might do to one of her daughters if she gave her life to him. Somewhere along the way, she had gotten a concept of God that was very negative and very cruel. She assumed that God's will was something to be dreaded and avoided, not something to be pursued.

This is a surprisingly common attitude. That's why so many are uneasy with this sentence in the Lord's Prayer. They see it as an invitation to pain and trouble. They reason that God's will means a life of suffering and deprivation. But the Scriptures teach just the opposite. Consider the great faith statement from the New Testament book of Hebrews: "Whoever would approach [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The nature of God is to reward, not to punish. Indeed, many of us have discovered that most of our punishment is self-inflicted, a result of our wrong and unwise actions. So to pray for God's will is to pray for goodness and for that which is ultimately right.

But there, of course, is the rub. We find it hard to wait for the "ultimately" part; we're in too much of a hurry for that. This is why praying for the will of God is a leap of faith. Come with me to the Garden of Gethsemane, where trust in the will of God was put to its farthest reach. On the night before Jesus was crucified, he went alone to a place of prayer at Gethsemane. He who taught

his followers to pray for the will of God now faced the ultimate test of that prayer. Jesus knew that a torturous death awaited him if he held true to his calling.

So that night Jesus prayed three times that he might be delivered from the assignment that awaited him. He prayed with such intensity that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:44). But each time Jesus pleaded to escape the suffering, he concluded his prayer, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (Matt. 26:42). Sometimes the highest purposes of life and the achieving of God's will can be gotten only by the most demanding price. In such instances, one must have sublime faith in the character of God. At such times it can be almost impossible to see beyond the immediate to the place of the ultimate. And since the will of God has to do always with the ultimate, when we pray for the will of God we are driven to the place of absolute trust.

Of course, any discussion of the will of God introduces a word that doesn't come easily to most of us: *submission*. Other elements in the Lord's Prayer—a request for daily bread, for the forgiveness of sins, or for escape from evil—involve our needs and our wishes, but a prayer for the will of God is an appeal for what *God* desires. Thus it is a giving-up prayer. When we speak it, we confess that we don't know all there is to know. So often I find myself saying to God, "You know what I think is best, but you also know how often my perception is poor; please show me your will, so that I will pray as I should." This kind of praying involves submission to God: I confess that God knows best (which doesn't seem like a very profound realization!) and that my wishes are often self-centered as well as shortsighted. It makes good sense, therefore, to submit myself to God.

On Earth as It Is in Heaven

The prayer for God's will makes particularly good sense when we go on to the second phrase in this portion of the prayer: "Your will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven*." Perhaps we would worry less about the demands of the first phrase if we paid more attention—deep down, heartfelt attention—to the second phrase. We think of heaven as the place where everything is good and right, and in life's more difficult times we console ourselves in the hope that heaven will make up for the disappointments of earth. Well then, why not pray and work

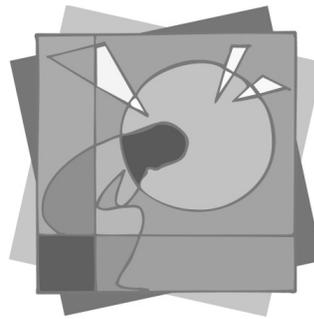
for the will of God to be done so that we can have some of the quality of heaven even now, while we are here on earth? Why not pray—and work!—that earth might become more heavenly? What a way to live!

This earth, as we now know it, is marred by sin. Is this the will of God? Obviously not. Everything in Scripture and in our Christian conception of God teaches that this world is not as God wants it to be and that something is seriously wrong. Also, our world seems to be under the domination of death. Is this God's will? Not perfectly; the Scriptures picture death as an intruder on God's perfect plan. And, of course, the Scriptures also teach that there will be no death in heaven, where the perfect will of God is done.

So, too, with sickness. Is sickness the will of God? Good, godly people often declare it to be so; confronting sickness in their own lives or in the lives of others they say, "Well, it must be the will of God." I submit that the agnostic research specialist or physician who works to fight sickness thinks better of the God in whom he or she does not believe than does the Christian who attributes the illness to God. Jesus showed quite a different attitude toward sickness. When Jesus' opponents criticized him for healing a woman on the Sabbath, Jesus answered, "And ought not this woman, . . . whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (Luke 13:16). Jesus looked upon the woman's affliction as something contrary to God's plan and order and something that therefore ought to be changed.

So when we pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we are aligning ourselves against sin, sickness, and death—and against all the selfishness and hurt and misery that exist in our world and that contribute to sin and sickness and death. We are praying to have a little more heaven in our earth. That is, we want more of God's will to be done on earth.

As I said earlier, this phrase is a kind of battle cry. It observes those conditions on our earth that are contrary to the will of God, and it enlists our influence against those conditions. It is our personal commitment to enlist against evil and our appeal to God to send more troops into this battle. We seek the will of God because we want to know which way God is going so that we can follow the same path.



To become Christian means, among other things, to be so dedicated to the will of God that we seek constantly to cast our vote with God. We say as much each time we earnestly pray, "Your will be done."

Let It Begin with Me

But I'm sure someone is asking a question—in fact, a rather logical question. Why must we pray for God's will if God already wills it? Can't God bring his own plans and best wishes to pass without our help?

The answer, I believe, quite simply, is *no*. Obviously this isn't because God hasn't the power to accomplish the divine will. But it seems clear that God has chosen to limit the divine power by granting us free will. God doesn't overpower us by sheer force. God chooses instead to appeal to our will, so that we will enlist ourselves with the divine will until that divine will is victorious in the affairs of earth. To become Christian means, among other things, to be so dedicated to the will of God that we seek constantly to cast our vote with God. We say as much each time we earnestly pray, "Your will be done."

So when you and I pray, we're trying to do two things. First, we are trying to bring *ourselves* into line with God's will. So often when we recite our Lord's Prayer we are not even ready to cast our own vote with God. Our will is too often contrary to God's will, and we have to struggle to bring it into line. A popular hymn-prayer asks for peace on earth and then says, "and let it begin with me." This is a proper approach to everything we might ask God to do in changing this earth for the better: let it begin with me.

What a wonderful prospect lies before us! We know full well that our world needs to be better, that it is not what it should be. But where do we start to bring God's purposes to pass? Quite simply, quite wonderfully, in the territory we know best—in our own souls. So as we pray, "Your will be done," we speak it best if in our hearts we also say, "and let it begin with me."

But of course this magnificent prayer is bigger than what happens between God and the one who prays. As

PRAYING FOR GOD'S WILL

When we pray, we struggle on behalf of God and God's will. We aren't trying to convince God that the divine will should be done; this would be nonsense. Rather, we are aligning ourselves with God to bring to pass what can be done only as the free will of humanity and the will of God are on the same side.

we noted in the opening session of our study, this prayer begins not in the first person singular but in the first person plural. Even so, when we pray for God's will to be done, we intend for that prayer to be answered beyond its operation in our own lives, deeds, and thoughts. We bring ourselves into the battle of the ages between good and evil, and we cast our strength on the side of good, voting for the will of God.

Part of this battle between good and evil is engaged in the arena of work. When we conduct our lives morally in our daily calling, when we enlist ourselves in acts of righteousness and mercy, when we help the disadvantaged and align ourselves against selfish privilege, we are voting for the will of God. Still more specifically, when we teach a Sunday school class, when we give of our resources to feed and clothe the poor, or when we work against corruption in politics or invest our time in any kind and generous act, we are voting for the will of God—that it might be on earth as it is in heaven. These are things we can *do*.

But there is more to the eternal battle than our doing. This is where prayer comes in. When we go to our knees, to seek God about the problems of life, about sin and sickness and human selfishness, we enter the lists

on the side of God. When we fight against corruption in politics in daily life, we discover that we're in a battle, dealing with very real opposition. Just as surely, when we pray for the will of God, we enter a battle. The same power of evil that opposes us in concrete fashion when we try to do the right thing opposes our prayers when we intercede for what is right. When we pray, we struggle on behalf of God and God's will. We aren't trying to convince God that the divine will should be done; this would be nonsense. Rather, we are aligning ourselves with God to bring to pass what can be done only as the free will of humanity and the will of God are on the same side.

So you see why I've said that this phrase, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," ought in spirit to be part of every prayer we make—not as a kind of magic coverall, but as the spirit infusing all we pray and all we do. What greater purpose could our lives have than this, or what better focus? How can we deal more strategically with life's perplexity and distress than to seek for God's will to be done? What higher goal for our earth than that it shall have the spirit and purpose of heaven?

This is why I call this phrase the Prayer Perfect. It is the disciple's prayer, spoken from humble, trusting hearts. But it is also a battle cry, enlisting our souls on the side of God's plan and purpose. And it is, ultimately, a shout of joy, a glad expecting that God shall win and that we will be part of God's victory.

About the Writer

Ellsworth J. Kalas is interim president and faculty member of Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as a United Methodist pastor for thirty-eight years in churches in Wisconsin and Ohio and on the staff of the World Methodist Council. He has authored more than thirty books, including Grace in a Tree Stump and Men Worth Knowing.



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 4

Give us this day our daily bread.

Scripture Reading

Mark 6:35–44

The Prayer for Security

I grew up in an economically insecure world. I was still in my preteens when we entered the Great Depression. It seems to me that ever since then our society has been seeking ways to guarantee our security, including facets of security that earlier generations could never have imagined. Mind you, we humans have always sought to be secure, but in the major body of the twentieth century and now into this twenty-first century, security seems to have become our passion. I venture that we are the most security-conscious people in human history.

Security used to be measured primarily in military terms; thus the U.S. Constitution spoke of the government's responsibility for the common defense of the people. Two generations ago, the word *security* took on new political significance with the Social Security Act. During the latter half of the twentieth century, the insurance industry burgeoned into one of the major players in the American economy. Since 9/11, security is measured by taking off your shoes and displaying your toothpaste and hand lotion at the airport. And from a political point of view, in every race from the state legislature to the presidency, the issue seems to be health programs and provisions, a security measure that is intended not only to protect us from illness and the costs associated with it but also to promise us longer life.

With all of this, you and I ought to feel secure. Two or three generations ago—recently enough that we remem-



With the heritage of a first-century working-class home, surely Jesus wouldn't give us a prayer that omitted the needs of our daily lives.

ber our parents or grandparents talking about it—security meant having children who would care for you when you grew old—and if you had no children, a sibling or a niece or nephew. Now we have Social Security, retirement programs, 401(k) plans, and insurance of every imaginable variety. If ever anyone should feel secure, it ought to be this generation in which you and I live.

But obviously, we don't feel secure. And it isn't necessarily because we're neurotic. It may instead be a sign of our innate good sense. After all, who can claim to be secure or to guarantee security for anyone else? For example, we deposit our money in institutions that are insured by the government. But the safety is only as good as the government's security, and that depends, again, on us. Worse yet, we have discovered that the value of the dollar we deposit today will almost surely be eaten away by that mysterious creature known as inflation.

In truth, so many factors are beyond our control. It is often said that the contemporary city dweller feels less need of God because whereas our ancestors knew they

depended on sun and rain, we are largely indifferent to such issues. And yet, if the weather forecasters predict a huge snowstorm or some other natural phenomenon, there is a run on every city store lest transportation be tied up and we find ourselves without food.

The same uncertainty pursues us at other issues having to do with our daily bread. An industry that was indispensable in one generation is forgotten in the next. In my boyhood, virtually every town and city in America had a Railway Express office; who could have guessed in those days that the business would someday be defunct? Or consider the independent merchant who knew his future was safe because he had a good product, provided good services, and was trusted in his community—until a massive retailer with lower prices moved in and he found his business wiped out. Many in our parents' generation dreamed of an employer with whom they could spend their entire career. Where can you find such an employer in our day, when corporate mergers, leveraged buyouts, outsourcing, and market fluctuations make every business susceptible to change?

It looks therefore as if our generation, with all its built-in protections, is as much in need of security as any generation in the past. The scene and the players have changed but not the basic plot. Thus we can be as glad as were our ancestors that Jesus included in this model prayer an appeal for security: "Give us this day our daily bread." Sometimes we may fear that our very human material needs are too commonplace to be brought to God. Jesus, however, taught us to pray for something as routine and mundane as our daily bread.

Our Daily Bread

Of course it isn't surprising that this model prayer includes an appeal for daily bread. Jesus' religious heritage in Judaism was nothing if not practical. Through all his life he was nurtured by the book of Psalms. The Psalms frequently concern themselves with our material human needs and just as often give thanks to God for supplying those needs and for providing them in abundance. Jesus' religion was never so spiritual that it was indifferent to the physical.

Think how often food, in general, and bread, in particular, were issues in Jesus' life. It was after he had fasted for forty days that Satan tempted Jesus to turn stones

into bread. Daily bread! His most notable miracle, short of raising Lazarus from the dead, was his feeding of multitudes with bread and fish. When after his resurrection Jesus joined two of his followers on the road to Emmaus, they didn't recognize him until "he took bread, blessed and broke it" (Luke 24:30-31).

The late David H. C. Read put the matter in very human terms. He noted that Jesus once said that when we pray we should go into our "closet" (Matt. 6:6 KJV). Dr. Read reasoned that the word Jesus used was probably the word for larder, or what generations of Americans called the pantry. In Jesus' day the place where food was stored was often the only corner of a poor home where one could really be alone. We can imagine Jesus, as a boy in Nazareth, slipping into that little storage corner in the evening, and with eyes on the provisions for the coming day praying, "Give us each day our daily bread."¹ With the heritage of a first-century working-class home, surely Jesus wouldn't give us a prayer that omitted the needs of our daily lives.

I'm glad this is the case, because as Helmut Thielicke has said, 90 percent of life consists of trivialities; the Lord's Prayer could not be a great prayer if it didn't concern itself with the trivial concerns that make up every day. Life is great and beautiful and noble, but it is made up of thousands of common, ordinary, everyday details. It is an alarm that starts the day, followed by juice and cereal, a garage door that sometimes sticks, and a car that may grind twice before it starts. Life is speed limits and stoplights and interstate harassments, the morning news and weather reports—and on a good day, the person in the next car nodding a greeting when you pull beside one another at a stoplight. Life is a ringing telephone and a wrong number, e-mail we're anxious to see and spam that intrudes on time and life; it is buying groceries and forgetting that you're out of eggs; it is writing a thank-you note and vacuuming the living room rug. Life is trying to remember your combination at the school locker, getting to class a minute late, and making plans for Saturday night. This is the stuff life is made of: ten thousand common things that become the air we breathe and the beat of our hearts.

So let me tell you the commonness of this phrase in the Lord's Prayer. The Greek word in our New Testament that we translate as "daily" is a word that, until only a few decades ago, could not be found in any



If something concerns you, it concerns God.

other Greek writing than the Bible. One of the earliest Christian scholars, Origen (c. 185–254), contended that Matthew must have invented the word. But in the twentieth century, scholars came upon this word in some ancient papyri—and the word was found in, of all things, a papyrus fragment of a woman’s shopping list. It was a reminder to a homemaker to buy certain food for the coming day. Thus scholars now feel the words would best be translated, “Give us this day our bread for tomorrow.”² Our Lord knows that you and I live in a commonplace world, a world where we live with the stuff of shopping lists. That world takes on new dignity when our Lord includes it in this model prayer.

Security and Daily Bread

As we have noted before, the Lord’s Prayer is a very short prayer, one that deals with life’s basics—as if, as we have observed before, this prayer is only an outline of how we should pray rather than being what we have so often made it, the whole of prayer in itself. Short as this prayer is, it’s interesting to see, on the one hand, how late in the prayer this daily-bread petition appears—and on the other hand, how early it appears. As we have already said, our generation has elevated security to the place of highest importance, but this prayer moves it farther down the line. In so much of our praying, the first words seem to be “Give me.” In this prayer we begin rather with the hallowing of God’s name, praying for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done, and only after these obviously weighty matters do we get around to telling God of our personal needs—the very basic, crucial need for daily bread.

This surely suggests that the Lord’s Prayer is teaching us, implicitly, that our human needs (usually, at least) are not the starting place for prayer. Prayer should begin with God, with the adoration of God and the concern for

God’s kingdom and God’s will. Why? Because everything else depends on these matters. We put God and God’s purposes first because to do otherwise is to get life and the universe out of order. This is altogether logical. Our security doesn’t really begin with bread; it begins with an orderly universe. To hallow the name of God is to put a right foundation under all of life. As Moses reminded the nation of Israel when he reviewed their wilderness travels, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3). Indeed, here is a word that our security-driven culture might attend to far more seriously: with all our striving and getting and consuming, we don’t find the fulfillment our spirits need. Our material needs are significant but they are not paramount, because we humans are so much more than simply bodies to be fed and favored.

But although the request for daily bread comes late in the Lord’s Prayer, nevertheless it comes surprisingly early. It comes before the plea for forgiveness of sins and the appeal that God should protect us from evil.

Obviously one shouldn’t try to build a system of theology on the order of the sentences in the Lord’s Prayer. Nevertheless, there is surely some significance in the order. Prayer begins with a relationship with God, as we noted earlier, and a hallowing of God’s name. It concerns itself early with the importance of God’s kingdom and with the will of God being done on our earth. But it doesn’t postpone our human needs—our simple, recurring, day-by-day needs—to the tag end. So while the daily needs of life should not constitute all of prayer, as they sometimes do for many of us, neither should they be left out of our prayers as if they were unworthy of God’s attention. If something concerns you, it concerns God. If something is part of life as we live it, it ought to be part of our prayers, whether the prayer is for blessing or for correction. All of life is rightly within the province of prayer.

Give

Let me give special attention to two words in this short petition. The first, *give*, no doubt strikes an unappealing note for many of us. We sometimes boast that nobody has to *give* us anything; we can take care of ourselves. I suspect that many people look upon this independent, industrious attitude as part of their religion—and in truth, there are plenty of supporting verses in the Bible,

especially in the book of Proverbs, to support such a feeling.

Some, thinking of the audience to which Jesus first spoke these words, might reason that in a simple, pastoral world of the first century, daily bread was uncertain for people who lived on the edge of poverty and where each day's existence might seem a divine gift. But I would press the matter a bit. If I earn my daily bread with muscle of back and arm, I must confess that these muscles are a gift of the Creator. If I earn my bread with my mind and my creative skills, I surely have to say that these have been given to me. And if I insist that I'm a "self-made man," proud of my determination and energy and drive—well, these attributes had to come from somewhere; I didn't make them out of the air. Whether they're part of my genetic code, a product of my upbringing, or the influence of some teacher or employer, I can thank God that I possess such a gift—yes, a *gift*.

And don't think me morbid when I recommend that we remember the uncertainty of our state. Our ancient parents knew that their bread depended on sunshine and rain, so they prayed, "Give us this day" with a more vivid sense of dependency. But we're not as different as we might think. The multimillion-dollar athlete is only a bone chip away from losing his career; the entertainer is prisoner to the fickle tastes of the public. In the world of business, a new product, a change in public taste, a revision of laws, and a manufacturer or a retailer is suddenly out of business. Every one of us, if we're wise, should pray with humility for our daily bread. And yes, for the health of body and mind to enjoy it.

Our

The other word is that plural pronoun we met earlier in our consideration of this prayer. As surely as we approach God by crying, "Our Father," so we come to the place of daily bread praying not simply for *my* daily bread but for all humankind: "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread." We can't speak this prayer selfishly. We aren't allowed to appeal for our own singular hunger; we

must be ready to include the needs of others alongside our own. We are bound up together in the bundle of life and of need. This greatest of Christian prayers can never be spoken in insistent isolation.

And with this plural prayer comes obligation, of course, to share with our fellow human creatures. Especially, dear Lord, when our daily bread comes with jelly or comes as gourmet cake! When we say, "Give *us* bread," and we have more than enough while the person next to us is empty handed—well, what do you think?

With it all, I continue to marvel that this greatest of all prayers emphasizes our basic, most elementary human need. In the midst of the praise of God and the pursuit of God's kingdom and will, we are encouraged to pray for simple human security. And it is *real* security, because its source is in almighty God. Mind you, it may not be security as you and I would like to define it, because it is one-day-at-a-time security. But that's just fine, when this security is centered in God. For when today ends, I know that God will be here tomorrow. The economy may change, the government may err in its judgments, inflation may devalue the dollar, my type of work may be discontinued, or my own skills may diminish; no matter, *God* will be there.

And blessed be God, ours is a heavenly God who understands that we have to live with something as mundane as bread—indeed, as shopping lists.

About the Writer

Ellsworth J. Kalas is interim president and faculty member of Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as a United Methodist pastor for thirty-eight years in churches in Wisconsin and Ohio and on the staff of the World Methodist Council. He has authored more than thirty books, including Grace in a Tree Stump and Men Worth Knowing.

Endnotes

1. David H. C. Read, *Holy Common Sense: The Lord's Prayer for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 54.
2. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 217.



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 5

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

Scripture Reading

Matthew 18:21–35

The Prayer We Will Answer

One day the apostle Peter confronted Jesus with a question. It wasn't a particularly noble question, but it was a very down-to-earth one and one that I'm sure interested the other disciples as much as it interested Peter: "How often must I forgive someone who has done me wrong? Perhaps as many as seven times?" I'm sure Peter felt he was on fairly safe ground. If I am honest with myself, I think there are not many people that I am willing to forgive repeatedly. Jesus took Peter's carefully calculated number and demolished it. Not seven times, Jesus said, but seventy times seven. Then Jesus proceeded to tell Peter and the other disciples a story—a story that puts the whole principle of forgiveness in a different light.

In Jesus' story, a certain king decided to settle accounts with his servants. I suppose he was seeking to tidy up his financial affairs, as people do from time to time. He found that one of his high-ranking workers, obviously a very trusted one, owed him a large sum; to put it in our terms, let's say ten million dollars. The man wasn't remotely able to pay; one wonders how he accumulated such a debt. So the king ordered that the man's assets be completely liquidated—which in that ancient world meant not only his land and savings but also that he, his wife, and children would all be sold into slavery. Terrified by such a prospect, the man fell on his knees before the king and pleaded for more time. In a gesture



But this prayer, as given to us by our Lord Christ, makes it quite clear that in order for us to be forgiven of our sins, we must be ready to forgive those who have injured us. In a very real sense, we give God permission to forgive our sins.

of remarkable pity, the king released him and forgave his debt—forgave him the entire ten million dollars!

As the forgiven man headed home, no doubt exuberant in the wonder of his new economic freedom, he came upon a fellow servant, one obviously much farther down the ranks, who owed him some twenty dollars. He seized the poor fellow by the throat and said, "Pay what you owe." The fellow servant fell to his knees, begging for mercy and for time to pay. The forgiven man not only refused the appeal, he ordered the other man thrown into prison until the debt was paid.

Word of this action got back to the king. He summoned the first man to him and said, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt. 18:32–33). The king then turned the man over to the jailers until he could pay

his debt. Jesus concluded the story by saying, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt. 18:35).

That rather strange little story is a dramatic commentary on a sentence from the Lord’s Prayer. It is the prayer for forgiveness. Listen: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12).

It’s obvious that in most instances the answering of prayer is God’s business; that’s why we pray, because we wish to bring to God those matters that we cannot manage for ourselves. But this portion of the Lord’s Prayer is different, because this is the prayer that *we* will answer. God has left in our control the power to answer this prayer or to prevent its being answered.

Now here is a special irony: Several parts of the Lord’s Prayer might seem to us to be somewhat within our province, but this doesn’t seem to be one of them. As I indicated earlier, a good many of us would be pleased to take on more responsibility for our daily bread; some of us are even a bit offended that God thinks we need help in this particular. The activists among us are also ready to work at seeing God’s kingdom come. But the phrase in question just now—*forgive us our debts*—is very much God’s business. Sin, by ultimate definition, is a God issue, so we go to God to be forgiven of our sins. But this prayer, as given to us by our Lord Christ, makes it quite clear that in order for us to be forgiven of our sins, we must be ready to forgive those who have injured us. In a very real sense, we give God permission to forgive our sins.

Whatever Became of Sin?

But before I go further, let me deal with a preliminary issue. Vast numbers in our contemporary culture really aren’t concerned about having their sins forgiven. Perhaps even the language of this prayer carries a rather comfortable tone for our culture. *Forgive us our debts*. A good many of us receive appeals nearly every week urging us to take on some debts—that is, to get still another credit card. Financial debts are almost essential to our modern world of business. What would the banks do if no one wanted to be in debt? The word *debt* doesn’t frighten our contemporary culture unless it is associated with bankruptcy—and for some, even that threat is simply a legal process to be passed through.

And what has happened to the word *debt* has happened to the whole concept of sin. Our language shows it. We have found so many convenient synonyms for sin that the basic concept is almost lost to our society. Phyllis McGinley, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and a devout Catholic, observed that people no longer see themselves as sinful but only as immature, underprivileged, frightened, or sick. Notice what is missing in all these words: they leave us exempt from responsibility. They don’t require us to say, “I am guilty. I was wrong.” So we’re socially maladjusted; what can you expect when we live in a socially perverse culture? If we have a negative personality pattern—well, that’s better than having no personality at all, isn’t it? Such is the thinking of a culture that has learned new and improved ways to avoid spiritual self-incrimination.

The late Karl Menninger, who was in many ways the most formidable name in twentieth-century psychiatry, observed what was happening in our modern scene and finally wrote a book that he aptly titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* He insisted that we needed to restore that ancient, direct, and quite offensive word to our vocabulary.

Words matter, because they not only convey thought; they also shape thought and give order to thinking.

Ultimately, we can’t get around the fact of our sins. We may call them by another name, but we can go only so far in fooling ourselves. David H. C. Read is right in tying together the two petitions of the Lord’s Prayer that ask for bread and for forgiveness. “Our natural life and health depend on getting our daily bread; our spiritual life and health depend on getting our sins forgiven.”¹ This language suggests that forgiveness from God is a matter of life and death, and while we may persuade ourselves that it isn’t really that big a deal, I doubt that we can convince our psyches. As Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, has said, “real forgiveness is something that changes things and so gives hope.”² Take hope from life and every day is a dead end. So Jesus teaches us to pray each day for bread, so that our bodies can survive, and to pray just as regularly for forgiveness, so that our souls can survive. And as surely as our need for bread is daily, so too our need for forgiveness is a daily matter. The sin that lies unforgiven becomes in time a malignancy of the soul and spirit, drawing all the spiritual nutrients to itself while the soul slowly dies.

The Word *Sin*

Let me say something about the word for sin that this prayer employs. It is a word of special importance to the common run of us humans, especially the kind of people who go to church and who try to live basically moral lives. Many of us might easily think that confession of sin is not that big a matter for us, since we don't murder or rape or steal. But this prayer asks that God should forgive our *debts*. The Bible uses a Greek word that means "a failure to pay that which is due," and thus a failure in duty.³ We are asking forgiveness not simply for what we have done but also for that which we ought to have done and have failed to do. And we are called to seek forgiveness not only for heinous sins that make headlines but just as surely for the pettiness, the neglect of goodness, the inconspicuous sins, and the sins about which our culture shrugs its shoulders and excuses with the line that is a kind of *carte blanche* absolution, "Everybody does it."

I sense that this phrase is a personally tailored prayer. When we speak these words, each of us needs to find the size that fits his or her unique condition of soul. When I say, "Forgive my debts," the prayer has a different content than when spoken by a ten-year-old. What is my debt to God, and how is the quality of that debt shaped by the opportunities of faith and growth that have been given me? For one thing, if I ask forgiveness for words hastily and unkindly spoken, the quality of my sin—and thus the size of my debt—depends in some measure on my personality. Some of us seem wired up to respond more quickly and thus with less thought than others whose nature is naturally more tentative and cautious. Are the two persons to be judged differently, even though they spoke with rather similar acerbity and unkindness? And another thing: is more expected of a mature Christian than of someone just beginning the faith journey? I think so. Thus, when you and I pray, "Forgive us our debts," the prayer has quite different content from one person to another.

There is beauty in this prayer—and wonder, too. Human wickedness and failure seem often to be so much beyond our coping. In the story I quoted earlier, Jesus used strong figures as illustration. The servant owed his king ten million dollars (translated into our currency), Jesus said. What servant can hope to pay such a monstrous debt? Even by the sale of all his resources and by placing



Forgiveness is all of one piece. As we forgive, we are forgiven.

himself, his wife, and his children into slavery, the servant couldn't clear himself. Jesus is telling us that each of us has a debt to the King of the universe that is altogether beyond our capacity to pay. So what can we do in this quite hopeless situation? Jesus tells us that God has a disposition to forgive. Jesus wouldn't have urged us to ask forgiveness of God if God were not inclined to mercy. The gospel doesn't leave us wallowing in interminable and hopeless guilt; it offers instead the mercy of glad deliverance.

God Is Not Casual about Forgiveness

Now we return to the conditional nature of this prayer. God doesn't forgive us willy-nilly. Generous as God is, God is not casual about the business of forgiveness. Forgiveness is far too great a matter, far too crucial to the very structure of the universe, to be treated casually. Even so, the prayer asks, literally, that God shall forgive our sins in proportion to the forgiveness we extend to others. Which is to say, we can determine the measure of the forgiveness that we receive. One day General Oglethorpe, founder of the Georgia colony, told his Anglican priest, John Wesley, "I never forgive." Wesley promptly answered, "Then I hope, sir, you never sin."

This brings us back to Jesus' story. We recalled a few moments ago that the first debtor in the story owed ten million dollars—a hopeless debt and properly symbolic of our human debt to God. The man's fellow servant owed him just twenty dollars—and of course that figure, too, is symbolic and in most instances pretty descriptive of the debts we owe one another. Jesus was making his point by way of humor. If you don't have a sense of humor, this is a patently ridiculous story; how could a person be forgiven a debt of ten million dollars and then be outraged that a colleague can't pay back a mere twenty dollars? Jesus wants us to laugh when we hear the story; he wants us to say, "How utterly absurd that

I should hold anything against another human being when God is willing to forgive me! Because no matter how much anyone owes me, it is in no way to be compared to what I owe God.”

Jesus is telling us that in some strange way, forgiveness is all of one piece. As we forgive, we are forgiven. Mind you, the process of forgiveness begins with God, who has extended mercy to us. But this divine majesty is meant to be passed along, and if it is not passed on, it ceases to work in our own lives. So many legends have grown around Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper, and of course by this time it is impossible to separate legend from fact. But the best of the stories convey truth, whether history or legend. It is said that da Vinci expressed his hatred for an enemy by painting the face of that enemy on the shoulders of Judas Iscariot. When the artist tried, however, to paint the face of Christ, he found that he could not bring up an image for his Lord. Then he forgave his enemy and painted out the disgracing picture. That night, da Vinci had a dream in which he saw the face of Christ and was able again to paint him.⁴

History or legend, the lesson is true. When we hold something against another person, we begin to shut out the face of Christ, and when the image of our Lord is blurred, we no longer have the faith to accept forgiveness. When we see Jesus, our hearts can envision the forgiveness we humans need. But when we are angry with someone, that person’s face, so to speak, constantly comes before us. Try as I will to see the face of our Lord, that face is clouded by the image of the persons I resent. So it is that forgiveness for my own sins is made impossible—not because God is unmerciful, but because when I hold something against another, I shut out the vision that gives me the faith to accept forgiveness.

When Robert Louis Stevenson lived in the South Sea Islands he conducted family worship for his household regularly. Some of his prayers from these occasions are still available, and they inspire us with their integrity as well as their literary beauty. One morning, midway

through the Lord’s Prayer, Stevenson rose from his knees and left the room. Since his health was constantly in peril, Stevenson’s wife feared he was suffering some sudden illness. She followed him from the room. “Is anything wrong?” she asked. “Only this,” he answered; “I am not fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer today.”

In our best and most sensitive moments, many of us realize that we we’re not fit to pray this greatest of all prayers—not until we have cleared the rubbish from our souls. With God’s help we sweep away bitter memories, deep resentments, hatreds that we have embraced as if we feared God might take them from us. But then, if we are fortunate, we hear the Holy Spirit’s reminder that when we keep such stuff in our lives we not only build a barrier between ourselves and our fellow human beings, we rob ourselves of the priceless gift of forgiveness. Then, by God’s mercy, we are ready to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” And granting forgiveness to others, we receive forgiveness for our own souls.

It’s a very simple formula, this prayer for forgiveness, a formula so simple that only the profoundly wise are willing to receive it.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. David H. C. Read, *Holy Common Ground* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 63.
2. Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 50.
3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 222.
4. *The Interpreters Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1951), 314.



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 6

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 4:1–11

Everybody's Prayer

"One question has always bothered me," an elderly man said one day as he took me aside at a church gathering. I braced myself for the question; this man was a patron saint in the congregation and as good a human being and as earnest a Christian as one is likely to know. I wondered what question would trouble this man through the long, honorable years of his life.

"This," he said. "What is the meaning of the sentence in the Lord's Prayer, 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'? Would *God* lead us into temptation?"

I suspect that anyone who has spoken the Lord's Prayer with any measure of concentration has asked that question. Why are we instructed to plead with God not to lead us into temptation?

Would God actually lead us into temptation? And do we need then to plead with God not to do so? The answer in the Bible itself seems quite clear. The New Testament book of James says simply, "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one" (Jas. 1:13). One wonders if perhaps the author of this letter, writing a generation after Jesus taught the prayer, was seeking to correct a question that the prayer had raised in the minds of early believers. I think it's quite possi-



Christendom survived the periods of persecution in better fashion than the acclaim and recognition that came when Constantine gave the church the endorsement of the throne. Public approval, acceptance, and acclaim proved more damning tests than persecution.

HUMANS AND TEMPTATION

No phrase of the Lord's Prayer comes closer to our humanness than this particular phrase: "Lead us not into temptation." If any sentence in the prayer applies distinctively and uniquely to our human race, this is it. It is our capacity for temptation that defines us as being human. If animals could pray (and perhaps you feel that they do), they could rightly ask for daily bread, but only we humans must worry ourselves about temptation—and every human being must do so. As for the angels of heaven, they can hallow God's name and pray too for God's kingdom to come, but from what we understand about angels, there is no need to pray for exemption from temptation. It is we humans who are capable of good and evil, so it is we humans who are so painfully susceptible to temptation.

ble, but in any event James makes clear that temptation is altogether outside the province of God, whether as receiver or initiator. Then he goes on to explain how it is that temptation works: “But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it” (Jas. 1:14).

Let’s look for a moment at the word *temptation*. Nearly four hundred years ago, when the King James translation of the Scriptures was made, the word *temptation* meant to test or to prove. Thus the New Revised Standard Version, translating the meaning of words for our time, casts the prayer this way: “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13). The classic words of the King James translation probably come to most of our lips more naturally than the more recent translations, so it is important to pause with those words before going further into the content of the prayer.

Of course temptation is itself a time of trial. For a boy or a girl who wants to make the baseball team or softball team, the time of trial is the sharp grounder that he or she must field or the curveball to be hit. For all of us in what we sometimes call the game of life, the testing comes multiple times each day, by way of passing thoughts, casual conversations, or perhaps those insistent television advertisements. These occasions are in truth tests of will and character. We wouldn’t necessarily identify all of them as temptations; indeed, we probably wouldn’t think of them as tests or trials, either. These matters are just the stuff of everyday living. And yet it is from this common *stuff* that our characters are shaped and our destinies committed.

When we hear this prayer from Jesus’ lips, we think quite naturally of his time of trial in the wilderness. Matthew’s Gospel puts the matter in bald terms: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1). To go back to my sports illustration of a moment ago, we might say—perhaps rather inelegantly—that this was when Jesus was being tried out for the team. How would he handle that hot ground ball or that wicked curve? What Jesus suffered were temptations, no doubt about it. But they were also the tests that prepared our Lord for the years of ministry just ahead. And fierce as those tests were, in ultimate terms they were—to continue with our sports analogies—only exhibition games before the real season began.

Being Tested

I’m thinking, you see, of what the Gospel of Luke says. After the three fierce tests in the wilderness, Luke tells us, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). One doesn’t need too much imagination to calculate what some of those “opportune” times must have been. If Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness with the promise that he could make the whole world bow down to him, I suspect that such a temptation came to our Lord more than once when people idolized him.

And so, of course, it is with us. Our tests rarely come wearing a black hat, like the villain in a melodrama. Some of our most serious tests of character come in highly attractive form. When you were elected an officer in your high school class, or when you received a promotion or an increase in salary, did you fear you were entering a serious place of testing? Probably not. But in truth success and recognition may pose much greater hazard to the soul than some of the headline sins—partially because we brace ourselves against the headline sins, while the more subtle sins of greed, pride, envy, and arrogance slip alongside as friends. They come with the territory of success.

The early Christian church went through recurring periods of persecution under a succession of Roman emperors. I’m sure they thought of those periods as times of testing, and no doubt some believers lost faith during such times. But as we look back on church history, we realize that Christendom survived the periods of persecution in better fashion than the acclaim and recognition that came when Constantine gave the church the endorsement of the throne. Public approval, acceptance, and acclaim proved more damning tests than persecution.

Testing has its value. That’s why we go to a doctor for a periodical checkup and to a financial consultant for some long-term planning. And it’s not just for our own well-being. We go to a state or county office of some sort when we want a driver’s license, and they test us for our own safety and for the safety of others who may be in reach of our skills or lack thereof.

So, too, with any number of life’s trying circumstances. I think I will never forget the colleague who spoke with me when I was watching over my then-three-year-old daughter, who had just passed through an emergency

appendectomy and whose life was still hanging in the balance. He said, "I would give a great deal to learn what you will learn from this experience, Ellsworth, but I would give still more to avoid going through it." He was right on both accounts. I learned things during those weeks that still benefit me half a century later, but I wouldn't wish the experience on anyone else. Trials can make us stronger, wiser, more gracious, and certainly more conscious of God. But not necessarily so.

As valuable as life's tests may be, only a fool or a masochist would seek out trouble. We live in a world where health is in peril of germs and sickness and accident, where our finances fluctuate with boom and bust, and where in spite of our best efforts we experience both defeat and success and garner both enemies and friends. We can't help but meet a certain amount of testing in the normal course of daily living. If given the choice, we would be glad to escape these tests. So the pious among us—and the irreligious, too, for that matter—appeal to God to guide us past life's perils. And if we sense that we have come to a place where our road divides into two (or perhaps even three!), and we cannot know which is the better way, we pray, "Lead us not through the place of testing."

Jesus and Testing

Here as at other points in this great prayer, Jesus must have shaped the petition from the context of his own earthly experience. His was no theoretical gospel, no ivory-tower analysis, but truth that had itself emerged from the place of testing. When the biblical story reports on Jesus' wilderness experience, we're told that he came through it without sin. But it is also very clear that the test of the wilderness was intense. Mark's Gospel is so succinct in reporting this experience that he doesn't list the specific temptations, as Matthew and Luke do; he says simply, "He was . . . tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:13). I am blessed to know that the angels waited on our Lord, but I have often pondered what Mark meant when he said that Jesus "was with the wild beasts." Was he simply emphasizing the violence that prevailed in that wilderness and with this physical description giving us an emotional setting for the spiritual struggle? Or was Mark portraying hell's invasion in the imagery of "wild beasts"?

As we have noted already in passing, the testing in the wilderness was only a preview of the continuing struggles



So often we don't recognize our tests when we see them, and as a result, we don't plead to be delivered from their evil. This petition, you see, fits every human being. It recognizes that we are sometimes very frail, but that in God's mercy there is strength to emerge triumphant from our time of trial.

Jesus would face. It's the daily-ness of life that is most trying. Friends failed Jesus, in the fashion of Judas and Peter; people like James and John who should have understood his plans were instead dull and difficult; crowds praised him and put his ego to the test; long days and insistent human need must have rubbed Jesus' nerves to a fine edge. And simple weariness was perhaps the greatest test of all, for there are instances where we can be courageous in the face of every imaginable struggle and then lose character from the dull weight of exhaustion.

So I wonder: did our Lord, who knew testing and trial so well, build into his prayer a simple recognition of the kind of lives you and I must live? Is this a prayer drenched in humanness, one that perhaps says, "When life comes to a place where one road leads to testing and another to freedom from testing, show me the road that leads the easier way"? Does this phrase suggest that while testing does, indeed, do us good, we prefer nevertheless to be spared its rigors?

Rescue Us from Evil

This portion of the prayer has a second phrase: "but rescue us from the evil one," or simply, "but deliver us from evil." This phrase, in the fashion of Hebrew poetry, balances the preceding line. In the times when two roads lie before us, we sometimes take the more difficult one: perhaps because life demands it; perhaps because we have erred. When that happens, we need help to deal with the evil we encounter. That intrepid frontiersman Daniel Boone is said to have prayed one day when he faced a hungry bear, "Lord, if you can't help me, don't help that bear." I understand that prayer.

These two balancing phrases tell us two important facts: the first, "do not bring us to the time of trial," reminds us that testing is universal in human life, part of the fabric of each day for every human being. The second, "but

deliver us from evil,” reassures us that we can be helped and that we can count on God for victory at any place of testing.

Part of the glory and quality of the Lord’s Prayer is in its altogether realistic take on life. We’re conscious of this when we speak the phrases that ask for daily bread and for forgiveness of sins. This is a prayer for life in the daily run—yes, even the daily grind. And it is this same quality that comes through so feelingly in the two phrases we are presently considering. The first admits that we live in a world of testing, and it makes concession to our human frailty when it allows us to say, “Spare me from the day of testing.” But it goes on to acknowledge that some testing can’t be escaped, and it offers help for such instances: “but deliver us from evil.”

The late David Read illustrated the point by a homely illustration. Suppose, he says, that you work in an office in close contact with several other employees. One gets on your nerves by making a certain remark at the same time and in the same tone of voice every day. It isn’t a big thing (indeed, you’re ashamed that you let it get to you), but get to you it does, planting in you the seed for temper and unpleasantness. Dr. Read suggests that you might well close your prayer “some gloomy morning” by asking, “Don’t let him say it this morning: it would be too much for me—but if he does, then help me to keep my temper.”¹ That’s an example of “Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

Most of us can easily imagine just such a prayer in our daily round of life. In truth, if we had the good sense to apply this petition from the Lord’s Prayer more frequently, we would no doubt be better equipped to deal with a fellow worker, a spouse, a pupil or teacher, the threat of morning and evening traffic, an unpleasant customer, or our boss or employer.

But this prayer applies not only to such sometimes-trivial matters but also to the whole crushing load of living. I think of an alcoholic who is trying desperately to reorder his life. He prays that the deadly urge will

not come upon him, that well-meaning but thoughtless associates will not press him to take a cocktail—but if they do, that he will have the inner strength to refuse. And here also is a person who has suffered the loss of a dear friend or beloved: at times the sense of loss throws her into a pit of despondency, an almost suicidal place. She prays that God will save her from those circumstances that push her to the brink of loneliness and self-pity, but if the situation arises, that she will nevertheless be given the resources to fight back the black mood and to turn to the mood that lifts and cheers. “Deliver us from evil!”

This is a prayer, you see, for everyone, because all of us live in a world where testing happens. This prayer works for a child who is tested by her little brother or her big sister, for a teenager whose greatest test in high school is the chance to elevate a grade by a little cautious cheating. And this works for the husband or wife who just now finds marriage a bore, and for a woman who has the ability to write or speak a clever, sarcastic, destructive sentence, and for the man who is bright enough that he finds it difficult to suffer fools gladly.

I’m hoping to suggest to us that our problem with this prayer is that so often we don’t recognize our tests when we see them, and that as a result, we don’t plead to be delivered from their evil. This petition, you see, fits every human being. It recognizes that we are sometimes very frail, but that in God’s mercy there is strength to emerge triumphant from our time of trial.

About the Writer

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1. David H. C. Read, *Holy Common Ground* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 80.