



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.