

Lifting the Burden

Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today

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Jesus, Teacher and Interpreter of the Torah II: 6:1–7:29

In this middle section of the sermon Jesus addresses three areas of behavior traditionally associated with religion in the strict sense: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The second area expands to include the "Lord's Prayer" (6:9-15), which many consider to be the heart of the entire sermon.

Righteousness in Acts Directed to God: 6:1-18

Once again everything hangs upon a particular vision of God that determines the appropriate way to act in matters of religion. The opening sentence gives the ruling principle: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (6:1). The three acts of religion under consideration—almsgiving (6:1-4), prayer (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18)—involve a piety that must truly respect the nature of the God in whom the disciples believe ("your Father in heaven"). It deforms such piety to carry out these practices in a public and ostentatious way aimed at bolstering one's own religious standing by winning the approval of others.

The advice in each case is set over against the counterpractice of "the hypocrites." The latter are the religious leaders who are so often the target of severe critique in this gospel, reflecting retrojection back into the life of Jesus of the Matthean community's polemic against the Synagogue. Nonetheless, the countermeasures Jesus recommends—not letting your left hand know what the right is doing when giving alms, going into one's inner room and shutting the door when praying, putting oil on one's head when fasting—surely render the color and vigor of his own speech. The Father "sees all things done in secret," not in a "Big Brother is watching you" way, but in the sense that disciples live out their lives in secret.

awareness of the presence of the God with whom they have an intimate filial relationship. The constant reference to “reward” may sound like earning “Brownie points” but really harks back to the “present-future” tension of the beatitudes. One performs these practices in the sight of a God presently unseen, known by faith alone. One performs them in the hope that the relationship presently hidden will one day be revealed in full glory and splendor. That is the essence of any future “reward.”

The Lord's Prayer: 6:9-15

The instruction on prayer (6:5-17) particularly brings out the sense of God that Jesus wishes to communicate to his disciples. He prefaces the prayer that has become known as the “Lord’s Prayer” (6:9-13) with an example, taken this time from the Gentile world, showing how *not* to pray. The pagans heap up empty phrases in their prayers because for them prayer is an attempt to move an ill-disposed or at best neutral deity to a more favorable frame of mind; the key thing is to hit upon the right phrase that will unlock the divine favor (v. 7). How different the situation in the case of the disciples! The Father knows what they need even before they ask (v. 8) and is only too willing to be generous. Believers’ prayer—and specifically the prayer that Jesus now goes on to teach the disciples—is not about moving God. It is about creating in the human heart the kind of disposition that will enable the divine generosity to flow in full measure.

To promote such a disposition the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer follow a distinct sequence. They move from a focus on God and God’s “agenda” to petitions more specifically directed to human need. In other words, the prayer first attempts to lift the human mind and heart away for a moment from fixation on its own concerns to a broader program, which is that of the “Father in heaven.”¹ This opening address, which in all likelihood echoes the distinctive address of Jesus himself to the Father,² establishes the context in which the prayer is made: a community of disciples whom Jesus is molding into the “family of God” (12:48-50) and seeking to draw into the relationship of intimacy and trust existing between himself and the Father.

¹ We recall the definition of prayer attributed to St. Augustine: “the lifting of the heart and mind to God.”

² It is likely that beneath the simpler Lukan form, “Father,” lies the Aramaic *Abba*, preserved in the Markan version of Jesus’ plea in Gethsemane (14:36) and by Paul in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6.

The three opening petitions—that God’s name be held holy, that God’s kingdom come, that God’s will be done on earth as in heaven (vv. 9a-10)—are not separate items on a list. The first and third are simply variations in biblical language of the essential prayer for the coming of God’s rule or kingdom, which is of course the center of Jesus’ proclamation (4:17). The presupposition is that the world has fallen out of the hand of God and is captive to hostile spiritual forces that manipulate human affairs, bringing bondage to sin and death, and the alienation of the world from its true source of life. The coming of the kingdom represents the reversal of all this: breaking the grip of hostile forces, reclaiming the world for the rule of the Creator, and the acknowledgment of that rule on the part of humanity (the “hallowing” of God’s “Name”).

The prayer that God’s kingdom may “come” acknowledges that its full realization remains an object of hope. The community that prays the prayer—the disciples of Jesus—does so as a kind of “beachhead” of the kingdom, enjoying its essence in the shape of filial relationship with God, but still very conscious that, so far as the external context of the world is concerned, the arrival of God’s liberating rule is far from complete.

The second set of petitions (vv. 11-13) looks more to human need but retains the focus on the future. The prayers reflect the situation of a people “on the move,” a “pilgrim” people. “Give us today our bread for tomorrow”³ (v. 11) has echoes of the feeding of Israel with the manna from heaven during the years of wandering in Sinai (Exodus 16). The manna fell on six days but not on the seventh (the Sabbath). The Israelites had to gather twice as much on the sixth day in order to have “bread for tomorrow,” the day of rest. The petition is not just for bread in the literal sense but for “a double measure” of all that the community needs for survival on its journey through the “wilderness” of the present situation of the world. “Bread for tomorrow” may also point to the plenty of the final banquet of the kingdom, of which the Eucharist and indeed all earthly meals shared in faith are a foretaste.

Again, because the community has not arrived at the perfection of the kingdom it is a community standing in continual need of forgiveness—both from God and mutually among its members (v. 12). The sense is not that God waits to see whether the members forgive one another before bestowing forgiveness. Rather, the flow of divine forgiveness is blocked if

³ The sense of “something for tomorrow” is one of the three possible meanings conveyed by the mysterious Greek adjective *epiousios* that qualifies “bread” in both the Matthean and Lukan forms of the petition. The other meanings are “bread required for survival” and “bread for today.”

it is not passed on through them to transform human relationships as well (cf. Matt 18:21-35). The comment following the prayer proper (6:14-15) makes this explicit.

The final double petition (v. 13) could suggest that God actually "leads" people into a situation where they will be exposed to severe temptation. The idiom is biblical;⁴ the perspective, once again, eschatological. The petition arises out of a sense that the final battle with the forces of evil will be climactic and that those forces may seem for a time to gain the upper hand.⁵ The community prays that it will not be exposed at this moment (which the early generations believed was soon to come about) to extreme test.⁶

The Lord's Prayer, then, is very much the prayer of a people on a journey. For all the incompleteness of that journey, the community moves on, knowing that it enjoys already the familial relationship with God characteristic of the kingdom. The community prays for the full realization of that kingdom, aware that the contest with opposing forces not only occurs in the surrounding world but runs through its own life and the hearts of its individual members. We do not, perhaps, pray the Prayer today with the same sense of eschatological urgency as the early believers. But we can pray it with the same sense of creaturely dependence, familial intimacy, and hope as those to whom Jesus first taught it.

True "Treasure": 6:19-34

Running through the section of the sermon that makes up the remainder of chapter 6 and lending it a unity is Jesus' concern to inculcate a proper attitude to the good things of this world. Once again everything depends upon an understanding of God, which when truly in place should result in a liberating absence of worry. Presupposed is a sense that the human animal is a very insecure being, much preoccupied with the future and whether food, clothing, lodging, and so forth will be available in sufficient degree to guarantee security. The conventional way to ensure that this will be the

⁴ Biblical idiom tends to attribute all occurrences ultimately to God, not distinguishing clearly between what God wanted and caused to happen from what God simply allowed. The sense of "lead," then, is "do not allow us to be brought into a situation of evil and be overcome by it."

⁵ The best translation of the final clause seems to be "Deliver us from the evil one (= Satan)" rather than the more traditional "Deliver us from evil."

⁶ The petition echoes the prayer Jesus will urge upon his sleep-prone disciples just prior to his arrest in Gethsemane: "Stay awake and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (26:41).