

MATTHEW
for
EVERYONE

PART 1
CHAPTERS 1–15

**TOM
WRIGHT**



Heythrop Library
114 Mount Street
London
W1K 3AH
UK

spirit, and the point here is to match the outgoing, spontaneous generosity of God himself. The best way to be sure is for nobody else to know.

The same applies to prayer. What you are in private is what you really are. Go into your inner room and talk to your father. You don't have to make a song and dance about it, and indeed the fewer people that know you're doing it the better. Nor do you have to go on mouthing pious phrases. You may find there are forms of words which help, as a framework or a starting-point; Jesus is about to give the **disciples** the framework he particularly recommends. But the point is to do business with God, one to one.

Jesus doesn't say what kind of reward we should expect. That, too, is part of the point. Simply knowing God better is reward enough; but there may be other things as well. You never know till you try. What is clear is that he is inviting his followers to a life in which inside and outside match perfectly, because both are focused on the God who sees in secret.

MATTHEW 6.7-15

The Lord's Prayer

⁷When you pray, don't pile up a jumbled heap of words! That's what the Gentiles do. They reckon that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard. ⁸So don't be like them. You see, your father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹So this is how you should pray:

Our father in heaven,

May your name be honoured

May your kingdom come

May your will be done

As in heaven, so on earth.

¹¹Give us today the bread we need now;

¹²And forgive us the things we owe,

As we too have forgiven what was owed to us.

*¹³Don't bring us into the great Trial,
But rescue us from evil.*

¹⁴Yes: if you forgive people the wrong they have done, your heavenly father will forgive you as well. ¹⁵But if you don't forgive people, neither will your heavenly father forgive you what you have done wrong.'

I was talking to a friend who had the reputation of being one of the finest preachers in the area. How did he go about it, I asked. He had no particular technique, he said; he just puzzled over the biblical readings that were set for that day until a framework emerged. Once he'd got a framework it was just a matter of writing it out.

That, of course, was a deceptively simple answer, and we can only guess at the hours of struggle and prayer that were disguised by such a short, and humble, response. But it's often the case, in many areas of life, that we blunder around until we find a framework around which we can build. And this is almost always true with prayer.

Jesus contrasts the sort of praying he has in mind with the sort that went on in much of the non-Jewish world. We know from many writings and inscriptions that many non-Jews did indeed use multiple formulae in their prayers: long, complicated magic words which they would repeat over and over in their anxiety to persuade some god or goddess to be favourable to them. Such prayers are often marked by a note of uncertainty. There were many divinities in the ancient pagan world, and nobody quite knew which one might need pacifying next, or with what formula.

This is hardly surprising. Prayer is one of life's great mysteries. Most people pray at least sometimes; some people, in many very different religious traditions, pray a great deal. At its lowest, prayer is shouting into a void on the off-chance

there may be someone out there listening. At its highest, prayer merges into love, as the presence of God becomes so real that we pass beyond words and into a sense of his reality, generosity, delight and grace. For most Christians, most of the time, it takes place somewhere in between those two extremes. To be frank, for many people it is not just a mystery but a puzzle. They know they ought to do it but they aren't quite sure how.

What the Lord's Prayer provides, here at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, is a *framework*. Jesus doesn't say you should always use identical words, and actually when Luke gives his version of the prayer it is different in small but interesting ways (Luke 11.2-4). It looks as though Jesus intended this sequence of thought to act more like the scaffolding than the whole building, though of course the prayer is used as it stands (usually in the longer version we find here in Matthew) by countless Christians every day. Already by Jesus' day the Jewish patterns of prayer were well established, with short but powerful prayers to be said three times a day. Maybe Jesus intended this prayer to be used like that as well.

What then does the prayer tell us about our regular approach to God? First, and so obvious that we might miss it, the prayer is deeply *meaningful*. It isn't a magic formula, an 'abracadabra', which plugs into some secret charm or spell. It is something we can mean with our minds (though it will stretch our thinking) as well as say with our lips. It implies strongly that we humans can and should use our ordinary language in talking to the creator of the universe, and that he wants and intends us to do so. It implies, in other words, that we share with the one true God a world of meaning which he wants us to explore.

Second, everything is set within our calling God 'father' (as Jesus does throughout this Sermon – in fact, we could suggest that a title for the whole Sermon might be, 'What it means to

call God "father"). For Jews in Jesus' day, this title for God went back to God's action in the *Exodus*, rescuing Israel from Egypt and so demonstrating that 'Israel is my son, my first-born' (Exodus 4.22).

Third, this God is not a man-made idol. He is the living God, who dwells in 'heaven', and longs to see his sovereign and saving rule come to birth on 'earth'. This is, in fact, a prayer for the **kingdom of God** to become fully present: not for God's people to be snatched away from earth to heaven, but for the glory and beauty of heaven to be turned into earthly reality as well. When that is done, God's name – his character, his reputation, his very presence – will be held in high honour everywhere. The first half of the prayer is thus all about God. Prayer that doesn't start there is always in danger of concentrating on ourselves, and very soon it stops being prayer altogether and collapses into the random thoughts, fears and longings of our own minds.

Fourth, though, because this God is the creator, who loves his world and his human creatures, we can ask him for everything we need in the safe knowledge that he is far more concerned about it all even than we are ourselves. Much of the rest of the chapter spells this out. But if we are truly praying this prayer to God's honour, we can never simply pray for food for ourselves. We must pray for the needs of the whole world, where millions go hungry and many starve. And already we may sense, bubbling up out of the prayer, the realization that if we truly pray it we might also have to do something about it, to become part of God's answer to our own praying. But more of that in due course.

Fifth, we pray for forgiveness. Unlike some religions, in which every single action carries eternal and unbreakable consequences, at the heart of Judaism and Christianity lies the belief that, though human actions matter very deeply, forgiveness is possible and, through God's love, can become actual. Jesus

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assumes that we will need to ask for forgiveness not on one or two rare occasions but very regularly. This is a sobering thought, but it is matched by the comforting news that forgiveness is freely available as often as we need it.

There is, however, a condition, which remarkably enough is brought right into the prayer itself: we ourselves must be forgiving people. Jesus takes an extra moment afterwards to explain why. The heart that will not open to forgive others will remain closed when God's own forgiveness is offered. Jesus will say more about this in chapter 18.

The prayer ends with a sombre and realistic note. Jesus believed that the great time of testing was coming upon the world, and that he would have to walk alone into its darkness. His followers should pray to be spared it. Even now, in the light of Easter and with the guidance and power of the **Holy Spirit**, we still need to pray in this way. There will come yet more times of crisis, times when all seems dark for the world, the church, and in our own hearts and lives. If we follow a crucified **Messiah**, we shouldn't expect to be spared the darkness ourselves. But we must, and may, pray to be kept from its worst ravages, and to be delivered from evil, both in the abstract and in its personified form, 'the evil one'.

Here is the framework Jesus knew we would need. Here is your heavenly father waiting and longing for you to use it day by day as you grow in your knowledge, love and service of him. What is stopping you from making it your own?

MATTHEW 6.16-24

On Fasting and Lasting Treasure

¹⁶When you fast, don't be gloomy like the play-actors. They make their faces quite unrecognizable, so that everyone can see they're fasting. I'm telling you the truth: they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷No: when you fast, tidy your hair and