

My spouse likes to rib me for not knowing the correct lyrics to songs. It's true. I've had some doozies in regards to misinterpretations. Many of us- when learning or memorizing words- often mishear and misinterpret. Years ago the advice columnist, Ann Landers, asked for letters about children misinterpreting the Lord's Prayer. And boy, did she get some unusual interpretations. Things like... "Our Father who art in heaven, Howard be thy name." The person writing in said for years she thought that Howard was God's real name. Or... "Our Father, who art in heaven, how didja know my name?" One parent eavesdropping on her children praying at bedtime heard, "Give us this steak and daily bread, and forgive us our mattresses." "Give us this day our jelly bread and forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." "Lead us not into Penn Station." Or as one brother thought he was praying for his little sister to get into trouble- "Lead a snot into temptation." "And deliver us some email or from eagle. Amen." One mother wrote in- thinking she was a little off topic- that she was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake hot off the griddle. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake; I can wait.' Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, 'Ryan, you be Jesus!'" Out of the mouths of babes! We laugh because it is cute, but there's nothing too cute about the Lord's Prayer nor being like Jesus. It takes guts to pray this prayer and to exemplify Jesus. While the Lord's Prayer is a model of how to a pray and beautiful one at that, we do well not to pray this prayer lightly. As a matter of fact, many preachers spend weeks and weeks preaching on this prayer alone. But we don't have weeks; we have today, so bear with this preacher. The Lord's Prayer is always appropriate during corporate worship, on a

battlefield, beside a hospital bed, at a wedding or memorial service or prayed privately. During the pandemic, one person told me that instead of singing “Happy Birthday” to ensure that they washed their hands for two full minutes, they said the Lord’s Prayer. Then their church adopted this idea and placed signs on the bathroom mirrors encouraging all to do the same.

After all, it was the Jewish custom in Jesus’ day to pray 3 times a day: early AM, middle of the day, and once at sunset. Scholars point out that the Lord’s Prayer models not only a Jewish prayer but also expresses Jesus’ teachings, beginning with the presence of a loving father. Jesus prayed for: the kingdom to come, the will of God to be done, daily bread, forgiveness, and a final affirmation that God is all in all. Many of us memorized this prayer and pray it by heart. If you haven’t committed it to memory, I highly recommend that you do. Rote prayer is God’s beautiful way of reminding me I’m human and some days I just need to connect with God by praying something that is deeply ingrained in my heart and body. Yet, at other times, sometimes we just say the words without really thinking about what we’re praying.

One of my favorite theologians, Frederick Buechner, says it better than I can. He says, “We can pray this prayer in the unthinking and perfunctory way we usually do only by disregarding what we are saying. ‘Thy will be done’ is what we are saying when we pray this prayer. That is the climax of the first half of the prayer. We are asking God to be God. We are asking God to do not what we want, but what God wants. ‘Thy kingdom come...on earth’ is what we are saying. And if that we suddenly to happen, what then? What would stand and what would fall? Who would be welcomed in and who would be thrown the hell out? Which if any of our most precious visions of what God is and what human beings are would prove to be more

or less on the mark and which would turn out to be phony as three-dollar bills? This prayer takes boldness. And then you have the second half. Give us. Forgive us. Don't test us. Deliver us. If it takes guts to face the omnipotence that is God's, it takes perhaps no less to face the impotence that is ours. We can do nothing without God. We can have nothing without God. Without God we are nothing. It is only the words, 'Our Father' that make the prayer bearable" (*Whistling in the Dark*). Jesus called God, Abba, meaning "Father." God is called such because that is God's relation to Jesus. Thus because of the natural relationship between him and Jesus Christ, God is also our Father as we're God's beloved children.

There is no doubt. Praying the Lord's Prayer can turn your life upside down. Matthew presents the prayer as a centering for the disciples: Start here, the Gospel suggests, and anything that follows will be easier to complete or bear" (A.J. Levine, *The Sermon on the Mount*). When we ask Jesus to become Lord of our life, the trajectory of our life is forever changed. One scholar suggests that Matthew's Gospel is governed by the Lord's Prayer. Matthew comes down to a powerful praying that god's will be done on earth. The context of this little prayer is right in the middle of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." **Prayer, especially little prayers, trusts the readiness of God.** In this sermon Jesus tells his newly called disciples who God is, and out of that, who they are to be like. Jesus is forming a people who would re-present God to the world. Therefore, Jesus invites- no, exhorts, his disciples to "pray like this, Our Father who art in heaven." "In the previous verses, Jesus instructs his disciples on prayer, instructions that still hold for today. The focus of prayer should always be on God. Jesus warns not to deliberately stake out a place where people can see you

praying. This doesn't mean not to pray in public but don't show off. And don't heap up empty phrases since God does not need many words. Faithful prayers do not waste words. God already knows our desires" (Levine). Notice that this prayer doesn't contain "me" but "us." The "us" implies "the communion of all humanity praying with Jesus Christ, our existence in the fellowship of the children of God. Jesus invites, permits, commands us to join him, especially in his intercession with God his Father, thus allowing us to speak with him to God, to pray with him his own prayer, to be united with him in the Lord's Prayer." (Karl Barth, *Prayer*).

Theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, in their book, *Lord, Teach Us*, suggest that when we pray the words, 'your kingdom come,' we are acknowledging that faith in Jesus is not simply an idea or an emotion. It is a concrete reality in which we are to become part or else appear to be out of step with the way things are now that God has come into the world in Jesus." They say, "When you join a club, they give you a handshake and a membership card. When you join the church, we throw you into the water, bathe you, half drown you, clean you up, and tell you that you have been given new life. To be Christian is to be adopted by a new nation, the kingdom of God. We're now to embody God's values and priorities in our daily lives. It is possible to see how every other petition in the Lord's Prayer is also a characteristic of the reign of God- of God's kingdom. God's reign is one of justice. That is why the Lord's Prayer continues: "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus' words challenge the power systems of the world and the web of debt and obligation. "Teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus gets straight to the point. What follows are two ways that God's kingdom comes and God's will is done: the provision of daily bread and release from debts.

Both requests are first directed toward God, recognizing that God is the ultimate source of all good things” (April Hoelke Simpson, workingpreacher.org). Jesus doesn’t elaborate on daily bread or being led into temptation, but he does explain about forgiving as we are forgiven. The intriguing thing in this prayer is that Jesus ties together being forgiven by God and forgiving others. Many of us don’t like forgiving. We’d rather be angry or hold a grudge. Forgiveness is something you give and respect is something you earn. We often get those confused. Forgiveness is a gift. Offering forgiveness to others becomes crucial to the forgiveness that we seek for ourselves. Put another way, the refusal to forgive actually blocks God’s forgiveness (Douglas Hare, *Intrepretations:Matthew*). A pastor tells the story of a parishioner whose pregnant sister and brother in law were murdered by a 16 year old, who has yet to apologize or show any remorse. This woman, a lawyer, works tirelessly advocating against the death penalty. When asked about her take on forgiveness, she says, “Let me be clear. I forgive Nancy’s killer not because he has an excuse- he has none whatsoever. I forgive not because he asked for it- he has not. Rather, I forgive for the One who asked and taught me to- for God. I forgive for the author and perfecter of my faith, Jesus Christ. I also forgive for myself. It is said that living with hate is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Hating my sister’s killer would not affect him at all, but I believe it would devour me. Here’s what I know about Jesus Christ whose name I bear when I call myself Christian. In his dying moments, Jesus, himself a victim of crucifixion, the Roman Empire’s capital punishment, state execution, requested forgiveness for his executioners” (John Buchanan, Fourth Church, Sept. 2011). Mic drop. It’s all easier said than done, which is why we need God’s help.

Even though Jesus didn't expound, I want to explore this concept of daily bread for a moment. When we think of daily bread, we may remember the story of the Israelites in the wilderness complaining and God provided them with a bread-like substance each day- manna- but only enough for one day or it would spoil. After studying and reading other scholars, I had a turn to wonder moment. One scholar put it this way, "In praying for daily bread, Jesus isn't asking God to magically send food to earth from heaven each day. Instead, taking seriously the idea that God's will and kingdom are coming here to earth, maybe Jesus is asking that the world be characterized by the gift of daily bread? Maybe Jesus envisions a world where people don't have to earn the right to eat. This leads to a question: Instead of storing up treasures on earth, how can we be part of God's will to make daily bread readily accessible to all? How can we work toward a reality in which basic needs are met, where all people have access to affordable housing, clean water, good healthcare, same treatment from police and authorities and well, food? This calls us beyond even well-intentioned acts of charity and asks us to reflect deeply on the system of daily bread modeled by God versus the economic systems we, especially in the United States, take for granted. Jesus' prayer also asks for a release of debts, presuming that 'we also have forgiven our debtors.' Jesus' words acknowledge that the world is a web of debt and obligation" (Simpson). Jews under Hellenistic rule- back in biblical times- were marginalized by being pushed off their land. In thinking about systems of debt and obligation that marginalizes, I am reminded of Michelle Alexander's discussion of life after prison in her book, *The New Jim Crow*. "Alexander's book is about mass incarceration and how it systemically marginalizes especially black (male) Americans but also other groups, including poor white Americans. The book is very well researched, deeply

thought-provoking, and exceedingly troubling. There are too many points to name but let me highlight one key point. Alexander discusses how difficult it is for those released from prison to reintegrate into society since they are frequently denied ‘employment, housing, education, and public benefits.’ It’s all too easy to shrug off this reality by telling ourselves that those who have been in prison lost their rights. After all, they broke the law. It’s too easy to believe that these people should be heavily sanctioned because they’re a threat to our safety and wellbeing, even though a striking number of imprisonments are for nonviolent crimes. Noting the problem in this logic, maybe the question we ask is this: In a society that makes it nearly impossible to ever be able to repay this sort of ‘debt,’ what might it look like for Christians to be committed to restorative justice instead of punitive retribution? This doesn’t mean cheap forgiveness for wrongdoing, but it does mean asking hard questions about how we might release people from ‘debts’ in support of profound human flourishing” (Simpson).

Friends, “authentic prayer is not a meek, contrived, and merely ‘religious’ act; it is the act of human beings who know how hard it is to be human. Real prayer cannot be faked” (Douglas John Hall). Reciting the words that Jesus taught us will do nothing if we don’t embody them. And embodying the ways of God’s kingdom doesn’t come naturally, so we need the Holy Spirit to do this work in and through us. So come, Holy Spirit, as we together pray like Jesus taught his disciples to pray...”Our Father, who art in heaven...”