

• *Jesus and Prayer* •

Teach us to pray.” This simple request from Jesus’ disciples in Luke’s Gospel expresses the desire of almost everyone with a spark of religious faith.

Saint Paul assures us that the Holy Spirit can and does help us in our prayer and that God the Father is eager to hear our prayers and answer them. In prayer we lift our hearts and minds to God. We address God directly and express our joys, sorrows, frustrations and failures.

The Gospels provide precious material about Jesus’ practice of prayer, give the texts of his prayer for the full coming of God’s kingdom and offer examples of his surprising teachings about how to pray. Everything that the Gospels present about prayer is consistent with what we have learned so far about Jesus as the prophet of God’s kingdom, the wise teacher and the powerful and compassionate healer and miracle worker.

Psalms and Temple Prayer

We cannot understand Jesus and prayer without looking first at his Jewish background. Jesus learned to pray from what we call the Old Testament. The book of Psalms contains 150 songs that have shaped and expressed the religious sensibilities of God's people throughout the centuries.

The psalms include hymns praising God, thanksgivings for recoveries and rescues from danger, and laments over individual and communal sufferings. The psalms in large part were composed for and used in association with the worship services at the Jerusalem temple. Jesus and his first followers would have been familiar with many of them.

Synagogue Prayers

In Jesus' time Jews who lived outside of Jerusalem developed prayers to be used in worship services held in local synagogues. There was only one temple (at Jerusalem) where sacrifices were offered, but there were many synagogues (the word means "gathering" or "meeting") throughout Israel as well as other parts of the Mediterranean world where Jews had settled. We learn from Mark and Luke that Jesus attended services in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and there read the Scriptures and commented on them.

At the heart of the Jewish synagogue service are three prayers known by the Hebrew words *Shema* ("Hear"), *Shemoneh Esreh* ("Eighteen [Benedictions]") and *Kaddish* ("Hallowed"). (1) The *Shema* is the confession of faith in God as "one." It consists of the reading or recitation of three biblical passages (Deuteronomy 6:4–5; 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41) along with blessings before and after them. (2) The Eighteen Benedictions are praises and petitions directed to God that ask for wisdom, forgiveness of sins, help in times of trouble and so on. (3) The *Kaddish* asks that God's name be hallowed and glorified throughout the world, and that God soon establish his kingdom in its fullness.

It is likely that Jesus knew and used these prayers or others like them. The psalms and the synagogue prayers shaped the language and theology reflected in Jesus' prayers and teachings about prayer. We can see many striking parallels in form and thought between Jesus' own prayer (the Lord's Prayer) and the *Kaddish* and Eighteen Benedictions. As an observant Jew Jesus shared his tradition's zeal for God's glory, trust that God hears all our prayers and hope that he will bring about the fullness of the kingdom.

Jesus' Practice of Prayer

Luke's Gospel is often called the "Gospel of Prayer." It contains a prayer from Jesus—what we know as the Lord's Prayer—and instructions about how to pray. Luke also portrays Jesus as praying at the decisive moments in his public ministry. We learn that Jesus had a rich prayer life focused on God as his (and our) Father and that Jesus marked the most important moments in his life by turning to his Father in prayer.

If you want to know what Luke regarded as the most important moments in Jesus' life, look at his mentions of Jesus at prayer. Between Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, Jesus was at prayer. After his first miraculous healings, Jesus withdrew to a deserted place to pray. Before choosing the twelve apostles, Jesus spent the night in prayer. Prior to Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus was at prayer.

Before the Transfiguration when the disciples received a glimpse of the glory of the risen Jesus, we are told that he went up the mountain to pray. After the Last Supper and before his arrest, he went with his disciples to the Mount of Olives to pray. And, at the moment of his death, Jesus prayed to his Father in the words of Psalm 31:5: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

In other Gospels Jesus shows himself to be rooted in the prayer traditions of his people. In Matthew he praises his Father by using

the typical Jewish thanksgiving formula: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because...”. In his struggle at Gethsemane to accept his suffering and death, Jesus embodies the spirit of Old Testament lament psalms. According to Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 Jesus died while reciting Psalm 22, which begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and ends with confident statements about the psalmist’s vindication and even resurrection.

Two Versions of the Lord’s Prayer

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke present slightly different forms of the Lord’s Prayer. They may reflect the Greek versions used in Jewish Christian and gentile Christian communities, respectively. Both texts can be easily translated back into Aramaic, the language in which Jesus taught. The form and content of the Lord’s Prayer undoubtedly reflect the voice of Jesus.

Because it is less familiar, Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (11:2–4) may be the better place to begin. It consists of a simple address (“Father”), two “you” petitions regarding the coming kingdom (“[H]allowed be your name. Your kingdom come”) and three “we” petitions about preparing for the coming kingdom—requests for physical sustenance (“our daily bread”), forgiveness of sins and protection in the trials and tribulations accompanying the kingdom’s arrival.

Matthew’s version (6:9–13) features a fuller address, beginning with a typical Jewish title for God: “Our Father in heaven.” It contains an additional “you” petition: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And it includes another “we” petition: “[R]escue us from the evil one.” Adding to “fixed” prayer formulas was and is typical of Jewish prayer practice.

Praying for the Kingdom

The Lord’s Prayer directly expresses the central themes of Jesus’ preaching. He invites his followers to approach God as “Father” with

the same spirit of intimacy and confidence that he himself displayed. The “you” petitions all express Jesus’ hope for the full coming of God’s kingdom and acknowledge that it is *God’s* kingdom and *God’s* task to bring it about among us and for us.

The first “we” petition recognizes our dependence on God for material and spiritual “bread” as we await and prepare for the coming kingdom. The second “we” petition declares that if we expect to obtain forgiveness from God at the Last Judgment and in the present, we must be willing to forgive those who have offended us. Matthew underlines the point by adding another saying to the prayer: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (6:14–15).

The third and final “we” petition warns that the full coming of God’s kingdom will be accompanied by a period of severe testing, and that we should pray for divine protection and help. The traditional ending “For thine is the kingdom...” is not present in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts and is generally regarded as a later addition to “seal” or end the prayer. The Lord’s Prayer soon became the equivalent of the Jewish Eighteen Benedictions, and was recited three times a day in some early Christian circles.

Ask, Search, Knock

Luke’s Gospel presents two sections of Jesus’ teachings about how to pray. Their surprising and challenging content bears the stamp of Jesus, the master teacher.

The parable of the friend at midnight encourages persistence and even shamelessness in bringing our petitions to God (11:5–8). It gives us permission to bother or pester God with our requests. Sayings about the power of prayer (11:9–10) may have become so familiar that we fail to grasp the magnitude of their claims: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and

everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” They all express a remarkable confidence in God’s willingness to answer prayers. There are no qualifications or nuances, and the “automatic” nature of the guarantees is surprising, even shocking.

The short parable that follows about the good gifts that a father wants to give (“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” 11:13) is a further reminder that God wants very much to answer our prayers and to give us the Holy Spirit as the best gift of all.

Persist in Prayer

Two parables in Luke 18:1–14 emphasize persistence in prayer and humility before God. The parable of the widow and the unjust judge suggests that if an unjust judge will finally give in to the repeated requests of a widow—the most powerless and defenseless member of ancient Jewish society—will not God answer the requests of those who persist in prayer? Jesus assures us, “I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them” (18:8).

In the second parable the Pharisee who goes up to the temple to pray represents the model of strict religious observance, while the tax collector can say only, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (18:13). Nevertheless, the humble prayer of the tax collector—who would have been suspected of dishonesty and disloyalty to the Jewish people—is heard by God, whereas the Pharisee’s list of his own spiritual achievements is rejected as not being a prayer at all. Jesus’ lesson here is “I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his home justified rather than the other [the Pharisee]; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (18:14).

Jesus' Own Prayer

The prayer attributed to Jesus in John 17 expresses his sentiments as the Son of God. As he concludes the Last Supper and prepares for his passion and death, we hear Jesus speaking to his Father in a lengthy prayer that begins, "Father, the hour has come..." (17:1). He prays first for himself in order that his Father might glorify him as he, the Son, seeks to glorify the Father in his death and Resurrection. Then he prays for the disciples who are with him, that the Father may protect them, give them joy and make them holy. Finally, he prays for the church, that its members may be one and so share in the unity that exists between the Father and the Son. This prayer invites us believers into the life of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

These Gospel texts about prayer undoubtedly reflect Jesus' own teaching on the subject. Using the language of Jewish prayer, Jesus teaches us to address God as a loving Father, to pray for the full coming of God's kingdom and to persist in our prayers of petition.

.....

W H E N Y O U P R A Y

We know it by several names—the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, the Paternoster (from the first two words of the Latin translation). We pray it at Mass, in the Liturgy of the Hours, as part of the rosary. Used by Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians, it is perhaps the most ecumenical prayer in our tradition. However, Catholics generally omit the doxology ("For thine is the kingdom..."), which was added later.

At Mass the Lord's Prayer is introduced with these words: "Let us pray with confidence to the Father in the words our Savior gave us."⁶ This prayer has been faithfully passed down from the time of Jesus. Matthew and Luke have slightly different

versions of the prayer in their Gospels. The version that we use at Mass is closer to Matthew's, as his Gospel was long considered the best for teaching the faith. While some scholars believe that Jesus was simply offering a way to pray, rather than exact words, clearly his followers and most Christians after them have treasured these words as coming from the Lord himself.

The *Didache* (Greek for "teaching") is a document from the late first century that presents the "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." It includes a version of the Lord's Prayer that is similar to Matthew's and the instruction to "pray this three times each day."



QUESTIONS

- Jesus marked the most important moments of his life with prayer. What are the significant times in your life when you have turned to God in prayer?
- What is your favorite line or section of the Lord's Prayer? Does it challenge you? Bring you comfort? Express or offer you hope?
- Jesus was a person of prayer. Could people say the same about you? How can you make more time for prayer in your life?