



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## A Prayer For All Time<sup>1</sup>

Matthew 6:9-13

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### *They Did What Jesus Taught*

In 79 AD, near the modern city of Naples, Italy, Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii, a town of approximately 20,000, under 13 to 20 feet of ash and pumice. Because of a lack of air and moisture, everything buried remained intact, giving archaeologists an extraordinarily detailed picture of life exactly as it existed when the city was destroyed. One thing they learned was that the Lord's Prayer was in common use in Pompeii in 79 AD (Kistemaker, 326).

About thirty years later, someone wrote a short instruction manual for Christians called *The Didache* (the Teaching). The second part of the work teaches specifics on such things as baptism, the Eucharist, fasting, and prayer. Chapter 8 is entitled, "Of Fast-Days and Prayer." It says:

<sup>1</sup> But do not let your fasts coincide with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Monday and Thursday, so you must fast on Wednesday and Friday.

<sup>2</sup> Nor should you pray like the hypocrites. Instead, pray like this, just as the Lord commanded in his Gospel:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our debt, as we also forgive our debtors;  
and do not lead us into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one;  
for yours is the power and the glory forever.

<sup>3</sup> Pray like this three times a day (Holmes, 355, 357).

Those two examples illustrate that "the Lord's Prayer was a fixed element in instructions on prayer in all Christendom, in the Jewish-Christian as well as the Gentile-Christian church" (J. Jeremias, *Lord's Prayer*, 10, in Kistemaker, 327). But, if your experience is like mine, you have not found it to be commonly used. I can think of at least two reasons why.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally prepared for the beginning of a new year and was entitled, "A Prayer for 2014." It can be used to set the tone for a new year, or adapted as needed for a different schedule.

1. We often hear it as a recitation; since our fellowship has tended to favor extemporaneous prayers and rejected rote readings and prayers, we don't often recite Matthew 6:9-13.
2. Many of us were taught that we cannot today pray the petition about the coming kingdom; absent that part of the prayer, it has been easier to just not use any of it.

Whatever the reasons, we ought to question our lack of use of the Disciples Prayer (Beasley-Murray, 147). (1) It is what Jesus taught when he taught his disciples how to pray (Lk. 11:1-4). (2) In both Luke and Matthew, the verb used when he tells them to pray this way is an imperative: "When you pray, *say...*" (Lk. 11:2); "*Pray* then like this . . ." (Mt. 6:9). We are missing something vital if we neglect it.

### *Three Things to Notice About the Disciples' Prayer*

I'm more interested in showing what makes this prayer so important than analyzing it in detail.

First, the petitions are *urgent*. The verbs are all imperatives: "[let your name be] hallowed," "[let] your kingdom come," "[let] your will be done" (see ESV footnotes for these alternate translations), "give us . . .," "forgive us . . .," "lead us not . . ." "deliver us..."

In the first three petitions, this surprises us. God's name is already holy; his reign has/will come; his will shall be done. End of story. But consider this: these petitions remind us that we are to align our wills with his. "Lord, use us to show your name as holy (cf. Ezek. 36:22-25). Bring about conditions so that your reign and will become on earth what they are in heaven."

The second three petitions are so bold because of the priority of the first three. Because we have a relationship with and submit to the one whose name is holy, we put our complete trust in him to give us our needs, change our hearts so that we forgive as we have been forgiven, and keep us from being successfully targeted by the Evil One. "Boldness" is almost inadequate to describe it. Such urgent prayer will lead to urgent lives.

Second, it helps us focus our *priority*. Here, we need to understand that the themes of the Disciples' Prayer were also present in Jewish prayers of the time, specifically the one known as the Eighteen Benedictions, to be recited three times a day. That prayer also was concerned with fundamental concerns of this life and the coming kingdom of God. But Jesus reversed the order, putting God's reign before the concerns of this life (Beasley-Murray, 148-149).

Some have seen a similarity with the Ten Commandments, the first four of which focus on God's nature and properly honoring him before the last six turn to relating to other people. Like those commands, Jesus taught his disciples to seek first God's glory and will. Above all else, we are to pray that God's cause — his holiness, reign, and will — will always be our cause (see Barth, 26).

"If we pray, 'Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,' we place ourselves at God's side, nothing less than that" (Barth, 27). Who of us would not agree that this is what Jesus did (see e.g., Mt. 26:39), what our lives should be, and what our world needs to see?

Does this mean that we should give no attention to this life's concerns? Not at all. It does mean that we understand what gives those concerns meaning, as well as what gives us the means to rightly manage them. This leads to the third thing we see in this prayer.

Third, praying the Disciples' Prayer leads to greater *trust*. To see this point, let's think more about the prayer's fourth petition, "Give us this day our daily bread."

The word "daily" (ἐπιούσιος, *epiousios*) appears only in this prayer (Mt. 6:11; Lk. 11:3) and has long puzzled interpreters. Four possibilities have been suggested: Give us the bread necessary (1) for human existence; (2) for today; (3) for tomorrow; or (4) for the future, the bread we will eat in the great messianic banquet (cf. Lk. 14:15) (Matera, 80). Some suggest that Jesus may have been thinking about the way laborers were paid (Mt. 20:1-16). Others recall Israel's daily receipt of the manna (Ex. 16) (Beasley-Murray, 156). Even if he was not specifically thinking about those examples, they illustrate the point Jesus was making: we must learn to completely trust God for our needs, something we do best when we seek first his glory and reign.

When we have committed first to his cause (the first three petitions), we grow in our ability to "entrust to [God] all our baggage (for one arrives with a very complicated collection of baggage when one has traveled through this world). . . . When we pray, 'Give us . . . our . . . bread,' . . . we admit that which is, namely, that we are nothing without him" (Barth, 28-29). We remember how he forgave us and so learn to forgive others in the same way. We let go and trust him to deliver us from the forces of the Evil One, however daunting they seem to be.

*This Year, Let Us Pray . . .*

Can you think of any better approach to prayer this year for our individual lives and our communal life as a church? Ah, but there are some obstacles to that, aren't there?

1. The most obvious is whether we will really seek God first, accepting the priority of the prayer. Each of us must decide that — daily. I suggest that praying this prayer will help.
2. But what of that second petition, "your kingdom come"? My study convinces me that what many of us were taught about that matter taught some of the truth, but not all of it. The word "kingdom" (βασιλεία, *basileia*) appears 154 times in the New Testament, 118 times in the Gospels. In a few places, it is used synonymously with "church." But it has a wider range of meanings than that.<sup>2</sup> And in Mt. 6:10, it is also used in a poetic structure that equates it with God's will, letting him *reign* in harmony with his holy nature.<sup>3</sup> I can certainly continue to pray for that. But, even if you equate it with church here, you can still pray that God's rule will be done so that more people will respond favorably to the proclamation of the church.

<sup>2</sup> This wider range of uses matches the expectations of the reign of God presented in the OT prophets. In the New Testament, one way to see the point is to find and list all the references to βασιλεία in the New Testament and then insert the word "church" everywhere "kingdom" is used. If the two terms are *always* equivalent, the verses should make sense with the substitution.

<sup>3</sup> Beasley-Murray notes that both forms of the prayer (Matthew, Luke) "easily revert into Aramaic, in which language they exhibit both rhythm and rhyme — a highly unusual feature, which Jesus' prayer shared with the daily prayer of the Jews, the Tefillah." He notes further that both "Luke's opening twofold petition and Matthew's threefold petition clearly present a parallel structure that features the kingdom of God as the subject of desire in each case. . . . The primary plea of this section of the prayer, then, is to present a plea that God put forth his almighty power so that his name might be hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done among humanity" (Beasley-Murray, 147, 150).

3. Does that mean that we should pray only those petitions? What of other concerns we have — for the sick, the grieving, the lost, etc.? To answer that, consider the wisdom and example of early church leaders such as Tertullian and Origen who proposed the use of the prayer as a pattern or outline for how to pray (Kistemaker, 327-328). We need not exclude needs and concerns not specifically mentioned in Matthew 6; we include them within the structure — and priority — of that prayer. How much more effective might our prayers be if, in each one, we focused first on God's holy name, rule, and will, and then, in light of that focus turned to our concerns?

Frank Matera contends that the Disciples Prayer is the center of the Sermon on the Mount, that the sermon and prayer interpret each other (Matera, 75). It certainly adds punch to the sections of the sermon that we find in chapter 6. Why are there hypocrites (6:1-18)? Why do we find it so hard to lay up treasures in heaven, not on earth (6:19-24)? Why are we so anxious about the things God has said he will provide (6:25-32)? Why do we have such trouble seeking his reign first (6:33)? Perhaps we're out of sync with God's cause. Perhaps praying the prayer Jesus commanded us to pray will help.

January 12, 2014  
Revised February 10, 2016  
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