

Learning to Pray: Praying for What?

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If you had the opportunity to ask Jesus to teach you just one thing, what would it be? There is only 1 thing the first followers of Jesus are recorded as asking Jesus to teach them, and that is: “Teach us to pray.” This is recorded in Luke, chapter 11. Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”

Why do you think they wanted Jesus to teach them to pray? Perhaps they could see the importance of prayer in Jesus’ life. Perhaps they could see that all Jesus did emerged out of his relationship with God. Jesus responded to the request “Teach us to pray” with a short prayer that we now call: “The Lord’s Prayer.”

This prayer is found in both Matthew and Luke’s gospels, although Luke’s version is a little shorter and has slightly different wording. When Jesus says: “this, then, is how you should pray,” He is not implying these are the only words to say. Rather, Jesus is offering us an approach to communicating with the Living God. Jesus did not give us these words simply to recite, but rather as a framework or scaffolding for our prayers.

We can pray this prayer, just as it is, as we so often do during our Sunday services. We can also use this prayer as a springboard, for our own prayers, elaborating on each phrase. We do not need to worry about having the right words. There is no wrong way to pray to our loving God.

This prayer teaches us we can pray about everything and anything. All our needs, all our longings, are covered within this prayer! As we continue our journey through this prayer, we will find that this prayer invites us to bring all our needs, and all needs within our communities, to God, whether these needs are physical, relational, or spiritual. For example, the request for daily bread (that will be the focus of next week's service), is understood to have a wide range of meanings, including **everything** we need for our daily well-being. There is nothing that we cannot pray about.

The Book of Psalms also teaches this. The book of Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible, provides many good examples of questions and emotions being expressed, reminding us that God wants an honest authentic relationship with us. God wants to hear our questions and emotions.

I had a humorous reminder of this a few months after our son was born, with a lost gift certificate that I asked God to help me find. I had a sense that it was inside a particular book. But after looking for some time, it had not turned up. One evening, I said to my husband: Why won't God show me where that gift certificate is?" Having voiced my frustration, I went upstairs, and picked this book of Psalms up, off the bookshelf. There was the gift certificate, inside this book that had previously been on my bedside table. It was right on top of Psalm 13, (a psalm, or prayer, of complaint), which, in this translation by Eugene Peterson, reads:

Long enough, GOD—
you've ignored me long enough.
I've looked at the back of your head
long enough.

Long enough
 I've carried this ton of trouble,
 lived with a stomach full of pain.
 Long enough my arrogant enemies
 Have looked down their noses at me
 Take a good look at me, Yahweh, my God;
 I want to look life in the eye
 So no enemy can get the best of me
 Or laugh when I fall on my face.
 I've thrown myself headlong into your arms
 I'm celebrating your rescue
 I'm singing at the top of my lungs
 I'm so full of answered prayers.

This Psalm is an example of just how honest we can be with God! ☺ At times it may be helpful to re-write this psalm in our own words, to help us communicate with God about questions and emotions we are struggling with.

Back to The Lord's Prayer. On the one hand, this prayer teaches us we can pray about all our needs, whether physical, relational, or spiritual. On the other hand, this prayer invites us to move beyond our needs and pray for the transformation of the world. Darrell Johnson has written a book about this prayer called: *57 Words that Change the World*. Indeed, through this prayer —through these 57 words—we are invited to participate with God in the transformation of the world. This prayer is both personal and political!

My focus here is on the centre of this prayer (chapter 6, verse 10): "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The phrase "On earth, as it is in heaven" captures the passion of God to transform this world and to bring the reality of heaven to earth. This phrase belongs with each of the first 3 requests. We are asking God to hallow God's name, on earth as it is in heaven. We are asking God to make visible on earth, God's kingdom, God's rule, just as God's rule

is evident in heaven. We are asking God to do God's will on earth, as it is done in heaven. We participate with God in the transformation of the world by asking God to hallow God's name, to make visible God's kingdom and to do God's will on earth, as it is done in heaven.

I wonder what the word heaven means to you. We tend to think of heaven as some place far away. Yet, as American theologians William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas tell us, "heaven is not some place 'up there.' Heaven is that place where God is and where we are totally with God, wherever God's "communion of saints" takes place, wherever God's will appears in explicit fullness and undeniable power."¹ For Jesus, says Darrell Johnson, "heaven is another dimension of reality very close at hand" ... 'heaven' is another dimension of reality that intersects and permeates all other dimensions of reality."²

According to Tom Wright, a New Testament scholar, heaven in the New Testament refers to "God's dimension" of present reality, a reality that is usually invisible, but that God on occasions makes visible to God's people.³ (9) Tom Wright describes heaven and earth as the two interlocking arenas of God's good world. Heaven is God space... Earth is our space. As depicted in the vision at the end of the book of Revelation, ultimately, these two spaces will be reunited and fully integrated, when the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes down from heaven

¹ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 67.

² Darrell Johnson, *Fifty-seven Words that Change the World: A Journey Through the Lord's Prayer* (Regent College Publishing, 2005), 106.

³ N.T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Grove Books, 1999), 22.

to earth. And this is what we pray for when we pray: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The kingdom of God is about God’s will being done on earth, as it is in heaven. The kingdom is about the healing of God’s creation and the restoration of God’s universe. It is about the glory and beauty of heaven becoming an earthly reality also.

God’s will is for people to be set free from oppression. God’s will is to bring healing to brokenness. God’s will is that we know, trust and love God. God’s will is for transformed communities. God’s will is for justice, right-relatedness, and peace.

“Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.”

We can use this line of the Lord’s Prayer, as with each line of this prayer that Jesus has given us to express our appreciation and praise, to articulate that which puzzles us. and to communicate our needs and desires. Using this line of the prayer, we can praise God, express that which puzzles us, and petition God.

We can thank God for the signs of God’s kingdom, and God’s will, that we already see, in our own life and in the life of others. We can thank God for communities characterized by compassion, justice, and open friendship. We can thank God for healing, and for freedom from oppression.

We can also say to God: “I don’t understand. Why are you allowing this to happen? Why are you allowing injustice to take place?” Our Indigenous siblings may lament: “Long enough, GOD— We’ve lived with the impacts of colonization long enough. We all may lament “Long enough, GOD— We’ve lived with this pandemic long enough.” We may never understand why God allowed Covid-19 to become a pandemic and impact our lives in the way that it has. Some of us may never understand why God has allowed us, or someone close to us, to struggle with depression, anxiety, or grief. We may never know why a prayer is not answered in the way that we want it to be answered. But as the Psalms remind us, we can be honest with God.

With this phrase of the Lord’s prayer, we can thank, we can lament, and **we can ask**. We can ask God for the signs of God’s kingdom, and God’s will, that we want to see. In what ways do you want to see God’s kingdom come in your life, in your community, in Richmond, in Canada, and beyond? In what ways do you want to see God’s will to be done in and *through* Richmond Presbyterian? Take some time today to express these desires to God.

Using this prayer as scaffolding for our own prayers can bring a new dimension to the various roles in our life. As parents, grandparents, godparents, aunts, or uncles, we can use this prayer to pray for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done in and through the lives of our children, grandchildren, godchild, niece, or nephew. We can pray in a similar way for the children and youth in our congregation. We can use this prayer to pray for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done in our communities as we’re out walking in our neighbourhood. We can pray this whole prayer stretched out over the day, or

repetitively throughout the day, adding our own words. Or we can pray one line of the prayer each day of the week, elaborating on this line in our own words.

Let's take this prayer as an invitation from Jesus to participate in the fulfilling of God's purposes in the world. Let's allow Jesus to teach us to pray through this prayer. And let's pray this prayer, for ourselves, our friends, our extended families, our neighbourhoods, and our communities.

In closing, I want to share an alternative version of the Lord's Prayer from the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand.⁴

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever.
Amen.

⁴ For the alternative reading of the prayer provided in the New Zealand Prayer Book see Night Prayer p.181 in <https://anglicanprayerbook.nz/167.html>. See also <https://newzeal.salvationarmy.org.nz/church-community/women/resource/god-our-father-and-mother-free-printable-%C2%A0new-zealand-anglican-lords-prayer>