

The Disciples' Prayer

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'" (Matthew 6:9-10)

Bernie was the type of student that you could not help but like. There were times, however, when he could be rather exasperating. He was the eighth-grade class clown who many times was interested in anything but the class at hand. It was hard to keep his attention, and when you didn't have his, you were soon bound to lose the attention of the entire class.

One particular day stands out in my mind. I was teaching on the topic of prayer. Out of the blue, Bernie raises his hand and says, "Look, Pastor, let's face it—my prayers are cheap and shallow. They are the same thing each night. What am I supposed to do?" I stood there for a moment looking at him, expecting some wise crack to follow. He sat there looking at me, not saying a word. The class was silent. I realized that this was no attempt on his part to be funny. There was pain and confusion in the eyes I was staring into. My first thought was, "How many other people feel this way about their prayer life but don't have the courage to express it?" Since that day, I have thought to myself, "Bernie is no different than the disciples who said to Jesus, 'Teach us to pray.'"

Prayer, in some ways, is such a simple act and expression of faith. On the other hand, prayer—meaningful and genuine prayer—can be one of the hardest things for me as a Christian to engage on a daily basis. On top of that, remember Jesus' words, "*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out*

workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38). There is such a privilege in these words as Jesus invites us to participate with Him in the harvest of souls. The privilege, however, carries a responsibility. He links the raising up of harvest workers with our faithfulness in prayer. It is a responsibility for which most of the time I feel so inadequate. Who are we that Jesus links the harvest of souls to our prayers? I am, after all, someone who also can echo Bernie's sentiments, "My prayers are cheap and shallow." Jesus, however, understands and knows us very well. He knows how inadequate we can feel. So He teaches us how to pray by offering us "The Disciples' Prayer." It goes like this:

"Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom
come, Thy will be done on earth as it is
heaven. Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive
those who trespass against us. And lead
us not into temptation but deliver us from
evil. For Thine is the Kingdom and the
Power and the Glory forever and ever.
Amen."

Many refer to it as The Lord's Prayer, but I like to think of it as The Disciples' Prayer because He gave it to us for our encouragement and to teach us how we are to approach Him in prayer. Dr. Martin Luther expressed it this way:

"Furthermore, we should be encouraged and drawn to pray because,

in addition to this commandment and promise, God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use. In this way we see how deeply concerned he is about our needs, and we should never doubt that such prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard. So this prayer is far superior to all others that we might devise ourselves. For in that case our conscience would always be in doubt, saying, 'I have prayed, but who knows whether it pleases him or whether I have hit upon the right form and mode?' Thus there is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it. This we should not trade for all the riches in the world (Book of Concord, The Large Catechism, The Lord's Prayer, p. 553.22-23).

This prayer, like none other I know, is a masterpiece of the infinite mind of God. Who else could take every aspect of true prayer and compose it in such simple form? In fewer than 70 words, Jesus teaches us a way to pray that can be committed to memory quickly, yet is slowly learned and grasped by one's heart. I learned this prayer as a young child, yet I am only beginning to fathom the depths of what Jesus is teaching me about prayer. Through this prayer, I am exposed to three key emphases in prayer.

The first is that the purpose of prayer is for the glory of God and not my needs. In other words, prayer is more about Him than it is about me. Jesus reflects this in John 14:13, *"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father."* As each petition is expressed, the focus and glory are all His. We praise Him when we say, "Hallowed be Thy Name," and we surrender to His will when we offer, "Thy Will Be Done." We agree with His evaluation of us as sinners when we ask, "Forgive us our debts," and we thank Him when we ask in humble trust, "Give us this day our daily bread." Then, in the end, we declare that all attention

and focus will be on Him and His Kingdom and Power and Glory now and forever!

Luther hit it right on the head when he said, "Prayer is an act of worship wherein we bring our petitions before God with our hearts and lips and offer up praise and thanksgiving to Him" (Luther's Small Catechism 1943, p. 146).

The second emphasis reminds me that the entire prayer challenges my attitude and spirit, which so often take on the tone and color of the world around me. Scan the prayer for a moment. The constant reference to "our" and "us" is a reminder of the unselfish nature of prayer. Why is it that my prayers revolve so much around my concerns and me when clearly Jesus' teaching expands my view and prayer list?

The name "Father" reminds me that prayer is more than some religious exercise and routine. It is so easy for me to slip into a mechanical attitude with my prayers. The name "Father," however, reminds me that prayer is an intimate expression of love between a child and his or her parent. In the word "hallowed" there is a spirit of reverence as I am ushered into the presence of the King.

Following this, our lips utter the same words heard in Gethsemane, "Thy will be done." In these words I hear trust and loyalty. From the lofty heights of "Thy will be done" there is then the mention of something as mundane as bread, drawing me to a focus on this day. In this prayer, where Jesus is teaching me so much about life, He shows me how to clothe myself in an attitude of dependence, day by day, for the most basic things in life.

Tucked in the midst of this prayer that covers the range of life itself, we ask, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In these words, there is the humble confession of a penitent heart, pledging itself to not hold back from others what Jesus freely gives us.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Can you hear the humility in

those words? No bravado or boasting of what we can do on our own. Only the plea, “lead us not”—do not let anything become a temptation to us that would steer us from you. “Deliver us from evil”—protect us from the evil one and his lies and deception. It is an attitude of humility and self-awareness that knows if we are left to ourselves, we are lost and doomed.

Finally, while there are so many facets to this beautiful prayer, the emphasis I cherish as much as any is the mission heart of the entire prayer. The emphasis on “our” and “us” is exactly the way a mission responder prays. His or her concern is for the welfare of the world. When we pray for the forgiveness of sins, we ask not only for ourselves but for the lost of the world as well. When we ask that He deliver us from evil, we are asking on behalf of those who do not know Christ has defeated Satan and death and paid the price for our sin. When we ask, “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking Him to extend His kingdom of grace to everyone. Luther understood so well the mission heart of this petition when he said, “What do we ask in this petition? We ask that God would graciously grant us true faith

and a godly life and that He would extend His Kingdom of Grace on earth” (Small Catechism, The Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Like a beautiful sparkling diamond, this prayer has many facets to it, each adding to its beauty. When you find yourself in a place where Bernie found himself, reflect on this prayer Jesus gave us and learn of its beauty from these facets:

1. The Disciples’ Prayer reminds me that prayer is about Him not me.
2. The Disciples’ Prayer provides a great attitude check.
3. The Disciples’ Prayer has a mission heart.

Prayer: I agree, Father, with Bernie at times. So often my prayers feel like they are cheap and shallow. I tend to make my prayers more about me than you. Expand my heart so that I focus less on me and more on you and on the need of people throughout this world to know you. In this prayer that Jesus gave to me, mold my attitude and spirit to reflect His own. Above all else, may my prayer life bring you all the glory. **Amen.**

Challenge: In your own words, pray this day according to these three emphases: Give praise and honor to Him; Humble yourself before Him, surrendering your will to His; Pray for those around you—for their forgiveness, their strength in the face of evil, and for their daily needs.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6

From the Book of Concord: “From the fact that prayer is so urgently commanded, you ought to conclude that we should by no means despise our prayers, but rather prize them highly. Take an example from the other commandments. A child should never despise obedience to his or her father and mother, but should always think: ‘This act is an act of obedience, and what I do has no other purpose than that it befits obedience and the commandment of God. On this I can rely and depend, and I can revere it highly, not because of my worthiness, but because of the commandment.’ So, too, here. We should regard the words of our prayers and their purpose as something demanded by God and done in obedience to him. We should think, “On my account this prayer would not amount to anything; but it is important because God has commanded it.” So, no matter what he or she has to pray for, everybody should always approach God in obedience to this commandment” (The Large Catechism, The Lord’s Prayer, p. 442.12-13).