

The Prayer of the Kingdom

His kingdom will never end.

—Luke 1:33

[Note from the Author: This chapter was part of the original manuscript of *The Secret Message of Jesus* (W Publishing Group, 2006). A number of readers of the pre-publication manuscript said they felt it alone was worth the price of the book. We decided to make it available on the internet to anyone at brianmclaren.net. If you have already read the book, we hope this chapter will help you make the message of the book a part of your daily prayer life. And if you haven't read the book yet, we hope this chapter will interest you in reading the whole book. You are welcome to use this chapter in discussion groups, classes, etc. Thanks – Brian D. McLaren)

The average person—committed Christian or non-Christian, Catholic or Orthodox or Protestant—most often first encounters the secret message of Jesus in a line of what we often call “The Lord’s Prayer.” Sadly, the prayer has been so often recited in such a bland, thoughtless, autopilot monotone that few people realize what a revolutionary, challenging, and well-crafted work of art it is. How many millions of people have mouthed the words, “Thy kingdom come” with little or no idea of what they were saying?

The prayer, you’ll remember, comes in the section of Jesus’ kingdom manifesto (Matthew 5–7) dealing with three spiritual practices—right between giving to the poor and fasting. Jesus emphasizes the secrecy needed for these practices to have their full impact. Don’t

do them for show, Jesus says, to be seen as pious by other people. Instead, do them secretly, with God as your only audience. Then, your spiritual practices will be truly rewarding.

Jesus then gives specific guidance as to the content of prayer for participants in the kingdom of God—and in that context, “The Lord’s Prayer” is presented. Interestingly, in other Gospel accounts, the prayer comes in answer to a specific request from the disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray.” In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus answers their request with these words:

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.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (vv. 9–15)

Let’s take a closer look at each line of this prayer of the kingdom.

“Our Father in Heaven”

Jesus's prayer doesn't address God as king but as Father—not in terms of God's power but in terms of God's love and relationality. And it addresses God not as *my* Father, but as *our* Father. In this sense, the person praying alone in private remembers that spirituality in God's kingdom, while personal, is never individualistic. Although the Father knows every hair of every individual head, the word *me* never occurs in the prayer: each request is about “us” and “our” communal concerns.

“Hallowed Be Your Name”

The phrase “hallowed be your name” could be paraphrased “may your name be revered” or “may your name be considered holy.” The beautiful dynamic tension—between the intimacy of *Father* and the sacred holiness of the unutterable name of God—seems to vibrate, unspoken, just beneath the surface through the whole prayer, and in the whole kingdom.

“Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done on Earth . . .”

Jesus said we should seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33), and the prayer makes the kingdom the first priority. Just as *God's kingdom* is made parallel to *God's justice* previously in Matthew 6:33¹, here *God's kingdom coming* is made parallel to *God's will being done on earth as in heaven*. This, of course, is what a kingdom is—the place where a king's will is done.

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't teach us to pray, “May your will be done among us disciples as it is in heaven,” or even “May your will be done in Israel.” Jesus' vision of the kingdom is a reality

¹ Many English Bibles use the word “righteousness” instead of “justice” in Matthew 6:33. Unfortunately, though, for many people the word “righteousness” is roughly synonymous with “religiosity” or “piety.” That is clearly not Jesus' intent. In French, Spanish, Italian, and many other languages, there is only one way to translate the word in the original text: *justice*. I believe it is a better translation in light of the whole teaching of Jesus.

that will come to the whole planet. It is in this sense a universal or pluralistic vision: it's for everyone everywhere, not just for the elite few somewhere.

This global understanding of God's concern was often forgotten by Jesus' contemporaries, as it is by religious people today. From the beginning, the nation of Israel was told it would be blessed to be a blessing to all nations, and the message echoed through Jewish history: Israel would be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 51:4) and "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6), implying that the Jewish people would bring all nations the knowledge, justice, and peace of the one true, universal, and living God. But some of Jesus' contemporaries found it easy to consider their compatriots as the only ones God loved, leaving everyone else not only their enemies, but God's too. Romans were oppressors. Samaritans were half-breeds with a compromised religion. Gentiles were a nuisance and a threat—to be tolerated, but not associated with, and certainly not loved.

Jesus has already said that God causes the rain and sun to bless the crops of all people—just and unjust. So he now instructs his disciples to pray that the blessing of the kingdom will come to all people—not just Jews, and not just Jesus' disciples; everyone should receive the benefit of living on a planet where God's will is done.

Contrary to what many might assume, the prayer is not, "May we go to heaven from earth as soon as possible" but, "May your kingdom come to us on earth." It's not a request for abduction and escape from the world, but a plea for transformation—we could even say revolution—within this world.

With the tense political dimensions of Jesus' Roman-occupied world in mind, we might ask how these words would have been heard by politically savvy people standing on the hillside that day: *"Your kingdom come"—yes, there it is: a prayer for the end to Roman occupation.*

“Your will be done on earth”—yes, may God liberate us from our Roman oppressors. Such an understanding would, perhaps, be more accurate than interpreting his words as a desire to escape and go to heaven, but the next few lines will make it clear that whatever Jesus means by these words, it’s not as simple as God fulfilling our political wishes.

“Give Us Today Our Daily Bread”

These words recall the worry-free, natural, daily dependence on God Jesus had spoken of a few minutes earlier in his manifesto. Instead of preoccupying ourselves with food and clothing “like the Gentiles,” the prayer invites us into a childlike, creaturely dependence on God, like birds, like wildflowers.² These lines, in a sense, offer a mirror image of what Jesus has just said: “Do not worry about your daily needs, but seek first God’s kingdom” becomes “We pray first for your kingdom to come, and we won’t worry but will trust you for our daily needs.”

This line of the prayer also recalls a pivotal event in Jewish history. During their flight from slavery in Egypt, as they wandered through the desert, the Israelites were provided “daily bread” in the form of *manna* (the word is a humorous play on the Hebrew phrase, “What is it?”). The travelers couldn’t save the mysterious food from one day to the next, or it would rot; each day they had to trust that the next day’s food would be provided. Jesus suggests, by evoking this story in the phrase “daily bread,” that his followers should see themselves as people on the move, on a journey, in the midst of a new exodus—not settled or stagnant, but moving into new territory and liberation with dependence on God.

² The Roman occupiers’ anxieties about food, clothing, and other elements of what we might call “national security” would have played a large part in their motivation to create and expand their empire. By referring to “the Gentiles,” Jesus may be implying that the occupied can easily fall prey to the same anxious motivations as their occupiers, and that the only way to create a truly alternative kingdom is to begin with trust, not anxiety.

Not only is the prayer for daily bread linked to what went before, but it is also linked to the next lines—among the most revolutionary of the prayer.

“Forgive Us Our Debts, As We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors”

These lines, by their placement, suggest that just as we need daily food, so we need daily forgiveness. But more radically, these lines seem to undercut any idea that the coming of the kingdom will involve the destruction of our enemies. We don't pray, “Forgive us our sins and punish those who sin against us,” but rather, the prayer engenders in us the hope that we and our enemies will be treated mercifully.

This prayer affirms, as we have frequently seen, that God's kingdom is not about revenge, but rather reconciliation. Seeking God's kingdom and God's justice leads us to pray that God's kingdom will come as a tide of mercy that carries both us and those who have hurt us to new heights. The word translated “debtors” is one of several words for *sin* in the ancient languages. One word suggests breaking a limit, going too far—as when one becomes angry and goes too far in rage. (This word will be used by Jesus in just a moment.) Another word suggests falling short, not going far enough—as when one fails to tell the whole truth. The idea of debt includes both ideas: a person doesn't go far enough to fulfill an obligation or to pay proper respect, or a person presumptuously goes too far in keeping something that should be returned. The implications for the occupying Romans would be obvious, but so would the daily grievances neighbors, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, employers and employees too easily accumulate against one another.

To pray for the kingdom to come, then, is linked to letting go of the obsessive and anxious pursuit of money, sex, and power: one simply prays, “Give me enough food for today.”

And it is equally linked to letting go of the desire for revenge: one prays, “As we forgive others, so forgive us.”

“Lead Us Not into Temptation, but Deliver Us from the Evil One”

The next line of the prayer has always been, to me, the most confusing. Traditional translations render it “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,” while newer translations present it as follows: “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

If we take the political context seriously, I think Jesus may be saying something like this: “Please save us from a violent confrontation with our Roman oppressors. But don’t leave us where we are either; please liberate us from their evil occupation.” In this view, the “time of trial” would suggest the kind of violent retribution Jesus anticipated if his countrymen did launch a violent revolution, Zealot-style: even as he walks the painful road to his crucifixion, this horrible possibility seems to be on his mind (Luke 23:27–31).

A more personal reading might go like this: “Lord, we need mercy for all our wrongs, and so we ask for forgiveness, being careful to extend mercy to those who have wronged us. And speaking of wrongs—please, because we are so weak, keep us out of situations where we may be tempted to do wrong, for we are weak. But even if those tempting situations can’t be avoided, help us to avoid doing evil.”

The prayer may also request rescue from “the evil one”—meaning the devil, as if to say, “Keep us away from the devil’s temptations; but if we are tempted, help us escape from the devil.” Perhaps Caesar or his puppet king Herod are cryptically referred to as “the evil one” as well. I wish I could offer the definitive way of understanding these lines, but I can only offer this personal opinion, based on where Jesus goes in the next lines—which are not part of the prayer

itself, but Jesus' commentary on the prayer. They, in context of the whole manifesto, suggest to me that the thrust of Jesus' attention is less on demonic tempting and more on the concrete social and political situation of his contemporaries. Of course, in Jesus' mind, the two are probably more related than they might be for people today, who, if they believe in the devil, see him as part of a "spiritual realm" that is often distant from the "political realm."

"If You Forgive . . . Your Heavenly Father Will Also Forgive You"

Here, the word for *going too far* is used instead of the word for *debt*, but Jesus is obviously seeking to draw attention back to that line of the prayer. The political application to would be clear: the Romans have gone too far: they have crossed the boundaries of God's people, and they owe the Jewish people a huge repayment for their occupation and oppression. But, this prayer suggests, the way ahead is not by repaying them for their violence with violence: the way of the kingdom is to realize how we have done wrong ourselves, and to receive mercy from God and offer it to those who have done wrong to us. This context would lean us to understand "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one" as "Keep us out of a violent conflict with the Romans, but don't leave us under their unjust domination either." It would reach in prayer for the political third way, Jesus' creative future—rejecting either passive compromise of the conventional future or the violent rebellion of a counter-future—that Jesus calls for again and again.³

³ Thanks to Jay Gary for these three terms: conventional, counter, and creative futures. See www.jaygary.com.

Review of the Prayer of the Kingdom

To whatever degree Jesus refers specifically to the current political situation, this prayer for God's kingdom is a prayer that is profoundly transforming of those who pray it. Let's review:

Our. The prayer binds us to others. We aren't guided to pray "I," "me," or "my" even once. This is a prayer of solidarity with others. The God we pray to is not the private property of any one of us or any subgroup of us; rather, the God we pray to is the God who is available to us all.

Father. The prayer puts us into a tender, personal relationship with a good and caring God, a relationship that renders other people as our brothers and sisters as well. That dual relationality—our connectedness to God and others—will echo throughout this prayer and throughout all Jesus' teachings.

In heaven, hallowed. The prayer emphasizes the loftiness, sacredness, and holiness of this God, who is also a tender Father. A powerful word for this high hallowedness is *otherness*. God is, by being "in heaven" and "hallowed," above us, beyond us, outside us, and other to us; yet at the same time, by being our Father, God is with us, beside us, connected to us, and related to us. Jesus plunges us into mystery and paradox in this very first line of the prayer.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. First and foremost, this prayer expresses the heart of Jesus' essential message, a cry for God's kingdom to break in and break through to us in our world.

Give us today our daily bread. We don't need to worry about food, clothing, and other material things. Instead, like the birds of the air and wildflowers of the field, or like the Israelites in the wilderness, we depend on God. Rather than letting material pursuits distract us from God, we look through them and see their source, God. We do not root our identity in an economy as

consumers, but rather as children in a relationship with God our Father; this line of the prayer seats us, in a sense, as children around our Father's table.

Forgive us as we forgive. As important as our daily food is our need for mercy, and we cannot expect to receive that mercy unless we are willing to extend it.

Do not lead us into temptation, but liberate us from evil. Our greatest danger is not another government or group or human being; it is the evil within us that makes us ever-susceptible to temptation. And the greatest evil we face is not something we can overcome ourselves, but something from which only God can free us.

The well-known line “For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever” is not in the original text, but it provides a conclusion to the prayer for use in public settings that is both beautiful and radical—radical because it claims for God three things that the Roman Empire and emperor would love to claim for themselves. It expresses, in a sense, an upraised fist against every earthly authority that claims to be absolute—along with an upraised hand and heart in praise and commitment to God.

I can imagine no greater spiritual practice for people seeking the kingdom of God than to pray this prayer—not as some sort of magical incantation, not as a mindless mantra, but as a way of dislodging our attention and affection from secondary distractions and refocusing them on what matters most. I have found it especially helpful to pray the prayer slowly, pausing after each line, to savor the meaning and let it resonate in my mind and heart. Doing so seems to create a pathway in the soul that leads us to God—and into God's kingdom.

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