

INTRODUCTION

Jesus told about a woman who leavened a large lump of dough with a pinch of yeast, about a merchant who sold everything for one pearl of great value, and about a man who sold all that he had to buy a field in which he had stumbled across a treasure. The yeast, the pearl, and the treasure might all be understood as the Lord's Prayer. As it appears in Matthew's Gospel, this prayer consists of an address to the Father and six brief petitions—fifty-eight words in all. And yet nothing in all of Christian piety and spirituality can approach it. Like the yeast in the parable it can permeate an entire life. Like the wonderful pearl, it is to be valued more than all other prayers together. And like the treasure in the field, it is worth whatever it costs to make it your own. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Every prayer is contained in it. Whatever is included in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is prayed aright; whatever is not included is no prayer." (*Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, Augsburg, 1970, p.15)

This study will examine the Lord's Prayer as providing our best guide to biblical spirituality. Such a guide is much needed. Ours is an age awash in spirituality of all kinds. For every person concerned about physical fitness, there must be two or three concerned about the fitness of their souls. Here are just a few of the hundreds of books and video cassettes offered in one recent catalogue: *The Tao of Inner Peace*, *The Way of Zen*, *The Spirit of Shamanism*, *How to Meditate*, *Addiction as Spiritual Emergency*, *Yoga for Beginners*, *The Language of the Goddess*, *Missa Luba*, *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*, *Tai Chi for Health*, *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of the Lakota*, and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Spirituality has to do with such questions as: How can I find inner peace? What is the right way to pray? How can I achieve harmony between mind and body? What is the way that leads to God? What is the way that leads God to me? How should we live with creation?

Such concerns come to focus in the activity of prayer, which is the most familiar aspect of spirituality. We all have been taught something about prayer. We all have had experience of prayer. Prayer is the arena in which most of us, at one time or another, have wrestled with the issues of spirituality. And so prayer promises to be a fruitful context in which to consider biblical spirituality. Besides, we have from Jesus himself the Lord's Prayer, which is most revealing about his spiritual life.

In this study we will use the scriptural form of the prayer as it is found in Matthew's Gospel. We will examine the Prayer in the context of both the Old and the New Testaments, to see what we can discover about biblical spirituality. No attempt will be made to give a precise definition of biblical spirituality, nor will exact meanings be attached to each of the phrases of the Lord's Prayer. Those are discoveries for you and your group to make as you move through the study.

The Lord's Prayer lends itself very nicely to a six-session study. It consists of an address to God, "Our Father in heaven," which is then followed by six quite different and brief requests:

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.

And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)¹

The first three requests concern what God may properly expect from us: respect for God's holiness, commitment to the coming kingdom, and obedience to God's law in our daily lives. The final three petitions are requests for what we may properly expect God to do for us: satisfaction of our physical needs, liberation from our bondage to sin, and deliverance from the powers of evil.

This two-tiered structure of the prayer is anticipated in the personal address with which it begins, "Our Father in heaven." We are invited to approach God as children coming to a

¹ The Lord's Prayer as it is commonly used in public worship today concludes with the doxology, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." These words are not included in the best manuscript copies of Matthew. As the footnote in the NRSV indicates, however, some form of them appears in early documents of the church.

parent, from whom we may expect to receive what a good parent provides—daily nourishment, forgiveness, and protection from threatening powers.

However, God is not a human parent. When we call God “Our Father,” we employ a metaphor, a figure of speech. God dwells in heaven, not on earth. God does not belong to the familiar world of mother and dad and is utterly different from any parent we have known.

Certainly God has parent-like concern for our needs. But God also has concern for the sustenance of creation, for the coming of the Kingdom, and for what the Bible calls “righteousness”—which for human beings means the pursuit of justice, mercy, and a right knowledge of God.

This insight into the two-fold meaning of “Our Father in heaven” is reflected in the *Brief Statement of Faith* of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The statement says, “We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel...whom Jesus called Abba, Father.”² We really can have it both ways. We can call upon the Lord God Almighty, who dwells in light unapproachable with the holy angels, and yet we may address God as “Abba,” which means something very close to “daddy.”

The Plan of This Study

To understand the plan of this study turn to the Table of Contents. There you will see that each of the six petitions in the Lord’s Prayer is the subject of a separate chapter. You will also notice a question is included for each chapter. These questions indicate key issues on which we will focus our discussion.

Now turn to Chapter One on page 6. This chapter, like all the others, begins with a **Summary**. The two **Basic Bible References** for the chapter follow. These passages are the primary ones you should read to prepare for the group session. They are printed in bold type in the text. A **Word List** containing terms or phrases in the Bible references which may be new to you is also included. Some of these may be explained in the notes of your Bible. For additional background you may want to look them up in a Bible dictionary.

The approach in each chapter is the same. First, there are comments on the nature of prayer as revealed in the petition we are studying. Then there is an extensive examination of an Old Testament passage. Several kinds of passages are offered—two narratives, a code of laws, a sermon, and an historical psalm. Careful attention is given to the Hebrew Scriptures because they were Jesus’ Bible. His own spirituality was rooted in and shaped

² Abba is Aramaic for father. See Mark 14:36 where Jesus begins his prayer in Gethsemane with the dual form of address, “Abba, Father.”

by these traditions. Any Christian spirituality unhooked from its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures is likely to be a cut-flower spirituality—exotic and wonderfully varied, but possibly faddish and transitory.

In parallel to the Old Testament passage, one from the Gospels is offered. It is either a story about Jesus or a selection from his teachings. We shall want to see how Jesus understood the spirituality he inherited.

The insights we gain from the two Bible passages are then employed to draw some conclusions about prayer, our most common spiritual activity. From these observations some inferences are drawn about biblical spirituality, contrasted with some of the contemporary spiritualities that vie for attention. Each chapter closes with a pressing question raised by the material. One or two written references are usually provided for those who wish to pursue these questions.

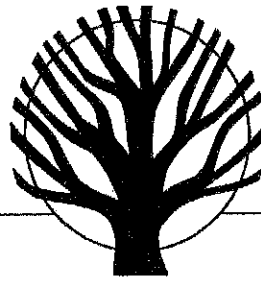
The objectives for the study are three: (1) To see what we can learn about the Lord's Prayer when it is set in its biblical context, (2) to see what the Lord's Prayer can teach us about the activity of prayer, and (3) to see what all of this teaches us about biblical spirituality.

This study does not offer the last word on the Lord's Prayer. Other studies and resources abound. At the end of Chapter Six you will find a list of such resources. You will benefit from exploring some of them.

Preparing for the First Session

Each person brings different skills and expectations to this study and will develop his or her own method of preparation. At the outset we suggest this approach. Read the **Summary** as you begin each chapter. Then skim the chapter, without looking up Bible references, to gain an overview of the material. Next go back and carefully read the chapter, reviewing the Bible references. Use the margins or a separate sheet of paper to make comments or note questions you want to discuss.

At the end of each chapter you will find several items **For Further Study and Reflection**. The first section recommends texts to be included in your "Memory Bank." These are familiar passages that are so central to knowledge of the Bible that you should be able to recall their content or to recite them. The second section suggests "Research" projects which will enrich your grasp of the material, but are not essential. Lastly, there are comments and questions for "Reflection" which will challenge you to explore further the issues raised in the chapter.



CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY

Christians understand prayer as that approach to God in which both God and humans retain their essential natures—God as Creator and humans as created. God is holy, different from us, separate from us, yet reaches out to us so that we are able to pray, but only as we maintain the proper distance. In prayer we approach one whose very name is to be kept holy.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Exodus 19:1-20:21
Mark 2:23-3:6

WORD LIST

Abba
covenant
glory
hallowed; holy; holiness
Herodians
Mount Sinai
sabbath
the bread of the Presence

CHAPTER ONE

Keeping Our Distance

True prayer is that approach to our Creator in which God does not cease to be God and we do not cease to be human. Prayer lessens the distance between us, but it does not erase the distinctions. Intimacy does not become easy familiarity, nor does boldness become brashness or brassiness. Prayer is a dialogue with the Holy One of Israel; it is not a chat over the fence with the next-door neighbor. God is present to us, closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet, but does not live next door.

Certainly prayer invites us to take advantage of our nearness to God. Our hymns are full of spatial references: “O for a Closer Walk with God,” “Near To the Heart of God,” and “Nearer, My God, to Thee.” (If you want a crash course in Protestant spirituality, go to your hymn book. Not even the Scriptures have had a greater hand in our spiritual formation than have our hymns.)

Prayer is calling on God to come forth and hear what we have to say. When I was a child I would go to the house of my best friend, stand outside and call out, “Harold! Harold!” until either he came out or his mother chased me away. Prayer is something like my childish hollering: it is a plea for God’s attention.

The Psalms—the Prayer Book of the Bible—has many references to calling upon the name of God and pleading that God draw near:

Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good;

according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.

Do not hide your face from your servant,

for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.

Draw near to me, redeem me,

set me free because of my enemies. (Psalm 69:16-18)

O God, do not be far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me. (Psalm 71:12)

I call upon you, O LORD; come quickly to me;
give ear to my voice when I call to you. (Psalm 141:1)

Prayer is a summons to God to draw near—but not too near! Scripture warns that if the distance between God and ourselves should be completely overcome, we should perish! God is holy, separate from all that is creaturely. Our very existence as creatures depends on this separateness being maintained. When Isaiah was given a vision of the Lord, he heard the angelic attendants saying to one another:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isaiah 6:3)

And the prophet's immediate reaction was to cry in dismay, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5)

God's act of creation included a withdrawing from that which was created. Should this withdrawal be reversed, we should cease to exist. This distancing is not somehow the opposite of love. The maintenance of the distance between divinity and humanity is one of the expressions of God's love for us.

When we pray in the Lord's Prayer "Hallowed be your name," we are asking that this distance between God and ourselves be maintained. We are asking that God not cease to be separate from us—that the necessary distance from us that is essential to our existence be kept.

God and Israel at Sinai

Keeping a proper distance from God is wonderfully illustrated in the narrative in **Exodus 19:1-20:21**. Turn to it now. Here is the familiar story of the giving of the Ten Commandments. It tells how the people of Israel, wandering in the desert following their liberation from Egypt, come to the mountain where God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush. Moses goes up the mountain to talk to God, who delivers the tender "eagle's wings" speech. God reminds Moses how the Israelites were delivered from captivity just as the parent eagle carries the eaglets to safety on his wings. And then God promises Moses that if Israel will keep God's covenant and obey God's commands, Israel shall be a holy nation. It will be separated out from all the other nations as a people special to God. (The word ordinarily used in the Old Testament as "holy" means "separate.")

Moses reports this conversation to the people, who agree to receive God's commands and to do what God bids. God has given Moses careful instructions for bringing the people close enough to the mountain that they may know the divine presence—but not so near that they may be destroyed. Included in these instructions are the washing of clothes and the avoidance of sexual contact, which seem to be outward signs that the people have understood the need for separateness.

On the appointed day God appears on the mountain in a cloud of smoke. Moses goes up the mountain, while the people tremble and keep a respectful distance. God talks to Moses in what the people apprehend as thunder. And God says to Moses those words we have known since childhood:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery;
You shall have no other gods before me.
You shall not make for yourself an idol...
You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD
your God...

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy...
Honor your father and your mother...
You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
You shall not covet your neighbor's house...or anything that
belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:1-17)

This is not the occasion to examine in detail each of the Ten Commandments. They have been traditionally received and understood to be a summary of the law of God, a resumé of the divine intention for our lives. What is worth further consideration for the purposes of this study, however, is the Fourth Commandment:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days

the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.
(Exodus 20:8-11)

In this commandment there comes to view one dimension of God's promise to Moses to make Israel a holy nation: Israel is to observe every seventh day as a workless day, as a sabbath day, as a day of rest. Holiness for Israel has not only to do with what we ordinarily call ethical conduct—with the honoring of parents, refraining from murder and theft and adultery—but also with remembering and reverencing the sabbath.

From the story in Exodus 19 and 20 we understand that holiness includes several things. First of all, it refers to the necessary separation between God the Creator and God's creatures. Secondly, it refers to the ethical conduct appropriate for those who know God's mind about what is good and lawful. And thirdly, holiness refers to those practices, days, and name that belong in some particular and peculiar way to God. And in the verb form "to hallow," it means remembering God's holiness and maintaining the proper distance and distinctions it requires. A prime example of hallowing is offered in the commandment about sabbath observance.

Jesus and the Sabbath

By the time of Jesus the hallowing of the sabbath had been developed into a fine, even a rare art form. Literally hundreds of regulations had developed to govern and enforce obedience to the Fourth Commandment. Sabbath observance became the touchstone of orthodox piety. (Some of us are old enough to remember when careful observance of Sunday as a sabbath day was the touchstone of Protestant piety in America.)

In **Mark 2:23-3:6** we see two results of this development in Judaism. Turn to this passage now. In an incident related in Mark 2:23-28 Jesus' disciples are described as plucking and eating grain as they pass through a harvest field on the sabbath. They are observed by certain pious Jews, who accuse them of disobeying God's command. Jesus fends off the accusation by reminding these Pharisees of a story from the life of David. Once David and his followers were so hungry they entered the sacred tent of meeting and ate the bread that was reserved for the priests. (See 1 Samuel 21:1-6 for this story.) And then Jesus reminds his hearers of what they seemed to be ignoring, that "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." (Mark 2:27)

But in the second incident, related in Mark 3:1-6, Jesus is not so successful in fending off opposition. He is in the synagogue on the sabbath. There is a man present with a withered hand. The Pharisees are watching to see if Jesus will heal on the sabbath. He asks them point blank, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life

or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). When they refuse to answer, Jesus is filled with righteous anger. But when he goes ahead and heals the man, the Pharisees are filled with murderous rage. There begins the conspiracy which, in the narrative in Mark's Gospel, leads eventually to Jesus' death. The Pharisees decide that Jesus is a threat to the holiness of Israel. To them he is a cancer that must be cut out lest the whole body be destroyed.

A Life and Death Matter

In the passages we have examined in both Testaments, *the holiness of God is seen to be a life and death matter*. We noted in Exodus 19:1-20:21 that the people dare not come too close to the sacred mountain and to the presence of God, lest they perish. And in the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over sabbath observance, holiness becomes—at least for the Pharisees—a life and death concern. To give up the sabbath meant to surrender the distinction between Jew and Gentile, between themselves and the pagan world. In each instance the very existence of the people is at stake. Holiness, at least in these narratives, has little to do with some kind of sacred aura around or about God. Rather it has to do with the proper distance between God and humans, the abolition of which brings with it the threat of death.

This suggests how we ought to understand Jesus' comment, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." (Mark 2:27) We have usually understood it to mean that humans need from time to time to rest from their work. But in the context of Exodus 19:1-20:21, it would seem to mean something quite different: A holy day is given to humankind by which we may preserve the necessary distance between God and ourselves—a distance that is essential to our humanity. Many twentieth century Christians find sabbath observance to be a hindrance to humanity—a yoke too heavy for already over-worked souls. But what will keep us from working ourselves to death except some kind of apprehension that we are not gods, but mortals—not creators, but creatures who are dependent for life upon their Creator?

So when we pray, "Hallowed be your name," we are pleading with God to maintain this distance, to keep space between us, to continue to be Creator to our creatureliness. Of course we are able to ask this because a name has been revealed to us by which we may call upon God. We are not left in silence and isolation by God's holiness; we may call upon God by name. God is the Holy One of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one whom Jesus called, "Abba." God is known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The nonchalance with which contemporary Christians receive the commandment about the sabbath is surpassed only by their cavalier use of God's name. This was brought home to me in a strange way as I was editing a book. My British secretary was offended

by a quotation from a newspaper account in which a Roman Catholic sister used the term “blimey.” She explained to me that “blimey” is a corruption of an oath, “May God blind me!” And that, to my secretary, was exactly what the Third Commandment forbade—the wrongful use of the name of the Lord. The divine name was not given us to be turned into an oath, a curse, or a nickname. It was given us that we might call to God across the necessary distance between us—and be certain that we were heard.

Humans and Mystery

Suppose that we had no personal name by which we could address God. Suppose that we had no name to use except the names we give to various beings in the created world: Maker, Big Mamma, Conductor, Engineer, Wind, Fire, Storm, General, Volcano, Big Brother, Big Sister, Big Boss, The Man Upstairs, Pilot, Emperor, King, and so forth. We would feel lost and alien in the universe. A universe like a machine, where every part is known and named and the whole is nothing but the sum of the parts, is a universe hostile to humans and to be feared more than anything else! We need to be able to call upon someone who is above and beyond the universe.

We need mystery in order to remain human. How else can we explain that in this highly technological age, when we have so brilliantly identified and named the parts and forces of the universe, there is such a demand for spirituality? People crave a name by which they may know and address the power that lies beyond what science and technology describe and harness.

Thinking about God

In prayer, however, we need more than a sense of mystery, more than an awareness of distance between ourselves and God. We cannot think about distance in the abstract. We need something on which to fix our minds.

Once when I was a young pastor, I went one evening to call on friends. Their eight-year-old daughter was in my Sunday school class, so her mother invited me to go upstairs to hear Judy say her prayers. Judy knelt dutifully on the bed and began to recite the words of the Lord’s Prayer. In the middle of her recitation, she sat bolt upright in the middle of the bed, fixed me with her blue eyes, and said, “Jack, what am I supposed to think about when I am saying these words?”

The question has remained with me to this day. I doubt that I would be writing this book had that child not stuck me with that probing inquiry. What are we supposed to think about when we pray the Lord’s Prayer? And more specifically, what are we to think about when we pray, “Hallowed be your name”?

Why not imagine ourselves standing before a great mountain, which is shrouded in mist? We imagine God to be in the mist, and we call God by name—not unlike the way I used to stand as a child outside the house of my friend and holler for his presence! We do not want God suddenly to appear, any more than we want to venture into that mist. It is there for our protection. We know that we may penetrate the secrets of everything else in creation, and we may give names to what we discover. We may even ask how the universe came into being, as well as what it is made of and how it operates. But we may not penetrate into the very presence of God. To erase that distance is to perish. And so we call to God by name, telling whatever it is that we want known. That is how we maintain the distance that is essential to prayer.

Biblical Spirituality

If we have rightly interpreted both Testaments in their teaching about God's holiness, then we may have learned an important truth about biblical spirituality: Biblical spirituality insists upon a proper distance between God and humans. This distance is not harmful to us. It does not make us somehow less than we can be. It is essential to our very existence.

Some contemporary spiritualities seem to want to eliminate that distance. Some want us so to expand our self-understanding that we stride the earth like Creators. The proponents of this kind of spirituality speak of limitless self-actualization, of the expansion of creative powers, of the enlargement of the ego so that we fear nothing and dare everything. Other spiritualities want us so to shrink the self that it becomes nothing—to lose all thoughts of self in the contemplation of the universe and of its powers. The proponents of this spirituality speak of self-effacement, of self-forgetfulness. In either case, there is no longer any distance between us and God. In fact, the aim of such spiritual programs is to eliminate that distance.

But if Scripture is to be our guide, then there cannot be any question of eliminating the space between God and ourselves. Biblical spirituality maintains a proper distance between God and humans—a distance that honors God the Creator and that is also proper to humankind, the created. That is why we said in the opening line of this chapter that Christians understand prayer as that approach to God in which both God and humans retain their essential natures. It cannot be an accident that the first petition of the Lord's Prayer is "Hallowed be your name." Each partner in the dialogue is given the right place to stand to receive a hearing. The proper distance is thus established for the conversations that will then take place.

Pressing Questions

You may be left with the pressing question, “How can we love a God who is distant from us?” In search of the answer you may want to read an essay by Simone Weil, entitled “Forms of the Implicit Love of God.” Ms. Weil (1909-1943) was a French teacher, writer, and social activist. She herself searched diligently for the right knowledge and love of God. This essay, which appears in *Waiting for God* (Harper, Collins, 1973), describes four ways in which God may be loved before God comes to be personally known. This as-yet-distant God may be loved in the neighbor, the beauty of the world, religious ceremonies, and through friendship.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) in the language of the New Revised Standard Version.
2. Psalm 71:12
3. Isaiah 6:3, 5.
4. Mark 2:27

Research

1. “Holiness has to do with the proper distance between God and humans.” The Lord’s Prayer maintains that proper distance by saying, “Hallowed be your name.” For your own use in prayer, construct three other statements that, for you, maintain “the proper distance.”
2. Analyze the hymn, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.” How does it describe God’s nature, intentions, and actions? How does it describe human beings? What difficulties does it suggest that humans experience in approaching God? How, then, does it suggest that humans approach God but at the same time maintain “the proper distance?”

Reflection

1. Think of the various names that you use for God when you pray. By what other names might you call God? What do you think that it means to “keep these names holy”? What difference does it make to keep God’s name holy in what you say and do?

2. We use the phrase, "In Jesus' name," when closing our prayers, and in doing so we acknowledge that the use of Christ's name gives us special access to God. Why do you think that this is the case?
3. Write a short prayer centering on the idea of God's holiness.