What is the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer?

by Scott P. Richert

The Lord's Prayer is a common name for the Our Father, the prayer that Christ taught to His disciples when they asked Him how to pray (Luke 11:1-4).

The Meaning of the Lord's Prayer, Line by Line

The best way to understand the Lord's Prayer is to break it down line by line.

Our Father: God is "our" Father, the Father not only of Christ but of all of us. We pray to Him as brothers and sisters to Christ, and to one another.

Who art in Heaven: God is in Heaven, but that does not mean that He is distant from us. He is exalted above all of Creation, but He is also present throughout Creation. Our true home is with Him.

Hallowed be thy name: To "hallow" is to make holy; God's Name is "hallowed," holy, above all others. But this isn't simply a statement of fact—it's a petition to God the Father. As Christians, we desire that all honor God's name as holy, because acknowledging God's holiness draws us into the right relationship with Him.

Thy kingdom come: The kingdom of God is His reign over all mankind. It is not simply the objective fact that God is our king, but also our acknowledgment of His reign. We look forward to the coming of His kingdom at the end of time, but we also work toward it today by living our lives as He wishes us to live them.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven: We work toward the coming of the kingdom of God by conforming our lives to His will. With these words, we petition God to help us know and carry out His will in this life, and for all mankind to do so as well.

Give us this day our daily bread: With these words, we petition God to provide us with everything that we need (rather than want). "Our daily bread" is that which is essential for everyday life. That does not mean simply the food and other goods that keep our physical body alive, but that which nourishes our souls as well. For that reason, the Catholic Church has always seen "our daily bread" as a reference not only to everyday food but to the Bread of Life, the Eucharist—Christ's own Body, present to us in Holy Communion.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us: This petition is the most challenging part of the Lord's Prayer because it requires us to act before God responds. We have asked Him already to help us know His will and to do it; here, we ask Him to forgive us our sins—but only after we have forgiven the sins of others against us. We beg God to show us mercy, not because we deserve it but rather because we do not; but we must first show mercy toward others, especially when we think that they do not deserve it.

And lead us not into temptation: This petition seems puzzling at first, because we know that God does not tempt us; temptation is the work of the devil. Here, knowledge of the Greek word translated into English as "lead" is helpful. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, "the Greek means both 'do not allow us to enter into temptation' and 'do not let us yield to temptation.'" A temptation is a trial; in this petition we ask God to keep us from entering into trials that test our faith and virtue, and to keep us strong when we must face such trials.

But deliver us from evil: The English translation again hides the full meaning of this final petition. The "evil" here is not just bad things; in the Greek, it is "the evil one"—that is, Satan himself, the one who tempts us. We pray first not to enter into Satan's trials, and not to yield when he does tempt us, and then we beg God to deliver us from Satan's grasp. So why is the standard translation not more specific ("deliver us
from the Evil One")? Because, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, "when we ask to be delivered from the Evil One, we pray as well to be freed from all evils, present, past, and future, of which he is the author or instigator."

Reflection:

After reading the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer, any new inspiration from the writer? What have you learnt from this passage? Use not more than 100 words to share your view.
469 What is prayer?

Prayer is turning the heart toward God. When a person prays, he enters into a living relationship with God. [2558-2565]

Prayer is the great gate leading into faith. Someone who prays no longer lives on his own, for himself, and by his own strength. He knows there is a God to whom he can talk. People who pray entrust themselves more and more to God. Even now they seek union with the one whom they will encounter one day face to face. Therefore, the effort to pray daily is part of Christian life. Of course, one cannot learn to pray in the same way one learns a technique. As strange as it sounds, prayer is a gift one obtains through prayer.

For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy. - ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX (1873-1897)

The desire to pray is already a prayer. - GEORGES BERNANOS (1888-1948, French writer)

Do what you can, and pray for what you cannot, and so God will grant you the ability to do it. - ST. AUGUSTINE (354-430)

470 What prompts a person to pray?

We pray because we are full of an infinite longing and God has created us men for himself: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (St. Augustine). But we pray also because we need to; Mother Teresa says, “Because I cannot rely on myself, I rely on him, twenty-four hours a day.” [2566-2567, 2591]

Often we forget God, run away from him and hide. Whether we avoid thinking about God or deny him — he is always there for us. He seeks us before we seek him; he yearns for us, he calls us. You speak with your conscience and suddenly notice that you are speaking with God. You feel lonely, have no one to talk with, and then sense that God is always available to talk. You are in danger and experience that a cry for help is answered by God. Praying is as human as breathing, eating, and loving. Praying purifies. Praying makes it possible to resist temptations. Praying strengthens us in our weakness. Praying removes fear, increases energy, and gives a second wind. Praying makes one happy.

“They should seek God in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17:27)

Praying does not mean listening to yourself speak; praying means calming down and being still and waiting until you hear God. - SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855)

Suddenly I experienced the silence like a presence. At the heart of this silence was the One who is himself silence, peace, and tranquility. - GEORGES BERNANOS (1888-1948)

Reflection:

How often do you pray in your daily life? What have you learnt from the article? Write not more than 100 words to share your ideas.

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