

Praying the Lord's Prayer - slowly: A Brief Guide

by Evan Howard

The Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father," is the most important prayer in the Christian faith. When his disciples asked to be taught how to pray, *this* is the prayer Jesus gave them:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed by thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy 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 lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil.
[For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory
for ever and ever, Amen]

This prayer was not meant merely to be a formula for recitation. The Lord's prayer is a simple model for praying some of the basic forms of Christian prayer. Just think of each phrase:

- Our Father . . . hallowed by thy name (*worship*, praise for God)
- Thy kingdom come, thy will be done (*submitting* to God, prayer for restoration)
- Give us this day our daily bread (*asking* for our needs, petition, intercession)
- Forgive us our debts as we forgive (*confession* and forgiveness)
- Lead us not . . . but deliver us (*Help!*, deliverance prayers)
- For thine is the kingdom . . . (back to *worship* again)

The point of the prayer, then, is not the precise words, but the heart-intention expressed in each of the phrases. So we *really* pray this prayer of all prayers, not just when we say the words, but when our hearts actually worship, submit, ask, confess, and so on.

But how do we get our hearts to line up with these moods of prayer? It is so easy to be distracted and drawn away from real prayer!

My recommendation is that we make use of two simple tools: (1) the words themselves, and (2) time.

Start by speaking the words. Take one phrase at a time. Just say it once. Or perhaps repeat it ("Hallowed be thy name . . . Hallowed be thy name . . ."). Then wait -- between each repetition, or even between each word ("Hallowed . . . be . . . thy . . . name . . ."). Give it some time, and let yourself sink through the words into the heart of the prayer itself.

After you have given some time to the first phrase ("Our Father . . . hallowed be thy name"), move on to the next ("Thy kingdom . . . on earth as it is in heaven"). Say it out loud. Repeat it, if appropriate. Repeat each word if appropriate. Wait. Give it some time. Is there any place in your own life where you especially desire the will of God to be done? Is there any situation you are aware of where you desire

the reign of God to have sway?

In this way you work your way through each of the five forms of prayer, speaking, repeating, waiting. Are you aware of some "daily bread" a loved one needs? Is there a danger from which your faith-community needs deliverance? In the end, you return to the worship where you began.

Sometimes as you move from phrase to phrase, nothing will happen. You just spend a little time reciting, waiting, and then you move on. That's fine. We just offer to God our intention as best we can. But at least in the waiting we give space for our hearts to align with the words. At other times circumstances, feelings, images will rise in connection with the prayers and we may find ourselves praying portions of this "Our Father" with heartfelt devotion. Furthermore, if we make this kind of praying the Lord's Prayer a regular practice, it will shape our habitual approach to God and the form will form us. We will learn to pray like Christ taught us.

For more see Evan B. Howard, *Praying the Scriptures: A Field Guide for Your Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999).