



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 3

... on earth as it is in heaven.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 26:36–46

The Prayer Perfect

I sometimes wish the Lord's Prayer were not as beautiful as it is. If the words had less rhythm, if perhaps they flowed less easily from tongue or page, we might hear them better. It is partly because of the very beauty of this prayer that we have made it into a ritual in its own right, so that we repeat it as part of a typical worship service or even as part of our personal time of prayer rather than seeing it for what I'm sure our Lord meant it to be—namely a pattern for our praying and indeed a structure for our very theology of prayer.

With that background statement, let me suggest that the phrase from the prayer that we are now about to discuss is the heart of this greatest of all prayers. Listen: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." If the rest of the prayer were lost and this phrase remained, we would still have the life and spirit of the prayer. Conversely, if all else remained and this phrase were taken from the prayer, the heartbeat of the prayer would be gone.

Having said that—and perhaps because this is the case—we can also confess that no other sentence in the prayer is so difficult to speak. We speak it uneasily. "Your will be done." Somehow we find a quality of sadness, even of tragedy, in those words. I suspect that this instinctive negative response says something about our opinion of God. It is as if this is a prayer one speaks only as an ultimate expression of resignation,



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after one's shoulders have been pinned to the mat of life. Something in us senses that we say, "Your will be done," only after we have said, "All right. You win. I give up." And as a matter of fact, in a sense this is true.

But this is also why I choose to call these few words the Prayer Perfect. This is all of prayer in one sentence. Until we rightly understand—and gladly use—this portion of the Lord's Prayer, all the rest of our praying is small and narrow and unworthy of the Lord to whom we offer it.

There are so many things I want to say about these few words, but first let me suggest to you that this is the *disciples'* prayer. I'm not speaking of the twelve who walked with Jesus; I'm speaking of any of us who profess to be or hope to be disciples of Jesus Christ. That's because these words can come only from a life of belief and commitment. You see, probably everyone prays.

Prayer is the last refuge of even the most irreligious soul. Even those who doubt the existence of God pray when circumstances compel them to do so. Something in our humanity inevitably reaches outward, even among those who don't know why they do so or who resent even their own inclination to do so. But the unbeliever or the skeptic doesn't pray, "Your will be done." And neither does the casual believer. Those who stay at the outer edges of religion are not at all comfortable with this prayer. Only the disciple, the committed believer, is ready to pray, "Your will be done."

This is because this prayer, "Your will be done," is the sublime expression of faith. To speak it in truth, a person has to believe in the unremitting goodness of God; otherwise one can never accept (or, more pressing, solicit) God's will. I remember a young mother who wanted to become a Christian but found herself with a problem. She realized (rightly) that a Christian should commit all of life to God, and this (wrongly) frightened her. She was afraid, she said, of what God might do to one of her daughters if she gave her life to him. Somewhere along the way, she had gotten a concept of God that was very negative and very cruel. She assumed that God's will was something to be dreaded and avoided, not something to be pursued.

This is a surprisingly common attitude. That's why so many are uneasy with this sentence in the Lord's Prayer. They see it as an invitation to pain and trouble. They reason that God's will means a life of suffering and deprivation. But the Scriptures teach just the opposite. Consider the great faith statement from the New Testament book of Hebrews: "Whoever would approach [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The nature of God is to reward, not to punish. Indeed, many of us have discovered that most of our punishment is self-inflicted, a result of our wrong and unwise actions. So to pray for God's will is to pray for goodness and for that which is ultimately right.

But there, of course, is the rub. We find it hard to wait for the "ultimately" part; we're in too much of a hurry for that. This is why praying for the will of God is a leap of faith. Come with me to the Garden of Gethsemane, where trust in the will of God was put to its farthest reach. On the night before Jesus was crucified, he went alone to a place of prayer at Gethsemane. He who taught

his followers to pray for the will of God now faced the ultimate test of that prayer. Jesus knew that a torturous death awaited him if he held true to his calling.

So that night Jesus prayed three times that he might be delivered from the assignment that awaited him. He prayed with such intensity that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:44). But each time Jesus pleaded to escape the suffering, he concluded his prayer, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (Matt. 26:42). Sometimes the highest purposes of life and the achieving of God's will can be gotten only by the most demanding price. In such instances, one must have sublime faith in the character of God. At such times it can be almost impossible to see beyond the immediate to the place of the ultimate. And since the will of God has to do always with the ultimate, when we pray for the will of God we are driven to the place of absolute trust.

Of course, any discussion of the will of God introduces a word that doesn't come easily to most of us: *submission*. Other elements in the Lord's Prayer—a request for daily bread, for the forgiveness of sins, or for escape from evil—involve our needs and our wishes, but a prayer for the will of God is an appeal for what *God* desires. Thus it is a giving-up prayer. When we speak it, we confess that we don't know all there is to know. So often I find myself saying to God, "You know what I think is best, but you also know how often my perception is poor; please show me your will, so that I will pray as I should." This kind of praying involves submission to God: I confess that God knows best (which doesn't seem like a very profound realization!) and that my wishes are often self-centered as well as shortsighted. It makes good sense, therefore, to submit myself to God.

On Earth as It Is in Heaven

The prayer for God's will makes particularly good sense when we go on to the second phrase in this portion of the prayer: "Your will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven*." Perhaps we would worry less about the demands of the first phrase if we paid more attention—deep down, heartfelt attention—to the second phrase. We think of heaven as the place where everything is good and right, and in life's more difficult times we console ourselves in the hope that heaven will make up for the disappointments of earth. Well then, why not pray and work

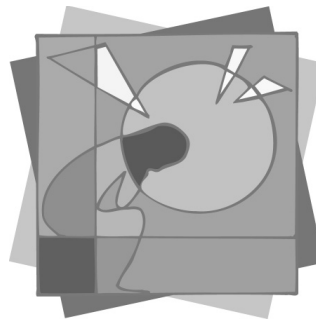
for the will of God to be done so that we can have some of the quality of heaven even now, while we are here on earth? Why not pray—and work!—that earth might become more heavenly? What a way to live!

This earth, as we now know it, is marred by sin. Is this the will of God? Obviously not. Everything in Scripture and in our Christian conception of God teaches that this world is not as God wants it to be and that something is seriously wrong. Also, our world seems to be under the domination of death. Is this God's will? Not perfectly; the Scriptures picture death as an intruder on God's perfect plan. And, of course, the Scriptures also teach that there will be no death in heaven, where the perfect will of God is done.

So, too, with sickness. Is sickness the will of God? Good, godly people often declare it to be so; confronting sickness in their own lives or in the lives of others they say, "Well, it must be the will of God." I submit that the agnostic research specialist or physician who works to fight sickness thinks better of the God in whom he or she does not believe than does the Christian who attributes the illness to God. Jesus showed quite a different attitude toward sickness. When Jesus' opponents criticized him for healing a woman on the Sabbath, Jesus answered, "And ought not this woman, . . . whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (Luke 13:16). Jesus looked upon the woman's affliction as something contrary to God's plan and order and something that therefore ought to be changed.

So when we pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we are aligning ourselves against sin, sickness, and death—and against all the selfishness and hurt and misery that exist in our world and that contribute to sin and sickness and death. We are praying to have a little more heaven in our earth. That is, we want more of God's will to be done on earth.

As I said earlier, this phrase is a kind of battle cry. It observes those conditions on our earth that are contrary to the will of God, and it enlists our influence against those conditions. It is our personal commitment to enlist against evil and our appeal to God to send more troops into this battle. We seek the will of God because we want to know which way God is going so that we can follow the same path.



To become Christian means, among other things, to be so dedicated to the will of God that we seek constantly to cast our vote with God. We say as much each time we earnestly pray, "Your will be done."

Let It Begin with Me

But I'm sure someone is asking a question—in fact, a rather logical question. Why must we pray for God's will if God already wills it? Can't God bring his own plans and best wishes to pass without our help?

The answer, I believe, quite simply, is *no*. Obviously this isn't because God hasn't the power to accomplish the divine will. But it seems clear that God has chosen to limit the divine power by granting us free will. God doesn't overpower us by sheer force. God chooses instead to appeal to our will, so that we will enlist ourselves with the divine will until that divine will is victorious in the affairs of earth. To become Christian means, among other things, to be so dedicated to the will of God that we seek constantly to cast our vote with God. We say as much each time we earnestly pray, "Your will be done."

So when you and I pray, we're trying to do two things. First, we are trying to bring *ourselves* into line with God's will. So often when we recite our Lord's Prayer we are not even ready to cast our own vote with God. Our will is too often contrary to God's will, and we have to struggle to bring it into line. A popular hymn-prayer asks for peace on earth and then says, "and let it begin with me." This is a proper approach to everything we might ask God to do in changing this earth for the better: let it begin with me.

What a wonderful prospect lies before us! We know full well that our world needs to be better, that it is not what it should be. But where do we start to bring God's purposes to pass? Quite simply, quite wonderfully, in the territory we know best—in our own souls. So as we pray, "Your will be done," we speak it best if in our hearts we also say, "and let it begin with me."

But of course this magnificent prayer is bigger than what happens between God and the one who prays. As

PRAYING FOR GOD'S WILL

When we pray, we struggle on behalf of God and God's will. We aren't trying to convince God that the divine will should be done; this would be nonsense. Rather, we are aligning ourselves with God to bring to pass what can be done only as the free will of humanity and the will of God are on the same side.

we noted in the opening session of our study, this prayer begins not in the first person singular but in the first person plural. Even so, when we pray for God's will to be done, we intend for that prayer to be answered beyond its operation in our own lives, deeds, and thoughts. We bring ourselves into the battle of the ages between good and evil, and we cast our strength on the side of good, voting for the will of God.

Part of this battle between good and evil is engaged in the arena of work. When we conduct our lives morally in our daily calling, when we enlist ourselves in acts of righteousness and mercy, when we help the disadvantaged and align ourselves against selfish privilege, we are voting for the will of God. Still more specifically, when we teach a Sunday school class, when we give of our resources to feed and clothe the poor, or when we work against corruption in politics or invest our time in any kind and generous act, we are voting for the will of God—that it might be on earth as it is in heaven. These are things we can *do*.

But there is more to the eternal battle than our doing. This is where prayer comes in. When we go to our knees, to seek God about the problems of life, about sin and sickness and human selfishness, we enter the lists

on the side of God. When we fight against corruption in politics in daily life, we discover that we're in a battle, dealing with very real opposition. Just as surely, when we pray for the will of God, we enter a battle. The same power of evil that opposes us in concrete fashion when we try to do the right thing opposes our prayers when we intercede for what is right. When we pray, we struggle on behalf of God and God's will. We aren't trying to convince God that the divine will should be done; this would be nonsense. Rather, we are aligning ourselves with God to bring to pass what can be done only as the free will of humanity and the will of God are on the same side.

So you see why I've said that this phrase, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," ought in spirit to be part of every prayer we make—not as a kind of magic coverall, but as the spirit infusing all we pray and all we do. What greater purpose could our lives have than this, or what better focus? How can we deal more strategically with life's perplexity and distress than to seek for God's will to be done? What higher goal for our earth than that it shall have the spirit and purpose of heaven?

This is why I call this phrase the Prayer Perfect. It is the disciple's prayer, spoken from humble, trusting hearts. But it is also a battle cry, enlisting our souls on the side of God's plan and purpose. And it is, ultimately, a shout of joy, a glad expecting that God shall win and that we will be part of God's victory.

About the Writer

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