



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## Gospel Prayer

### St. Matthew 6:9-13

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Today is Rogation Sunday. *Rogare* is the Latin verb meaning “to ask”, as in our Gospel, where Jesus tells his disciple that whatever they will ask in his name, the Father will give them. This was the day in the Middle Ages when the people of the parish would process with their priest and wardens, marking its boundaries while praying for and blessing the fields and livestock—asking for God’s blessing in the knowledge that he is good and faithful. Prayer is the theme of the day, so it seems good to say a little bit about prayer.

We all pray, but how does prayer work? We say that prayer changes things. But, how? Prayer isn’t some “force” that makes things change all on its own. It’s God who brings the change. It’s not uncommon to hear people say that somehow prayer is asking God to act and that by asking we free him to do what we ask him to do. But that can’t be right, Brothers and Sisters, because God is sovereign. His will comes to pass. Human beings can’t tie his hands by failing to pray or by praying for the wrong things. It’s also not uncommon to think that our prayers somehow inform God—as if he needs our help figuring out what to do in a particular situation and that he can’t or won’t do the right thing if we don’t pray and tell him our concerns and our wants or needs. But, Brothers and Sisters, if we know anything of God it’s that he is perfectly good and that he is also all-wise and all-knowing. There is no situation in our lives for which God does not already know precisely what to do for the perfect good and, again, there is no situation over which he is not sovereign. It’s as if we think that

when we pray God hears and says, “Oh! I’m so glad that Bill prayed and asked for such-and-such because I hadn’t thought of that. Now that he’s told me about it, I see that his plan is much better than mine.” But a God who would respond to our prayers that way is no god at all.

No, the more I pray the more I’m convinced that prayer really does change things, but it changes things because *prayer first changes me*. The more I pray, the more I find myself centred on Jesus and on his kingdom and then, *as a result*, bringing Jesus and the ways and values of his kingdom to bear not just on the situations I find myself in, but then seeking to go out into the world to bring Jesus into new situations. That, Brothers and Sisters, is—more than anything else—how prayer changes things.

But that means our prayer needs to be kingdom prayer. Bad prayer or poorly focused prayer is better than no prayer at all, but real kingdom prayer will truly transform—not just us, but everything we as Jesus’ people touch. And, of course, Jesus gave us the perfect “kingdom prayer” and we all know how it goes:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be 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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

That’s Matthew 6:9-13. It would be hard to find another Bible passage more familiar to people. And yet I know from talking to people that we don’t always understand what Jesus is asking us to pray here. Most people get the parts about delivering us from evil, giving us our bread, and—maybe slightly fewer but still most—get the bit about asking for forgiveness, although it seems that we often mentally skip the other bit about “as

we forgive” others. But I’ve noticed we often struggle with the earlier petitions in the prayer. Maybe not the “Our Father” part, but the “in heaven” and “hallowed be thy name” and “thy kingdom come on earth” parts are often hard to grasp. When I ask what it means to pray for bread, everyone gets that. When I ask about “thy kingdom come” most people pause and have to think about it and pretty frequently respond with, “Well, what do *you* think it means?” And so what happens is that we sort of pray the prayer backwards. Yes, we pray it as it’s written, but mentally we’re focused on the end of it—the “Our Father” and the “in heaven” and the “thy kingdom come” are the preliminaries we pray to get to the real meat of the prayer where we ask God for what we need or want.

But Brothers and Sisters, that’s not how we should be praying it. The real meat of the prayer is actually that part up-front. The rest is what simply follows naturally. To miss the significance of the beginning of the prayer is like entering a church through the back door. I’ve told you before about the time I did that, sneaking into the local Roman church through the back door. The Boy Scout troop I was in was sponsored by the church. We met in their school gym. The church was off-limits and was always locked, but the glimpses I could see through the glass door intrigued me. I could vaguely remember the layout of the Lutheran church where I was baptised, but since then we’d mostly attended non-liturgical churches. But one night we were playing a hide-and-seek type game outside and I saw a car parked by the church’s back door. I tried the door and it was unlocked, so I sneaked into a back hall.

Now, I knew I was going in through the back door. But a lot of people approach God in prayer by going through the back door without even realising that’s what they’re doing. They start with “deliver us from evil”

or with “spare us from the time of trial”.

I think of the retired fisherman who are always in the locker room when I arrive at the Aquatic Centre to swim. Let’s just say they’re very “salty” characters—and not the “salty” Jesus calls us to be. Sometimes I’ve got my collar on and they’ll apologise for their language. I usually tell them that I’m not the one they need to worry about. And that often gets one or more of them talking about how he “met God” out on the ocean in a storm. A friend of mine who’s a retired Coast Guardsman tells me that every sailor or fishermen has “met God” at some point. As there are no atheists in a foxhole there are no atheists in a storm at sea or on a sinking ship. But my friend—and my locker room acquaintances prove his point—my friend also notes that most of these men who meet God in the middle of a storm don’t seem to be transformed by the encounter. They cry out for deliverance, but once the storm has passed they’re back to business as usual.

They slip just inside the back door of the church looking for shelter when the wind and the rain hit—after all, everyone knows that everyone’s welcome in the church. They never actually go into the church—they’re just not interested—and once the sun comes back out, off they go—they’ve got no more use for the church or for God.

Some people get a little further and actually step through the door and into the back hall like I did that evening. They know there’s more to it than just crying out for help when the storm comes. Think of the famous story of Martin Luther. He was a law student, but one night he was caught in the worst thunderstorm he’d ever seen. Sheltering under a tree and fearing for his life he cried out in a desperate prayer, “Save me and I will become a monk!”

“Save me from the time of trial!” And then we think, “Maybe I’m in the time of trial because of my sin or because God wants something from me. And so as we plead for deliverance from the storm, from disaster, from life we also plead for forgiveness. And the good news is that if we genuinely cry out to God for forgiveness he hears us. Jesus died for our sins. If we trust that that’s what he did at the cross and grab hold of him in faith for forgiveness, he *will* forgive. That’s good news. But it’s not the *whole* good news. This is where the good news *starts*, but for a lot of Christians this is also where it ends. If it ends at the cross, what do we do about Easter and the empty tomb? What do we do about the Ascension? What do we do about Pentecost?”

Some people go further into the church. When I sneaked in the back door I found one of the altar guild ladies working in the sacristy. At the time, I didn’t know what a sacristy was, but as I recall, I think she was preparing the vessels and the bread and wine for Communion. Some people get that far into the Lord’s Prayer. They’ve heard about Jesus feeding hungry people—feeding five thousand with a few fish and loaves of bread and having twelve baskets of left-overs. They’ve heard how he ate with tax collectors and sinners. They’ve heard him say that he’s the bread of life. We see the bread and wine sitting ready for the Lord’s Supper on the table in the sacristy—maybe we don’t understand the significance, but we see food and so we pray, “Give us our bread for today”. If God is good, won’t he share? If God is the Father, can’t we come like children to ask for what we need? And, of course, the answer is yes. Jesus tells us to pray for our daily bread. But, again, this is often as far as we get. These are the “easy” petitions for even an unregenerate person to understand: I’m in trouble, save me from it; I’m starving; give me bread to eat.

Of course, Jesus really did save people from trouble. He calmed the storm. He healed sick people and gave sight to the blind. Jesus really did feed hungry people. But there’s more to it than that. Just as there’s more to the bread and wine we might see prepared on the sacristy table. When I sneaked into the church that night what I really wanted to see was *the* church, not the back hall or the sacristy. I asked the lady working there if I could see the church. She didn’t offer to take me around through the main entrance, but she pointed me to the door on the other side of the room and told me I could take a look. And so I did. The door led into the chancel and from there I could see the rest of the church. There was the altar, where the bread and wine would be placed to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. There was a font at the back—you had to walk around it to get into the church and then the centre aisle led straight from the font to the altar. I remember being struck that there were two “pulpits”, which seemed funny because for years I’d been told that “catholics” didn’t care about the Word. Here in the church was where the “action” happened. And just so with the good news.

A lot of people come to Jesus through the back door, so to speak. We come crying out for help when we’re in trouble. We come crying out for forgiveness when our sin overwhelms us. We come crying for bread because we’re starving. And Jesus is happy to care and to provide and to rescue. But we need to ask *why* Jesus offers deliverance and forgiveness and bread in the first place. And that’s where we come to the heart of the prayer—the heart that we often pass over, the heart that so many people don’t know what to do with, the part that goes: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

We often misunderstand the good news because we see it only in terms of our own needs. We’re not the first people to do this. The Jews of Jesus’ day did the same thing. They wanted

a return to the days of milk and honey—prosperity—that they had under King David. That was their version of “give us our bread”. Many of them, like the Pharisees, understood that Israel’s sins had brought about her problems and so they prayed “forgive us our sins”. Many Jews couldn’t imagine how things could get any worse and so they prayed for the Lord to deliver them from the “time of trial”. These were all things they expected of the Messiah and of the kingdom they hoped he would bring.

And so when Jesus came, when he ushered in God’s kingdom he didn’t just preach. As we say: talk is cheap. He met people’s needs in very practical ways. But in feeding the hungry and healing the sick he pointed to something bigger—the same way the water in the font and the bread and wine here on the Table point to something bigger. They call us to be part of the kingdom Jesus is establishing, the kingdom that’s breaking in. The present age is passing away and the age to come is dawning and Jesus calls us to take part in it—not passively, but actively. He gives, he heals, he forgives, he makes whole and then he calls us to give up our lives—to take up our crosses and to follow him as he builds his kingdom and invites us to help.

Again, Jesus tells us to pray: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*” The good news is *not* about pie in the sky when you die. The good news is not about hunkering down and being good and moral people while we wait for Jesus to rescue us from this world. The good news is not about going to heaven when we die. This is the great perversion of Christian eschatology. Jesus told a story of new creation, but it’s more common to hear Christians today telling a story of escape from creation. If the good news were really about escape from the world, Jesus would have left out those parts of his prayer about kingdoms coming and wills being done and “on earth as in

heaven”. We often pray for Jesus’ kingdom as if he said “in heaven as in heaven”, but that’s not what he said. He said, “on earth as in heaven.”

Brothers and Sisters, it’s right here. We pray it all the time. It’s the core of the good news, it’s the essence of the whole story of redemption told in Scripture—and we all too often miss it. In fact, our whole narrative, the whole story we tell sometimes gets so messed up that we aren’t sure what to make of Jesus’ prayer at this point. “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven.” Again, this is the heart of the good news. It’s where the whole story of redemption is headed. It’s not escape, it’s not “the rapture”, it’s not going to heaven when we die. Jesus is talking about the entire restoration of God’s creation; it’s the restoration of heaven with earth—sundered by our sin—but redeemed, made new by Jesus, and brought back together. It’s about human beings being forgiven and restored to live life in the presence of our Creator as he originally intended.

This is what Jesus’ kingdom is about and in his death and resurrection he set in motion the events and forces that would renew and restore Creation. In the cross we see just how costly it was. Sin is terrible. Death is terrible. It took the death of the Son of God to break our bondage to sin, to make atonement, and to conquer death. But our God was willing to pay the price to undo the damage unleashed by our sinful rebellion.

This is why it’s important we understand the Lord’s Prayer. When we come at it backwards as we so often do—focusing first on deliverance, forgiveness, and provision—we can end up thinking that God’s kingdom is about God doing the things we want him to do. At worst—and this seems to happen a lot—God becomes something hard to distinguish from a personal genie who exists to serve us. Praying is like rubbing a lamp and making a wish.

But if our faith is in a God who exists to serve us and to meet our needs, we’ve put our faith in an idol. Now, better bad prayer than no prayer at all. We might come in the back door of the church, we might creep around the back hallways for a while, but better in than out. If we’re here long enough eventually we’ll find our way to the font and to the altar and we’ll meet Jesus properly.

But *better* we pray as Jesus tells us to pray and understand from the get-go that Jesus is Lord: that the whole mess began with our insisting on our way and on getting what we want and that Jesus has come to provide a means of forgiveness as he undoes and fixes the mess we’ve made of God’s creation—not least of which is the restoration of earth and heaven, the restoration of the human realm with the divine so that we can once again live in the presence of our Creator. So that we can take up our divinely-given vocation to bear God’s image, to his representatives in his Creation.

If we understand that *this* is what the Good News is about, it’ll turn our self-centred prayers into God-centred prayers. If we have kingdom perspective it suddenly makes sense that we would ask for forgiveness while *also* asking for the grace to forgive others—this is how the kingdom spreads, it’s how grace and mercy break into the world to provide healing and to break the cycle of sin and revenge and payback and violence. Kingdom perspective reminds us that the daily bread God gives today is a down payment on the life he has promised us in Jesus in the heavens and earth made new. Kingdom perspective reminds us that deliverance from temptation and from trials today is a promise of a coming day when sin is vanquished forever and every tear is wiped from our eyes.

And, now, if we’ve managed to get our prayer oriented around the kingdom instead of our own needs we’re ready to make sense of the very

first part: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” We have come in through the back door, but now we’re finally in the church proper where our Father has been waiting for us. Finally, we see who he really is. He’s not the “big guy” who’s “up there” to hear our prayers when the storms come and we’re afraid of dying. He’s not the malevolent judge just waiting for us to do something wrong and gleefully rubbing his hands together as he consigns us to hell for eternity. But neither is he the namby-pamby doting grandfather who winks at our sin and gives us whatever we ask for. No. He is the just judge who will deal with sin, but who is also so loving and full of mercy that to deal with sin he sacrificed his own Son for our sake and to restore his Creation. He is the Father, but more importantly, if we will come in faith to Jesus his Son, he is *our* Father.

As we come to our Father, we also see that he is hallowed. That means that he receives glory and honour. And our Father is hallowed through the restoration of his Creation and he is honoured in everything that makes that restoration possible, because all these things show his goodness, his love, his mercy, his grace, his generosity. Our Father is honoured by the sacrificial death of his Son and by his glorious resurrection. Consider John 12:27-28. During that first Holy Week Jesus said, “My soul is troubled. Father, I’m tempted to ask you to deliver me from this hour, but no. I’ve come to this hour for just this reason. Father, glorify your name.” And that’s just what the Father did in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Father was never more glorified than when his Son died on the cross as a sacrifice for sin, preparing to make all things new.

So when we pray this prayer the right way through we can start with “Our Father” without imagining we’re addressing a celestial tyrant. He’s our Father who is honoured by showing

mercy, love, and goodness. He’s honoured as he gives his own Son for the life of the world and from that point we can bring him our needs in prayer, whether it’s bread or forgiveness or deliverance, without them becoming a litany of selfish “gimmes”.

And do you see how praying the Lord’s Prayer—and not just saying the words, but really praying it through from “Our Father” at the beginning to “deliver us from evil” at the end works to make us truly Easter people—makes us kingdom people who will actually live out the implications of Jesus’ resurrection? We believe that prayer changes things, but first and foremost prayer changes *us* and the change that God makes in us through prayer then goes on to change the “things” around us. God created us in the first place to be his image bearers in Creation—to bring his goodness and his wisdom to bear on the world. We rebelled against that calling, but Jesus has redeemed us and called us back to this mission for which we were created. Jesus restores us to be God’s image-bearers in the world, to once again make known God’s goodness and wisdom. We have been transformed by the good news and the Lord’s Prayer reminds us that we are now called to share that good news. We who have been forgiven are to forgive and to show the world what forgiveness looks like. This is why Jesus calls us to be merciful and to work for justice and to make peace. We who were hungry and have been fed and we who have been delivered from evil are now called to do the same for others. Brothers and Sisters, this is how prayer changes us and through us changes the world. You can’t pray for God’s kingdom to come without being moved to see the kingdom manifest through your own life and actions. You can’t pray for bread without being moved to then share your bread with those in need. You can’t ask for forgiveness without then forgiving others. You can’t pray for deliverance from evil and from

trial without being moved to help to deliver others. What we pray for in Jesus’ name becomes what we offer and give to the world in his name. Again, prayer changes things because prayer first changes us. Dear friends, we are not just saved by the gospel. We are shaped by the gospel. And if we truly are shaped by the gospel, there’s a powerful sense in which we become the gospel to the world—in word, in deed, in prayer, and in life.

Let us pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be 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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.