

Pray Like This

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I still remember that morning when we were all presenting pastoral prayers that we had written for our worship class.

A few of us had up in the library the night before, weaving elaborate phrases, filling notebook pages with creative images, evocative metaphors, sure to impress even or long-tenured professor.

But she wasn't impressed, and halfway through our presentations she strode into the middle of the room and waved her arms for us to stop.

I caught one of my classmates eyes with a bit of panic.

She looked a little disappointed but not all that surprised

And after letting out just the slightest of sighs she said:

“Prayers aren't words, you know.”

That was one of those moments when something really clicked for me. I realized that I had been treating my pastoral prayers like a sort of second sermon. Another place to slot in my ideas, this time on a less suspecting audience.

And worse, I had been using that moment as a place to show off a little. To be poetic, and beautiful, and well polished. Quick with a turn of phrase that would leave them dazzled.

Put another way.

I was out in public praying to seen by others. Heaping up empty phases, thinking that was what it was all about. And, to the extent that any one was impressed with me, I had already received whatever benefit I would get from such prayers.

“Prayers aren't words, you know.”

So I put that paper on the floor, and I haven't read a prayer of a page in a service since.

Sometimes I stumble a bit, or ramble and repeat myself. I rely on a shallow bench of phrases and images you may be getting tired of, but I can tell you that standing down there with my eyes closed, and nothing to save me, I never forget that our prayer is so much more than my words.

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Jesus knew that it was easy to seem religious. He knew that plenty of people, many regarded as some of the most religious people in the world, never uttered a word of prayer or offered a breath of devotion when the cameras were off, and crowds departed.

He knew how much religious folks liked to be seen and heard so that everyone would know how much better, and how much more special, they were.

And he knew that it was all paper thin.

So in the course of his teaching he offered an alternative.

Instead of praying like that, he says.

Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed by your name.
Your kingdom come. Your will be done. On Earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And leads us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

Or as we have come to call it. The Lord's Prayer.

Today is the first of three sermons I will preach about the Lord's Prayer. Each week for the rest of the month, I will talk about a different part of this prayer. So if I don't get the part you have always wondered about today, you'll just have to keep coming back.

And for those of you who will be away, the sermons are easy to find on our website.

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But the first thing I want you to notice is that Jesus teaches this prayer to his disciples in a very particular context.

It is offered as an antidote to complex and showy prayer.

You don't need to pray like that. Pray like this.

The Lord's Prayer has no words longer than two syllables. Only the simplest of metaphors. Nothing to elaborate.

It is the prayer of a carpenter's son. A prayer for fisherman and laborers. A prayer, perhaps, for people rushing the kids to soccer practice while they eat dinner in the backseat. Or a prayer for people weeping at a bedside with no other words to offer. A prayer for you. And for me.

It's like all those coaches who told me, never an especially graceful athlete, "you are making it hard than it is." See? Relax. Shoulders down. Breathe.

Pray, like this.

And what follows is kind of a template for a good, simple, prayer. Everything you need. And not a whole lot more. And so today, I want to just look at the first few lines.

Our Father in heaven. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven.

First thing to notice, is that in prayer we have someone to talk to. We begin by addressing God, speaking as one would to another. Our prayers do not rise into oblivion, but they land in the heart of God, who rests beside us to receive our every prayer.

In our confirmation class, I ask a different student each week to open us in prayer. Near the beginning of the class year we always brainstorm lots of different ways of addressing God, so that we can add some variety to the beginning of our prayers instead of just saying Dear God, over and over and over.

The image of father is definitely a classic, but it also has its limits. Not everyone has a positive association with that word, and no human failing should ever muddy God's goodness.

And God is not literally a Father, God is not male or female, so I am fan of mixing it up.

And thankfully, or Christian tradition is full of a diversity of ways to address God. I call God mother, or source of life, womb of mercy, hope of the world, prince of peace,

God is beyond any name, so the more names we use, the less likely we are to associate God too closely with one image.

But whatever the name, whatever the image, however we imagine God beside us in that moment. We begin by addressing God. Speaking to God. One to another.

Pray like this: Pray to God.

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And then we move ahead, to next lines of the prayer and before we ever get to the point of asking anything for ourselves, we are told to pray:

“God, may your will be done.”

Which is a little odd if you think about it.

“God, may your will be done.”

It’s kind of like waking up in the morning and asking the sun to rise, or for gravity to continue to hold you to the ground. Whether you ask or not. It’s going to happen.

We are talking with God. But, as Jesus says in our passage this morning, God already knows what we need before we ask.

So why pray?

Well, prayer as it turns out is not for God’s benefit. It’s for ours. God does not need us to pray so that we can inform God about what is happening down here on Earth.

God wants us to pray, because it is good for us. It changes us.

“Your will be done.”

A reminder we are not the center of the world, that our desires are not the only desires, our hopes are not the only hopes, our needs are not the only needs.

It is a simple truth, that can be so easy to forget. The prayer is here to remind us.

“Your will be done.”

Not just to remind us, but to remake us into people who would forget it less and less. To shape us into people who would live as if God cared about the whole world and not just our little corner of it.

“Your will be done. Your kingdom come.”

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Jesus saw a problem with the way people were praying.

They were trying to one up each other, praying where everyone could see them to reinforce their reputation, and to show everyone just how holy they were.

And he also knew that people were mostly just handing God a list of demands, asking only for the things they already cared about, failing to stretch their hearts to love a world bigger than their own concerns.

He saw people using prayer in hopes of building their own little kingdoms, rather than crying out in hopes of ushering in God's kingdom of justice and peace .

And it was, in the face of that, that Jesus showed another way.

Pray like this he said. Keep it simple. Don't make it harder than it is.

Our God in heaven.

Your name is holy.

Let your kingdom come.

Let your will be done on Earth,

like it is in heaven.