

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The Lord's prayer

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! The most commonly used Christian prayer in the world is the Lord's Prayer. Jesus gave it to us a model to guide our prayers. Yet too often we mouth the words of the Lord's Prayer, and don't reflect on what those words mean.

I learned the Lord's Prayer by heart when I was young boy. I remember standing in line at Primary School Assembly, and reciting the prayer along with all the teachers and students. But as the years went by it faded into the background, and my mind drifted whenever a person up the front led us in reciting the prayer.

But over the past 24 years, while I have served as a pastor, the Lord's Prayer has become central for me in my own prayer life and in teaching others how to pray. This morning, let's explore this famous prayer Jesus has given us, and let's reflect on what we can learn from the prayer.

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I've never prayed the Lord's Prayer as often as I have during recent times. When my father became seriously unwell he asked me before major surgery to pray with him. I had been hesitant to pray with him up till that point. He was visited by his pastor who prayed with him, and as his son I felt a bit awkward about leading him in prayer. But here he was asking me to pray for him. So I led in a prayer, and we concluded by saying the Lord's Prayer together. He held my hand as we prayed. His heart-felt 'Amen' with me at the end showed me how much that prayer meant to him.

Over the next month while my father was alive I prayed the Lord's Prayer with him several times each week, and with my siblings as well. On each occasion the Lord's Prayer spoke to each of us and gave us the words to express our deep feelings to God. Each time a different aspect of the Lord's Prayer meant something special to me or my father. When the doctor told us my father would not live for long, the words of the Lord's Prayer 'Thy will be done' were particularly meaningful. There were times when we didn't know what to pray, but the Lord's Prayer provided the right wording to guide our thoughts and longings before God. When my father died the family gathered around the graveside, and I led our family again in the Lord's Prayer as a way of expressing our worship, praise and dependence upon God.

One of our problems with prayer is that we often don't know what to pray or how to pray. Our prayers so easily drift into a self-centred 'shopping list' where we say something like: 'God, please look after me today, keep me happy, may people treat me well, look after my family and friends, and ... bless the missionaries!' What we need is a model for our prayers, a framework that guides us on how and what to pray. That's why Jesus gave us this prayer we call the Lord's Prayer.

One thing that should strike us about the Lord's Prayer is that it is a prayer for a community of disciples to pray as a group. The first person pronouns are all plural: our, us, we. It's obviously suitable for an individual Christian to pray the Lord's Prayer, but the prayer is primarily designed to guide a community in praying. That's a challenge to us in our culture, where we emphasise the individual in prayer but don't focus much on praying as a group. That's one reason why it's so important to include thoughtful prayers in

worship services. Corporate prayers are meant to be the heart of our praying as God's people. As a pastor when I plan and lead a worship service I'm careful to plan a healthy variety of prayers: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, dedication, prayer for our needs and for the world. It's healthy for us in our corporate worship to often pray the Lord's Prayer together, and for each of us in our personal prayers to use the Lord's Prayer.

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This morning we're thinking about the Lord's Prayer, this pattern for prayer that Jesus has given us. We've seen that it should be prayed by groups of Christians in community together before God. Let's consider now how it can be used by individual Christians as they pray alone.

Some people like to use the Lord's Prayer at the start of their prayers, setting the context for everything else. Some find it helps to pray it slowly, pausing every few words to hold before God the particular things on our hearts which come into that category. That's how Martin Luther taught people to pray. I remember a grandmother I knew who prayed the Lord's Prayer slowly each morning, and when she came to the phrase 'deliver us from evil' she prayed in detail for each of her grandchildren in light of that request. Some like to pray the Lord's Prayer at the end of their own prayers, as a way of summing those prayers up. Some people find that saying it slowly, over and over again, helps them to go down deeply into the love and presence of God. Perhaps it's wise to vary the way we use the Lord's Prayer, since variety is the spice of life! As Jesus warns us here in the Sermon, we must never let our prayers become meaningless or thoughtless (Matthew 6:7).

What does the Lord's Prayer teach us? If we pray it regularly, what does it instruct us about true Christian prayer?

We learn, first, that prayer is thoughtful. As Jesus introduces this prayer, he explains that we must not fall into the trap of mindless mumblings as we pray. He said: 'And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (that's from Matthew 6:7-8). Notice that Jesus describes God as the 'Father' of all who follow Jesus. Because he is our Father, and we are his children, he knows what we need but likes it when we express our humble yet confident dependence on him. The way Jesus introduces the prayer also encourages us to engage thoughtfully with this God we address. He is '**our Father**', concerned for our needs and entering into an intimate relationship with each disciple. Yet this God is also '**in heaven**': the almighty, all-powerful Lord of the universe.

Those opening words of the Lord's Prayer help us to keep a balanced view of the God we pray to. He is mighty and majestic, but not so remote as to be uninterested in our needs and concerns. He is close to us, but not our buddy that we can take for granted. At the same time he is our loving Father God, and also the One who reigns in sovereign power over the universe. The Lord's Prayer keeps us thoughtfully aware of this God we are praying to.

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The Lord's Prayer teaches us to be thoughtful in our prayers, not just to mutter meaningless words. The prayer teaches us, secondly, to be humble before God. We pray that his holy name and reputation will be honoured, that his kingly reign will be progressively established and will finally arrive in fulness, and that God's purposes will unfold in God's world. It is not our own name, our own little kingdoms, our own will that is our primary concern. The prayer teaches us to humbly focus our prayers first on God and his glory, before we move to our own needs.

Then, third and finally, the prayer teaches us to trust God. After praying for God to be glorified, there are three requests for our own needs. First, we look to God to provide our daily material needs, as we pray: ‘Give us today our daily bread’. Second, we ask him to pardon our past sins, as we say: ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ It’s important to notice that Jesus develops this point further straight after the prayer, in vv.14-15. He challenges us not be insincere by asking forgiveness from God when we are not willing to forgive others who hurt us. The third request is for protection from future sin, as we pray: ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’. Here we admit we are vulnerable, and we depend on our Heavenly Father to protect us.

The familiar ending of the prayer says ‘For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.’ This ending seems to have been added to the Lord’s Prayer by the church in the 2nd century AD. It was used very early and very widely by the early church, so many of us may want to retain it as a fitting way to conclude the prayer, appropriately giving the kingdom, power and glory to God.

One final thought. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we are not only learning that that we should be thoughtful, humble and trusting in our prayers before God. Praying a prayer like the Lord’s Prayer will inevitably change our hearts and minds. The prayer will remind us of the great and loving God we worship. It will challenge us to put first things first: honouring God’s name, the growth of God’s kingdom, God’s purposes being acted on. The prayer will remind us to be dependent on our Heavenly Father for our needs and the needs of the Christian community, both locally and globally.

Let me encourage you to use the Lord’s Prayer each day as part of your own prayers. It will be exciting to see where the Lord’s Prayer might take you on your journey with the Lord Jesus.

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Jesus has given us a wonderful prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, to guide us in our prayers. Let me pray that prayer now, in the traditional words. I invite you to pray the prayer aloud, along with me:

*‘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 trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.’*