

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

May 31-June 6, 2020

Sermon Series: Momma Said

Week Two: "Say 'Please'"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, send Your Holy Spirit upon us so that we may perfectly love You and faithfully follow You today and always. In the name and spirit of Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

A Simple Guide to prayer. What are those simple phrases your mother always told you to say to others? Say "I'm sorry." Say "Please." Say "Thank you." These phrases are basic components of our prayer life.

This Week's Sermon Theme:

We ask God for what we want and what we need.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:7-13 (A group member should read the passage aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What makes the pagans think their prayers will be heard by God? (6:7)

Why does Jesus say we do not need to do that? (6:8)

How is God addressed in Jesus' prayer? (6:9)

From the two parts of verse 10, what does Jesus say the Kingdom of God looks like? (6:10)

What does Jesus say we should pray for daily? (6:11)

What are the two components of praying for forgiveness? (6:12)

What (or who) does Jesus pray to be kept away from? (6:13)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are “I wonder” questions that the group might want to pursue together.

We’ve probably all heard really lengthy prayers – so we might wonder why, given that Jesus advises against using “many words.”

We might also wonder why pray at all if God already knows what we need.

We could ask, why does Jesus address God as “Father”? And what does it mean to pray for His name to be “hallowed”?

We might wonder about the relationship Jesus draws between God’s Kingdom coming and God’s will being done on earth.

We probably wonder what exactly is meant by “daily bread.” Is Jesus saying never to pray for anything beyond our needs for today? Can’t we pray about long-term needs?

We might be surprised to read the word “debts” where we are used to hearing the word “trespasses.” Are “those who have trespassed against us” the same as “debtors”?

We could also wonder about whether God would really lead us into temptation. We might wonder why we would pray for God not to do something that God wouldn’t do by nature in the first place.

We might wonder, if the Bible says, “deliver us from the evil one,” why we seem to pray nowadays, “deliver us from evil.” Why was that part of the prayer depersonalized from what sounds like a reference to Satan to a reference to the more general concept of “evil”?

Finally, we probably wonder why the familiar words “for thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen” do not appear in the Scripture reading.

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Luke 11:2-4; 1 Chronicles 29:11; Matthew 4:17; Matthew 6:31; James 1:13

The Lord’s Prayer shows up in two places in the Gospels – in this week’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, and also in Luke 11:2-4. It’s interesting though – while most people think of Jesus teaching the Lord’s Prayer as a response to the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray, that actually only occurs in the presentation of the prayer in Luke’s Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel, the Lord’s Prayer shows up as part of the Sermon on the Mount – and it’s NOT in the Sermon on the Plain, Luke’s rough parallel to the Sermon on the Mount in Luke 6:17-49! What’s more, the version of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke usually takes people by surprise – it’s much shorter than Matthew’s version, which is the basis of the prayer most of us have learned by heart.

In Matthew, the Lord’s Prayer comes within the context of a longer teaching on prayer. In verses seven through nine, Jesus admonishes His disciples, first, to not pray like the “hypocrites.” These are the people who love to be seen praying in public – who want to be perceived as Godly but who really are

only interested in their own self-advancement. Jesus says that since the improvement of their own self-image is what they are really after, then their true desires have already been met when they receive it. Jesus also condemns the prayer of the “pagans,” or “Gentiles,” depending on the biblical translation you use. Jesus calls their prayers “babbling” – and it is quite possible Jesus is referring to ancient pagan practices of using magical incantations and chanting to get a god’s attention, so the god can be coerced or manipulated into doing one’s will. Jesus teaches His disciples not to view God in that way!

Rather, disciples of Jesus are to pray to God with short, simple phrases. Prayer need not be long, lengthy, and explanatory, as if God does not know what God’s people need. By way of example, Jesus then prays what we have come to know as the Lord’s Prayer, saying “pray in this manner.” A close look at Matthew’s version and Luke’s version will point up another interesting difference – in Matthew, the Lord’s Prayer seems to be a model to be emulated – Jesus says “pray like this.” In Luke, on the other hand, it seems to be a command from Jesus to actually repeat these exact words – Jesus says, “when you pray, say:.” Again, it’s interesting that the early church followed Jesus’ “directions” as reported by Luke, while using the words from Matthew in doing so!

One of the earliest Christian “handbooks” in existence is a document known as “The Didache.” The first-century document gave concrete guidance for early Christian communities and required the prayer to be repeated three times per day. In fact, it is here, in the Didache, that we find the words “For thine is the power and the glory for ever and ever,” which do not appear in the Gospel, appended to the required prayer pattern. The words “the Kingdom” were added to this version even later, perhaps because of the prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:11.

The Lord’s Prayer is very similar to the Qaddish prayer of the Jewish synagogue: “Exalted and hallowed be His great Name; in the world which He created; according to His will. May He establish His Kingdom; in your lifetimes and in your days; and in the lifetime of the whole household of Israel; speedily and at a near time. And say, Amen.” The Qaddish is an ancient liturgical Jewish prayer that is not to be recited except by a gathering of ten or more men and may have developed in synagogue liturgy simultaneously with the use of the Lord’s Prayer in liturgical Christian worship. Notice the focus in both prayers on the exaltation of God and the hope for the speedy coming of God’s’ Kingdom on earth. There are parallels to other parts of the Lord’s Prayer in other ancient Jewish liturgical prayers, demonstrating that Jesus was likely drawing on His Jewish heritage in praying the Lords’ Prayer.

You probably never have, but think about the contrast in the very first phrase of the Lord’s Prayer – “Our Father in heaven.” Fathers are intimate, earthly relationships – but heaven is a spiritual place, absolutely separated from the creation in which we live. By calling God “Father,” Jesus reminds us that God is personally concerned with the welfare of His children, but as the Almighty God in heaven, He is also the all-powerful Creator of the universe. The contrast drawn by this now so-common phrase is truly awe-inspiring in its implications. The all-powerful Creator of the universe relates to us as a Father to His children.

The first actual request made of God in the prayer is “hallowed be Your name.” It’s hard for us today to relate to how inter-related names and persons were in ancient middle-eastern thought, but to pray for God’s name to be hallowed (set apart as holy) was the same as praying for God to be acknowledged as the One truly Holy God in a world of many gods. How does that happen? By way of the second and third requests made of God! “Your Kingdom come” and “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” are essentially petitions to God that the entire world would come under the reign of God. This was the

ancient hope of Israel – remember that Jesus’ very first proclamation was “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17)! In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray that this inbreaking Kingdom of God will truly achieve its fulfillment here on earth – just as the Jews pray in the Qaddish!

In the fourth part of the prayer, notice that the pronouns shift from “you” and “your” to “us” and “our.” Now the petitions become personal for the Christian community. The NIV translates this fourth petition as “Give us today our daily bread,” but the Greek is notoriously difficult in this sentence. We usually think of this as something along the lines of “Give us the food we need today,” but if we think about it, that is actually kind of redundant – “Give us our bread for today, today”! Other interpreters think it means something along the lines of “Give us the bread necessary for our existence” – the words are intended more as a prayer for the ongoing sustaining of life itself than specifically for food. Still others think it actually means “Give us today our food for tomorrow,” but this seems to conflict with Jesus’ other teaching to “not worry about tomorrow, what you will eat” (Matthew 6:31)! One of the best interpretations suggests that rather than “tomorrow,” or “today,” the request is “Give us daily our bread for the coming day” – not meaning tomorrow, per se, but the coming day when God’s Kingdom arrives! This is in keeping with the previous words praying for the coming of God’s Kingdom and reflects a desire that the “messianic banquet” might be experienced today, and every day, while we await the fullness of God’s Kingdom.

The next petition of the prayer is, in Matthew, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Luke uses a different word – the word for “sin.” Although we might view “debts” and “sins” somewhat differently, in ancient Jewish thought, sin truly was a “debt” owed to God, so the two different phrasings in Matthew and Luke are not so different as may first be thought. It is again important to notice how strongly the coming fullness of God’s Kingdom is in view here – the prayer for forgiveness anticipates the future judgment of all humanity that is expected at the end of time. The relationship between our own future judgment and our present judgment of others is clear, and again reflects the “now but not yet” nature of God’s Kingdom.

And finally, the prayer concludes with “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” Many modern translators prefer to translate the first half of this petition “And lead us not into testing,” because of the strong Christian belief that God cannot, and does not, tempt His people, but does at times test His people. See James 1:13 for the strong emphasis on this point! When one is tempted, they are lured into sin; when they are tested, they are placed in difficult circumstances that test one’s faith. While testing could result in sin, it has a fundamentally positive purpose, while temptation has a negative purpose. The prayer is that God would refrain from such a severe time of testing as would lead to a crisis of faith. Given Jesus’ warnings about the troubles that lie ahead for believers (see Matthew 24), it is not surprising to find such a prayer here. The final words are for deliverance from choosing an evil path. Linguistically, it is a complete toss-up as to whether the final word should be translated “evil” or “the evil one.” The Greek word is the same in the masculine (in which case it would be “the evil one”) and the neuter (in which case it would be “evil”). Usually, context provides a clue for translation, but that is not the case here. Ultimately, the decision is nitpicky to the extreme – for us, as for the original reader, the difference between “evil” and “Satan” is nil.

To wrap up – in teaching the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus reminds His followers that we are part of the greater story that is the inbreaking of God’s Kingdom, which will, assuredly, one day reach its fulfillment. When Jesus says, “pray like this,” He is telling us to pray with a central focus on the realization of God’s coming

Kingdom. The Lord's Prayer focuses our lives, and our own prayers, on how our own discipleship plays a part in that process!

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Are you able to pray the Lord's Prayer meaningfully, or is it just rote? How can you pray differently to ensure you are thinking about the deeper meaning of its words?

How could the Lord's Prayer serve as a model for your own prayer rather than being a specific prayer you say? What elements of the prayer could inspire your own personal prayers?

What kinds of things do you petition God for? Will the content of the Lord's Prayer impact your petitions before God?

Specifically, is your prayer life oriented toward the core petition in the Lord's Prayer for God's Kingdom to be brought to its earthly fulfillment? How can you reorient your petitions to God to reflect an emphasis on the coming Kingdom?

How can your "Please" prayers to God be brought into alignment with this broader goal? Are your wants aligned with the image of the Kingdom of God Jesus demonstrated?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

This week, in closing, try praying the Lord's Prayer pausing after each phrase, to allow the meaning of what you are petitioning God for to sink in, to help form your future prayer life:

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

For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.

Amen.