

Sam Storms  
Bridgeway Church  
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### Can We Pray the Lord's Prayer "Inoffensively"? Matthew 6:7-15

Please watch this short video clip, as it explains my decision to preach today on what is popularly known as *The Lord's Prayer*.

I was alerted to this video by a friend of mine in England, Andrew Wilson, who pastors a church in Eastbourne, near London. He pointed out in a blog he wrote this past Monday that leading movie theaters in the U.K. have banned this short rendition of the Lord's Prayer because they believe it to be "offensive". The plan was for this video to be shown in advance of the new Star Wars movie. The fear was that "it could offend or upset people of other faiths or none" (Wilson).

Wilson goes on to describe how people in the U.K. have responded to this decision. The response, he notes, "has been fairly predictable: secularists cheering because they think it is offensive, and Christians lamenting because they don't. Personally," notes Wilson, "I think the advert is great, and that the brouhaha will cause more people to watch it in the end anyway. But as to whether it is offensive, I have to come out and say it: the secularists are right. The Lord's Prayer is not mild, inoffensive, vanilla, listless, nominal, wishy-washy or wall-papery. If you don't worship the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, in fact, it is deeply subversive, upsetting and offensive, from the first phrase to the last."

I must say that I completely agree with Andrew on this point. And I suspect that this catches many of you by surprise. After all, *what could possibly be offensive about the Lord's Prayer?* The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who is the first man you saw in the video, was surprised that anyone would find it offensive. Here is what he said:

"I find it extraordinary that cinemas rule that it is inappropriate for an advert on prayer to be shown in the week before Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Billions of people across the world pray this prayer on a daily basis. I think they would be astonished and deeply saddened by this decision. . . . This advert is about as 'offensive' as a carol service or church service on Christmas Day."

With all due respect to the head of the Church of England, I must disagree with Justin Welby. *When one looks closely at the Lord's Prayer it is impossible to avoid the inflammatory and dogmatic spirit in which Jesus intended it. It is shot through and through with exclusivism.* By exclusivism I refer to the belief that there is only one true God, that he can be known only through a relationship of faith in Jesus Christ, and that his will alone must prevail in our lives and that those who stand in unbelief and opposition to the coming of his kingdom will be judged.

That the prayer might "offend" people of a different opinion or different religious conviction is unavoidable. I hope they are offended by it! I hope they are frozen in their tracks as they stop to think deeply about what Jesus was saying. I hope that the Holy Spirit would grant them enough insight and understanding that they would realize that one cannot casually reject the God who is addressed in this prayer. I hope and pray that they would see that the God to whom this prayer is addressed is not Allah or any other alleged "deity".

The Apostle Paul has already alerted us to the fact that the Christian gospel of what God the Father has accomplished for sinners in and through God the Son, Jesus Christ, is going to be offensive to everyone! In fact, it is precisely through the offense of the gospel that people are awakened from their spiritual slumber and brought to faith in Jesus. Paul said this in his first letter to the Corinthians:

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews

demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

***God wants to “offend” the mind of the non-believer. He aims to upset them, to challenge them, and to remind them as lovingly but as forcefully as possible that if they do not repent of their idolatry and turn from their false gods they will perish, eternally.***

We live in strange times, as I’m sure all of you know. The question many are asking is: “How do I respond to the non-Christian world, in particular to the Muslim world? How should I think about their ‘faith’ and this so-called ‘god’ whom they refer to Allah? When I pray, how should my prayers be shaped in light of their presence in our society?”

Now, let there be no mistake: Jesus was not thinking specifically of Muslims or people of some other religion or even of atheists when he taught his disciples and us to pray in this manner. But what he taught us to pray has direct and immediate application to our attitude toward those who reject Jesus Christ. It speaks specifically to our beliefs as Christians and thus provides us with guidelines for how we are to think of non-Christian people and how we should relate to them. So let’s look closely at what our Lord said.

#### *The Context*

In vv. 7-8 we are told not to babble on with meaningless and repetitious phrases, as if God were impressed by such mindless verbosity. The reason is that ***God knows what we need before we ask him***. But if God knows all our problems and needs *before* we ask, why ask at all? We must remember that, generally speaking, God has determined not to fulfill our needs unless we ask him to. ***We must not presume that God will provide for us apart from our prayers what he has ordained to provide for us only through our prayers***. Our petitions are the means by which God has purposed to give us what he already knows we need. There is something important to God about our asking him for things he knows we need. It would seem, on the surface, to be quicker and more efficient, and obviously less strenuous on all concerned, if God were simply to bypass prayer and get on with the giving! But that is not his way. He finds particular honor and glory in being the One to whom we must humbly come to receive that which we need.

A related issue is found in the question: ***“What can I possibly tell a God who knows everything?”*** Some answer: “Nothing.” Jesus answers: “Anything!” The doctrine of divine omniscience compels us to be totally honest with God in prayer. When dealing with someone whose knowledge of you is limited, you can pretend, manipulate, deceive, even lie to them. In other words, *ignorance often generates hypocrisy*. Omniscience, on the other hand, demands honesty. What good is it to pretend or play-act with someone who already knows your heart and motivation? Thus, we need never worry about finding ourselves in a desperate condition and discover that God was caught short. Augustine once said, “God does not ask us to tell him our needs that he may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving what he is preparing to give.”

#### *The Outline of the Lord’s Prayer*

Although we don’t see this in Matthew’s version of the prayer, in Luke 11:1ff. Jesus gives us this model prayer in response to a request by one of his disciples. ***“Lord, teach us to pray”*** (Lk. 11:1).

My guess is that Jesus meant for this prayer to provide us with an ***outline or sketch*** of the broad themes that should occupy us when we pray. In other words, each of these requests is something of a ***topic statement*** that can and should be filled out with much more detail and content. To take but one example, it would be a mistake to think that we’ve said all we should say about God’s kingdom merely by saying three words: “Your kingdom come.” The same may be said of the remaining five petitions.

As for the structure of the prayer, I think you can see that it is made up of *six* clearly defined petitions or requests: ***three relating to God and three relating to us***. The first three pertain to God’s name, his reign, and his will, respectively. Or again, if it will help you remember them better, the focus is on sanctification, sovereignty, and

submission. Or again, the first petition conceives of God as our Father, the second of God as our King, and the third of God as our Master.

The second set of three petitions concerns our bread, our debts, and our enemy the Devil. Or again, we are to pray for provision, for pardon, and for protection.

*(1) God's Name (Sanctification)*

It is the name of God, Yahweh, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father as well, that is to be “hallowed” (v. 9b). It isn't the name of Allah or any other alleged ‘god’ but the name of our heavenly Father that is the focus of our prayers.

In case you are wondering, and contrary to what many today are saying, ***Allah is not the same as the Christian God.*** In fact, there is no Allah. Allah is a name used to describe a vacuum, nothing. Islam explicitly denies that God is Triune, that he exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They explicitly deny that God has a Son. And the NT repeatedly declares that ***if you deny the Son you also deny the Father. If you do not love the Son, believe in the Son, and obey the Son, you do not know God*** (see John 8:18-19, 24, 39-42). The apostle John put it as pointedly as anyone possibly could:

“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:22-23).

***You cannot know God or worship God or be in a saving relationship with God unless you acknowledge and believe in Jesus Christ as his only Son whom he sent to be a sacrifice for sinners. And it is to this one and only God that Jesus tells us to pray.***

And what are we to pray? ***“Hallowed be your name”*** (Matt. 6:9b). There are two things here for us to note. First, there is a shocking contrast in this petition. We are instructed to pray to a “Father” who is in “heaven”. To speak of God as in ***“heaven”*** draws attention to his transcendence, his otherness, his glorious difference from us. He fills the universe with his powerful presence. He is high and lifted up, far beyond our wildest imagination. We are in comparison with him, as Isaiah says in the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of his prophecy, mere grasshoppers; we are a drop from a bucket, a speck of dust on the scales.

And yet we are to address him as our ***“Father”***! How can this be? How can the one and only God who created heaven and earth and rules over all affairs in providential power be our “Father”? Father is a word of intimacy. It points to God's nearness to us and our dearness to him. It is a word of relationship and love and joy and fellowship. So, be stunned by this! Let the reality of this truth take your breath away: ***The God who called the universe into existence out of nothing is not simply your God, not simply your Lord, not simply your Master, but your Father!***

The second thing to note is the word translated ***“hallowed”***. It renders a verb that is elsewhere used in the NT to refer to sanctification. To be “sanctified” first and primarily means to be set apart, to be consecrated, to be acknowledged as different from all others. To pray that God's name be “hallowed” is to pray that his name be acknowledged as holy and majestic and that he be glorified as infinitely greater than and beyond all that we see in creation. So, in using the word “sanctification” with regard to God's name Jesus is not saying that God is sinful and defiled and needs to be made pure. Rather he is saying that ***our prayer should be that God take whatever steps are necessary so that he would be acknowledge and worshipped as unfathomably great and grand.***

Think about how offensive this is, unavoidably so. To pray that God would act so as to make great and glorious his own name necessarily entails his defeat and destruction of anything and everyone that opposes him. It is to pray: “Oh God, heavenly Father, may ***your*** name be recognized and revered by all nations; may you take steps to suppress any opposition to ***your*** glory and your greatness.” Quite simply, this is nothing short of an incendiary, and therefore unavoidably offensive, request!

*(2) God's Reign (Sovereignty)*

We are also to pray that the “**kingdom**” of this God who is our Father might “**come**” (v. 10a). Don’t forget that the kingdom of God is both present and future. It is already here but has not yet been consummated. God’s sovereign rule is revealed in what he accomplished through Jesus in bringing us the forgiveness of sins and adopting us into his family and giving us a hope for a glorious and eternal future with him. But the kingdom is also still future. It has not yet been consummated. It will come in power when Christ returns to judge his enemies and vindicate his people and to establish a new heavens and a new earth.

Thus when we pray, “Your kingdom come,” we are asking that God work in such a way that the gospel of Jesus spread throughout the earth, bringing souls to saving faith in him. It is also to pray that Jesus Christ would physically and personally return to consummate his sovereign and kingly rule. And when he does he will crush all remaining unbelief; he will destroy all earthly power that resists him; he will dethrone his enemies and overturn empires and his rule will be pervasive and permanent.

***To pray for God’s kingdom to come, therefore, is to pray that all the enemies of Jesus Christ be defeated. Is that offensive to others? It certainly should be, if they are paying attention.***

#### *God’s Will (Submission)*

The third petition is that we pray: “**Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven**” (v. 10b).

The “will” of God that Jesus has in mind is what we call his revealed will or his preceptive will or his moral will. This is what God “wills” or “wants” to happen here on earth in the lives of men and women. We cannot know what God’s secret or sovereign will is unless Scripture explicitly tells us. But God’s moral precepts or his desire for how we should live is made clear to us in Scripture. It is to be our prayer, says Jesus, that what God has declared *should* happen, does happen.

Our prayer is that God’s will on earth be as fully and finally obeyed as that will is honored and obeyed in heaven, among the angels and those believers who have died and are now with Christ in heaven. ***This, then, is a prayer that only those things which honor God be done. And if we are to pray that only God’s will be done we are necessarily and unavoidably also asking that the will of all his enemies be thwarted.***

#### *Our Bread (Provision)*

In the second set of three petitions Jesus turns his attention to us and our immediate needs. The first concerns our “bread” or the daily provision we need.

The word “**daily**” is found in the NT only here and in Luke 11:3. Most believe it means that we are to petition God for whatever food and other physical needs are necessary for the coming day. But we who live in an age of grocery stores and refrigeration are inclined to take our daily bread for granted. In Jesus’ day, however, many people purchased one day’s food at a time, never quite sure if tomorrow’s supply would run short.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ comments here are worthy of careful consideration.

“Is there not something extraordinary and wonderful about the connection between this request and the previous requests? Is not this one of the most wonderful things in the whole of Scripture, that the God who is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the God who is forming his eternal kingdom and who will usher it in at the end, the God to whom the nations are but as ‘the small dust of the balance’ – that such a God should be prepared to consider your little needs and mine even down to the minutest details in this matter of daily bread! But that is the teaching of the Lord everywhere. He tells us that even a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our Father, and that we are of much greater value than many sparrows. He says that ‘the very hairs on your head are all numbered.’ If only we could grasp this fact that the almighty Lord of the universe is interested in every part and portion of us! There is not a hair of my head that he is not concerned about, and the smallest and most trivial details in my life are known to him on his everlasting throne. This is something you find only in Scripture. You go straight from ‘Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven,’ to ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ But that is the way of God, ‘the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy’; who nevertheless, as Isaiah tells us, dwells with him also ‘that is

of a contrite and humble spirit.' That is the whole miracle of redemption; that is the whole meaning of the incarnation which tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ takes hold of us here on earth and links us with the almighty God of glory. The kingdom of God, and my daily bread!" (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 2:70).

In essence, this request is a declaration on our part that we are utterly and altogether dependent on God for everything we have. We aren't ultimately dependent on the government or the stock market or anyone other than God himself. And his promise is that he will more than amply provide. As Jesus himself will say at the close of Matthew 6, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness [that's the first half of the Lord's Prayer, the first three petitions], and all these things [such as our daily bread] will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).

Nothing that concerns us is a matter of indifference to God. He bears our problems on his heart. As Peter would later say, "Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 3:7).

#### *Our Debts (Pardon)*

Of the six petitions in this prayer, this one alone is blessed with an extended commentary. At the close of the prayer Jesus returns in vv. 14-15 with additional explanation. What does this petition mean? Some have tried to restrict its relevance to the OT, but salvation preceding the cross was no more conditioned upon obedience than it is now. ***Salvation always has been and always be by faith alone.*** Furthermore, this prayer is given to and is meant to be prayed by *believers*. It is our heavenly *Father* to whom we pray. This is not the prayer of a lost sinner seeking eternal pardon. The forgiveness in view here is not that initial remission of sins that inaugurates the Christian life. Jesus is not referring to that once-for-all forgiveness for which we pray but once. Rather, ***this prayer for forgiveness is one of confession on the part of a child who seeks from his/her heavenly Father, not the creation of a relationship but the restoration of it. The goal of this prayer is not salvation but the renewal of its joy and power and the spiritually reinvigorating experience of comfort and consolation.***

We see this principle in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18:23-35) where a man expects forgiveness as a matter of course but refuses to extend similar mercy to those in his debt. The point was that "God forgives only the penitent and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit. Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling" (John Stott, 149-50). In other words, *how can I expect God to do mercifully for me what I callously refuse to do for my brother?*

So, are we to forgive all those who sin against us, even those who abuse and manipulate and criticize us? Yes. So, are we to forgive those who seek our death and destruction by bombs and beheadings and other terrorist attacks? Yes. So let us pray: "Father, as we suffer at the hands of our enemies, remind us that the only thing we truly and rightfully deserve is eternal damnation, and because you have forgiven our sins through Christ we will never, ever experience it!"

#### *Our Enemy (Protection)*

How do we reconcile the notion of God leading us into temptation with what James wrote: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). If we interpret the word "temptation" to mean a trial or test to which our faith is often subjected, we must acknowledge that God does indeed lead us into such an experience (see 1 Cor. 10:13; James 1:2-4; consider the experience of Abraham). We are to consider such tests or trials as occasions for "all joy" (1:2). They are tests that the Lord employs to cultivate in us perseverance, proven character, and hope (Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Pt. 1:6-7).

The way to interpret this petition in the Lord's Prayer is by addressing both parts: not only the "lead us not into temptation" but also the "deliver us from evil." The strong adversative "***but***" implies that what we desire in the second half of the verse is the antithesis to what we seek to evade in the first half. In other words, rather than leading us into temptation we ask God to deliver us from evil. The second half of the petition defines positively what the first half states negatively. The temptation into which we ask God not to lead us is exposure to the seductive appeals of "***the evil one***" (the definite article is present), that is "Satan" himself. It is he from whom we desire to be delivered.

To this we should also add the comments by Robert Stein. He believes that behind the words “lead us not” is an Aramaic expression which “rather than asking God not to lead the Christian into temptation, is asking him not to allow him to succumb to temptation” (*Difficult Passages in the Gospels*, 73). Thus, whereas Stein takes the word “temptation” in its negative sense, he understands the petition to be a request that God enable us to resist it when it comes. “**Let us not succumb or yield or give into temptation,**” therefore, is the preferable way of interpreting the prayer.

*“For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever, Amen!”*

Although this concluding doxology is not present in the best Greek manuscripts that we possess, it may well have been an original conclusion to the prayer. And even if it isn’t part of the original manuscript, its theology is perfectly consistent with everything Jesus and the apostles have taught us.

Indeed, this may well be at one and the same time both the most glorious and most “offensive” statement in the entire prayer. **Yours** is the kingdom, says Jesus. The kingdom belongs to no other. There is no other ‘god’ whose rule and reign will prevail throughout eternity. **Yours** is the power, says Jesus. All other ‘gods’ are nothing more than the figment of someone’s imagination. They are devoid of power. No one can stand against you and your purposes. And **yours** is the glory, says Jesus. No one else will ever be praised and honored and magnified.

Can you now see why I described this prayer as *exclusive*? Don’t yield to the pressure to be inclusive simply because you don’t want to offend people who disagree with you. The only way you can love them, the only way you can display your care and concern for their temporal and eternal welfare, is by pointing them to the one and only God and his Son Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory and honor and power and praise. Only in relationship with our great Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, do we find eternal life.

And if that isn’t offensive, you haven’t been paying attention. But oh what a glorious offense it is!