

The Lord's Prayer: Efficiency, Efficacy, and Effect

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"Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete." (John 16:24)

A few years ago, at a regular gathering of ministers of various denominations, I was asked to take my turn leading the group in prayer. I knew them well enough to try something unusual, so instead of offering the customary impromptu oration I recited the Lord's Prayer.

I got a few curious looks, but no one was rude enough to criticize me. How could they? Nevertheless, I wondered if I had disappointed them. Would they think I was insincere? Uncreative? Would I have been wiser to offer petitions tailored to the situation, offered in a more personal style? Could I have come up with something better on my own?

I doubt it. The Lord's Prayer is terrific. I use it frequently: standing up, lying down, kneeling, driving, by myself, with others, in church, in meetings . . . As Toyota says, "Who could ask for anything more?"

The aim of this paper is to share how I think the Lord's Prayer *works*. I still struggle with the suggestive ambiguities and vague mysteries of this magnificent text. It is impossible for anyone to claim they have mined out all the riches of the prayer. But I would like to share with you what I find in the prayer that is exciting to me: its *efficiency*, its *efficacy*, and its *effect*.

Ed Schroeder wrote a few years ago: "The complementary term to Christian prayer is God's Promise, not God's Providence."¹ This clarifying distinction led inexorably to the conclusion that the engine under the hood of the Lord's Prayer must be precisely the Good News that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." (2 Corinthians 5:19) I believe that the Lord's Prayer, by its very structure, cries out for a dynamic interpretation that makes full use of the cross of Christ. This is the prayer of Christian faith, which boldly asserts that if we want anything from our Father in heaven, all we need do is ask in Jesus' name.

Efficiency

"Do not heap up empty phrases . . ." (Matthew 6:7)

The Lord's Prayer is certainly efficient. A few short, pithy phrases and it is over. When we pray, Christians do not need to use many words or long ones. Perhaps Jesus thought about shortening it even more; some of its phrases are omitted in Luke without changing the meaning perceptibly.

As compact as it is, the prayer has two major divisions, commonly acknowledged as having different themes. Within each division (or "great petition") a set of petitions develops one important idea. The two great petitions parallel the two great commandments: "Love God" (with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength), and "Love your neighbor" (as yourself).

First Part: "Be God to Us"

The first three petitions ask, essentially, for one and the same thing. They all say to the Father in heaven: "Be God to us." What we are asking for here is that the "greatest and

¹ Edward H. Schroeder, <http://www.crossings.org/thursday/Thur0321.htm>.

first” commandment, as Jesus called it, might be fulfilled among God’s people on earth. Scripture is filled from beginning to end with the story of God seeking to bring us into a right relationship with himself.

In order to express this desire as fully as possible, the theme gets divided into three petitions, like terms of a hendiatis.² Combined with each other, they express the fullness of a righteous relationship with God. God must be our God in the realms of thought, word, and deed. The triad “name, kingdom, will” is suggestive of those realms.

- 1) When we ask that the Father’s name be hallowed, we mean that whenever the name of God (i.e., the *word* that represents him) is used, it should always be to God’s glory and not “in vain.”
- 2) When we ask that the Father’s kingdom come, we mean that *in all our hearts* God should be Lord over us all, through faith in him. That is to say, we should own none but God as Lord. No one and nothing should occupy the “God” spot in our souls.³
- 3) When we ask that the Father’s will be done on earth as in heaven, we mean that *in our actions* God should be God to us.

To love God, to have full faith and fear of God, is not three discrete things—it is one indivisible reality. For example, if the *actions* of God’s people are unholy, we dishonor God’s name and deny God’s Lordship over us. We should not try so hard to distinguish between these three petitions—they do, after all, overlap—as to see what they add up to. True faith in God or true love of God must be evidenced in all these ways, which together constitute the whole of human expression. We are dishonorable hypocrites if we fail to honor God in any of these three aspects of life.⁴ Partial homage is sin, not righteousness.

Second Part: “Be Good to Us”

The second set of petitions likewise presents one overarching great petition to the Father in heaven: “Be good to us.” Alternatively, we might say “Bless us,” “Take care of us,” “Give us life,” or “Give us your peace.” Here we ask for what we need for ourselves. However—and this is crucial—because the prayers are for *us* to be blessed, they do not distinguish or separate out our needs from our neighbors’ needs, or even from our enemies’ needs (“Pray for those who persecute you” – Matthew 5:44). They are therefore the prayers of a world bound together by love. They constitute the *prayer of love*, just as the first set of petitions constitutes the *prayer of faith*. A life consistent with these petitions is a life of unbounded love of others. The deeds that match these intentions are works of love. Such love fulfills the second great commandment: that we ought to love our neighbors *as ourselves*.

For the purpose of our analysis, it works best to think of the latter petitions not as four but as three. When we do so, another triad emerges: “present, past, and future.” Humanity has three sorts of trouble: present distresses, damaged pasts, dismal futures; or needs, hurts, and fears. We might be 1) in dire straits, lacking the essentials for survival; or 2) collecting

² A hendiatis (Gk for one-through-three) is a set of three words representing concepts which are not disparate and unrelated but together sum up one totality. For example, “faith, hope, and love.”

³ Luther, in the Small Catechism, explains that the kingdom comes among us “when through the Holy Spirit’s grace *we believe*.”

⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright has written *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Faith, and Life*—the subtitle strikes the same chord (a triad!).

and storing grudges and guilt; or 3) afraid of imagined future calamity. Any of those things can and will take away our peace. Thus the petitions of the second half ask God systematically and comprehensively for relief from all woe – real, remembered, or imagined.

To amplify just a bit: The petition which asks for our daily bread uses that as a metaphor to ask for all of our immediate needs, whatever we need *right now* in order to have peace. Luther suggests that this includes “food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock,” plus fourteen more items, “and the like.” It takes a lot just to get us from one day to the next!

The next petition asks for the forgiveness of our sins (trespasses, debts). The way it is expressed seems at first blush to imply a contingent connection between our forgiving others and God forgiving us. But the prayer does not mean to imply that we work a bargain with God to earn our own forgiveness. Rather, this petition sorts into two baskets everything of the past that can and does destroy our present peace – the wrongs *we* have done for which we need to be forgiven, and the wrongs *others* have done to us, which we (just as surely) need to forgive. If we are lugging around either kind of trouble from the past – and we all do! – we will not have peace. To be comprehensive, the petition must cover both.

A two-part petition then asks that we be delivered from the two sorts of *future* troubles that we might get into. First are those in which we might be implicated (temptation, failing in trial). But there are also

troubles (or evils) which might befall us without our having caused them. Thus this petition encompasses all possible future events that might ruin our lives, both in the present through fear of them and in the future through the actual occurrence.

Our Lord’s tiny prayer is thus so ingeniously designed that it constitutes a miniature outline for the comprehensive fulfillment in all the world of the first *and* second great commandments, which is to say for the world to be filled with

righteousness through our having faith in God and filled with total peace through our unstinting love of one another: May our Father in heaven be totally our God – in thought, word, and deed; and may God bless all of us with peace, in every dimension. As angels once sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth.”

FIRST GREAT PETITION “Be God to Us” (<i>totally!</i>)	SECOND GREAT PETITION “Be Good to Us” (<i>comprehensively!</i>)
. . . in our speaking (Hallowed be your name)	. . . by supply our present needs (daily bread)
. . . in our thinking and believing (Your kingdom come)	. . . by healing what is wrong in our past (through forgiveness)
. . . in our doing (Your will be done)	. . . by freeing us from fear of the future (evil, possible temptation or trial)
Sum of the above: Righteousness before God	Sum of the above: Peace on earth

Efficacy

“Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.” (John 16:23)

The Lord’s Prayer is not just concise, however. It is also potent, in the sense that it *works*. The prayer derives its power from its author, by virtue of the fact that he *told* us to pray *like this*. In order to understand this, it is essential to consider the context of this prayer, in the whole work of Christ. Why does it matter that this prayer is our Lord’s? Does this prayer accomplish what Christ came to accomplish?

The Problem

First off, we need to ask what sort of power a prayer needs. Is it the power of information? Is a prayer a list that we present to the Father in heaven, for appropriate action? Or do we have the power to change God’s mind by our much praying? Is prayer an arbitrary obligation imposed on us, as a test to see whether we will be good? What exactly is the weakness or problematic on which a powerful prayer might need to work?

We say in the doxology which has been added to Jesus’ prayer: “The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours.” The power is *not* in us, or in the prayer. The power is God’s. *What we need is standing*. Who has the standing to ask God for any favor? “Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matthew 16:26) As Psalm 24 says:

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Because of our sin we deserve not life and every blessing, but judgment and death. Jesus tells us as much when he says that the very nice man who went to the temple to pray did not go home justified. (Luke 18:14) Although he put his best foot forward, he did not even get a hearing. Sinners have no standing because of our sin; the righteous have no standing because, well, because they are also sinners.

The very fact that we pray for our Father’s will to be done on earth would seem to imply that, at present, that will is being flouted. Whose fault is that if not ours, collectively? Seen thus, the Lord’s Prayer is also a confession of sin! If God’s name is *not* being hallowed, if we do *not* hold God as lord in our hearts, etc., where do we get the temerity to ask for anything at all?

Jesus taught that we should “strive *first* for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, *and [then]* all these things will be given to [us] as well.” (Matthew 6:33) How soon will *that* be? Our hypocrisy leads to judgment, not blessing. “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are from me.” (Matthew 15:8) Things have fallen apart. The first step Jesus

takes towards putting the world right is to remind us, by placing the first great petition on our lips, that all depends on our having God's favor.

But if we are the world's problem, how can we be the answer? How can we hope that *all those things* will some day be given to us as well? *The power prayer needs is reconciliation – that is, for someone somehow to remove the impediment of sin.*

The Power

Jesus Christ is the answer, come from God. He is the antidote to the antinomy between the two halves of the Prayer. In his own body, at his Word, on the strength of his subsequent death and resurrection, the one who is Son of Man and Son of God reconciles us to God so that we may approach our Father in heaven to ask for everything good. Now. We *may* ascend the hill of the Lord with petitions, since in baptism we have put on the clean hands and pure heart of our Lord Jesus.

Absent the context of Christ's reconciling work, we would pray this prayer at some peril. If not for Christ, we ought to be afraid to ask that the kingdom of God come in all its fullness. But Christ has put paid to our fears by paying our debt and reconciling us to the Father, making us children of God. In him, at last, "righteousness and peace *have* kissed each other." (Psalm 85:10) (The two weren't really on speaking terms until Jesus.)

The power of the Lord's Prayer, then, is the power in the promise of salvation which is accomplished in Jesus Christ, who licenses us to pray boldly in this way. "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:32) Jesus not only teaches us this prayer, he cosigns it in his blood.

Matthew 6:9-13 (NRSV)

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.

And forgive us our debts, as
we also have forgiven our
debtors.

And do not bring us to the
time of trial, but rescue us
from the evil one.

And in our beseeching for the kingdom of God to come (a kingdom with which we are now familiar), we are praying precisely for what God has given us – that in Christ we should be recovered to God's family.

When we pray the first great petition *as believers in Christ*, we are asking for God to be God to us on the terms which Christ makes available, believing that *God's* name is hallowed when we praise God's Son; *God's* kingdom comes among us when God's Son is recognized as Lord; and *God's* will is done when we obey the Messiah, the Son of God.

Luke 11:1-4 (NRSV)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And when we follow the first great petition with the second, we who are already righteous through Christ are seeking the good of others as much as our own. As Luther says in his sermon on "Two Kinds of Righteousness," when we are united with Christ his righteousness becomes ours. "Then the soul no longer seeks to be righteous in and for itself,

but it has Christ as its righteousness and therefore seeks only the welfare of others.”⁵ This shift epitomizes what happens in the Lord’s Prayer.

People write prayers all the time, some of them quite lovely. But only because Christ himself authorizes us to ask, only because we ask *in his name*, only because he has taken our sins upon himself, do we have the standing to pray *this* prayer and know that we will receive all that we have asked for: namely, that “goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of our life, and [that we] shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Because of Christ, it is no longer our dying that will make this world a better place, but our living.

Effect

*“In your mercy, strengthen us through this [Communion]
in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another;
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”*

(Prayer after Communion, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 114)

So what *happens* when this prayer works? Do we sit back and wait for life and peace and every blessing to be delivered like a pizza?

*If all of the raindrops were lemon drops and gum drops,
Oh, what a wonderful world this would be!
I’d walk around with my mouth open wide, . . .*

Would the world be better if benefits simply rained from heaven on the beneficiaries? Is that what we want, or what God wants for us? No. This prayer asks for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven; and God’s will is that we be filled with faith and love so that we live our life together to God’s glory.

This prayer helps make that happen in two ways. First, by rehearsing (as often as we pray it) what God is doing in and for us; and second, by influencing believers to participate in all that work.

As we pray the six petitions of this prayer, we are reminded or recatechized to the effect that God who is our father in heaven:

- Has made his own name glorious, and will always do so;
- Has given us the kingdom, a kingdom which will stand forever and to which we belong;
- Always accomplishes what he sets out to do;
- Has given us each other, and provides for us—and always will;
- Has granted us all the forgiveness of our sins for the sake of his Son Jesus; and
- Holds our future in his hand—and will, to all eternity, so that death has no dominion over us.

At the same time, praying the prayer is a way of taking upon ourselves the delightful duties of children of God, who because of our faith and love want to:

- Lift up the name of the Lord however we can;
- Belong to the kingdom of his Son Jesus, and bring others into that kingdom;
- Enact the good and gracious will of God in all our lives;
- Provide for the needs of others;

⁵ Luther’s Works (St. Louis edition), vol. 31, p. 300.

- Forgive the sins of others, and help them to know God's forgiveness; and
- Defend and protect one another from any sort of evil.

The requests in this prayer, even as they are directed at God, are also reflected back upon those who pray it in Christ, so that we become, through God's forming our intentions into faith and love, the hands of God bringing salvation and peace and hope to the world.

This reflection of the petitions on us is evident in several ways. Most impressive to me is that every single petition, even as it is uttered, introduces the notion that we who pray must be involved in "making it happen." When we pray this prayer in Christ, we are (by the Holy Spirit, who teaches us all things) urging ourselves on in every good direction! To quote Philippians 2:13: "For it is *God* who is at work *in you*, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Or Ephesians 2:10: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, *which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*"

Actually, we could say that the first three petitions do not ask God to *do* anything. We only ask God to *be* God to us. As I said before, if we were all doing our part, we wouldn't have to ask. It is not God who needs to be changed, but ourselves and our neighbors. These petitions should quicken *our* love for the Word of God, propel *us* to worship, and energize *us* to serve God in every possible way.

While the other petitions ask God to *do* something, to bless us, they nevertheless involve us personally in taking care of each other and ourselves.

For example, the fourth petition asks for our daily bread. Notice that we are instructed to ask for something *we* have to make! Not manna. In the next petition, no sooner do we ask for God's absolution than we commit *ourselves* to forgiving those who have wronged us. The sixth petition (at least in Matthew) asks for protection from bad things that might simply happen to us, but also from the harm we might do ourselves by failing in trial or succumbing to temptation. I believe that each of these petitions was deliberately constructed in such a way as to remind us, whenever we pray to God, that *ora* (prayer) is not too far from *labora* (work).

A second and powerful way in which these petitions reflect back upon those who pray is the intentional use of the plural of the first person pronoun. *I* cannot pray this prayer for *myself*. To customize it by praying "My Father in heaven" would be to destroy the prayer. But I do not need to pray it that way! Others, when they pray, are praying for me. When I pray, I am praying for them. We are all praying for each other. This prayer, by putting the plural where we are inclined to use the singular, teaches us what it means to love our neighbor *as ourselves*. Conscientious use of this prayer, allowing our minds to be transformed by its words, should transmute selfish hearts into selfless.

Therefore, when we ask what the effect of the Lord's Prayer is, we have to conclude that it is intended to produce two effects. We are reminded of the shape of God's good will and work in the world; and we are re-enlisted in that work ourselves. When all is said and done, God is the same before and after our prayer, but we have been changed as we increase in *faith in God* and *love of neighbor*. We ask God for everything, and the generous reply—like that of a host at a banquet—is "Help yourselves!" I don't mean this in a Pelagian or semi-Pelagian sense, but in the complicated sense that we become by the Holy Spirit agents plenipotentary who answer the many cries of God's children, *even* for forgiveness. The two great petitions unfold into a prayer that God would work in us and in the world, for the

sake of Jesus Christ and by the power of his Spirit, to make us people who fulfill the two great commandments. We are all to become people who love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and who love each other as ourselves. It turns out that what Jesus wants us to want from our heavenly Father coincides with what God wants from us and wants to do in us – as Micah 6:8 says, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” This is the effect, or these are the effects, of praying and living the Lord’s Prayer, thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord.

Conclusion

I was reading an article about a man who got stuck in a New York elevator for a whole weekend, when I ran into a fascinating bit of information:

In most elevators, at least in any built or installed since the early nineties, the door-close button doesn’t work. It is there mainly to make you think it works. . . . Once you know this, it can be illuminating to watch people compulsively press the door-close button. That the door eventually closes reinforces their belief in the button’s power. It’s a little like prayer.⁶

Is that so? When we pray, are we pressing a dummy button? Is prayer futile? Do we believe in the power of prayer only because, every once in a while, we get what we ask for? Do our prayers rise up like incense only to evaporate?

In defense of the power of prayer, I have offered here my perspective on the internal dynamics of the quintessential prayer of Christian faith, the Lord’s Prayer. That is the button Christians push more often than any other. Do we get what we ask for when we use these words Jesus taught us?

Emphatically, yes. Christian faith seeks what God has promised us in Christ. ***The Lord’s Prayer gives a definite shape to this seeking, by outlining what God has promised and showing us how faith will respond.***

For, after all, prayer is faith put to words just as love is faith put to work. “*Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*” is the fifth century rule of Prosper of Aquitaine. Roughly translated, “How we pray establishes (constitutes?) what we believe.”

The principle is usually employed with reference to the liturgy of the church, of which the Lord’s Prayer is only a small part. In this paper I have tried to apply it vigorously (if not rigorously) to the prayer our Lord composed. If the Lord’s Prayer were at odds with the theology we teach, we would certainly need to revisit our theology. We would not stop using the Lord’s Prayer.

What I hope I have shown in this paper is that the Lord’s Prayer should not be made to stand on the periphery of confessional Lutheran theology. In fact, the doctrine of “justification by faith” may help us see what is really going on in the Lord’s Prayer, as well as how that relates to Jesus’ other teachings about prayer.

“Ask and *you* will receive,” Jesus taught. And he still says, “Ask for righteousness. Ask for the kingdom. Ask for peace. Ask for faith. Ask for love. Ask for freedom. Ask for God to be glorified. Ask, and God will give freely, out of mercy, for my sake.” “Knock, and the door *will* be opened for you.”

⁶ Nick Paumgarten, “Up and Then Down,” in *The New Yorker*, April 21, 2008, p. 111. Emphasis added.