

WEEK 8: A MODEL FOR PRAYER

Matthew 6:9–18



The Place of the Passage

Throughout much of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls his people to a “righteousness that exceeds,” or is greater than, that of the scribes and Pharisees. This is a righteousness that is far removed from hypocritical religious acts and that instead flows from a transformed heart and is expressed in every part of life. Jesus calls his disciples to this righteousness (Matt. 5:17–20), illustrates it with six ethical examples (vv. 21–48), and then illustrates it further with three examples in the realm of religious devotion: giving, prayer, and fasting (6:1–18). In this section he expands his teaching on prayer to include what we refer to as the Lord’s Prayer, and then he briefly addresses fasting. The Lord’s Prayer is the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, both thematically and structurally. Jesus refers repeatedly to God as our Father in the Sermon on the Mount, and now he teaches us how to relate to our Father in prayer. This is a model for true communion with God.

The Big Picture

In contrast to hypocritical or empty praying, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray and fast rightly.

Reflection and Discussion

Carefully and thoughtfully read this section of Jesus' teaching, Matthew 6:9–18. Then use the provided questions to help you think more deeply about the text. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 1831–1832; online at www.esv.org.)

What should come to our mind when we begin prayer by addressing God as “our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9)? How does this encourage us to pray (consider also 1 Pet. 5:7)?

The first topic in this prayer is not a declaration that God's name¹ *is* hallowed; it is a request that God's name *be* hallowed. Throughout the Old Testament, a name functions as a summary or shorthand for one's identity. And to be “hallowed” means to be holy, sanctified, or set apart. In light of this, restate or paraphrase this first request in your own words.

The kingdom of heaven is God's saving and renewing reign through Jesus. It is already present and spreading in the world as the church (Matt. 4:17, 23; 12:28), yet it will not come in its fullness until Jesus returns. What are a few examples of what we expect when we pray for God's kingdom to come (6:10)?

The Bible distinguishes between God's *sovereign* will,² which always happens and which mysteriously includes both the good and the evil actions of humanity, and God's *moral* will, which refers to his commands that people may or may not obey. Which aspect of God's will is in view in Matthew 6:10? What are a few areas of life in which you long to see God's will done?

While the first three requests of this prayer are more directly God-centered, the next three requests focus more on our personal needs, the first of which is the petition for “our daily bread” (v. 11). This prayer assumes that God providentially and kindly oversees the whole process that results in a meal's being placed in front of us. There are many people and processes that contribute to bringing even the simplest of meals from the field to the table. Write down several of the concrete and specific means God uses to bring you the food you eat, then thank him for each one.

Jesus often uses the language of “debts” (Matt. 6:12; see also Luke 7:41–48) to refer to that for which we need to be forgiven. In what way are sins appropriately called “debts”? How deep is our debt to the Lord (see Matt. 18:24)?

James 1:13–15 says that God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. What, then, does Jesus mean in Matthew 6:13?

In Matthew 6:14–15 Jesus connects our forgiveness from God with our willingness to forgive others. In other words, only the forgiving are forgiven. How do we understand the connection between the two—our forgiveness from God and our forgiveness toward others? Consider how Matthew 18:23–35 helps us understand the connection (see also Eph. 4:31–5:2; Col. 3:13).

The content of our prayers reveals our values. In light of this, what do the requests of the Lord's Prayer teach us to prioritize in life? What are some ways in which you can better cultivate these priorities?

Fasting is about forgoing food in order to express devotion to God. What similarities do you see between Matthew 6:16–18 and 6:1–8? What, then, is Jesus' main point?

Christians often fast in order to amplify prayer and to express a particular longing to the Lord. What are a few things that you long for God to do in your life or the lives of others? How can you plan to pray and fast for these in light of Jesus' teaching here?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

PRAYING TO A FATHER OF LOVE. When Jesus teaches us to address God in prayer, he chooses one of God's titles in particular: "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9). Prayer does not mean coming to "our employer," reporting for duty. It does not mean coming to "the force," ready to experience a surge of energy. It is coming, very personally and very relationally, to our Father who loves us. Prayer is essentially relational. Prayer is speaking to the God who cares for us with fatherly affection. Since Jesus' own death, resurrection, and ascension secure our eternal adoption into God's family, we come humbly and boldly to the Father by grace (Eph. 1:5).

FORGIVENESS. Jesus tells his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts" (Matt. 6:12), but he does not yet say just how much it will cost him for this prayer to be answered. Forgiveness is gracious and free for the one who requests it, but it is costly for the one who extends it. Jesus is on his way to the cross, where he will pay *all* of our debts with his very life. As he will tell his disciples later, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom³ for many" (Matt. 20:28). The payment we owe to God for our debt of sin is eternal death, and this is what Jesus paid on the cross so that we would not have to do so. God has now "forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13–14).

Whole-Bible Connections

SANCTIFYING GOD’S NAME. The prayer “Hallowed be your name” (Matt. 6:9) is not a praise but a plea. It is a request that God would cause his name to be sanctified, honored, and regarded as holy. It is a request that God’s name would no longer be profaned but honored in the world. The background to this request is Ezekiel 36. God sent Israel into exile because they had “profaned my holy name” (Ezek. 36:20). But he added, “I had concern for my holy name,” and he promised to act “not for your sake . . . but for the sake of my holy name” (vv. 21–22). God said, “I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them” (v. 23). This is connected to God’s promise to bring a new covenant in which he would forgive sins, give new hearts, and send the Holy Spirit so that people no longer rejected him but honored and obeyed him (vv. 26–27). Jesus has come to bring these blessings through his death and resurrection. He calls us now to ask the Father to spread these blessings in the world so that God’s name might be hallowed.

YOUR KINGDOM COME. When Jesus teaches us to pray “Your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10), he is teaching us to ask God to spread his rule and reign in the world. The promise of God’s kingdom was an especially prominent part of the message of the prophet Isaiah. The “good news” (lit., “gospel”) that Isaiah announced is summarized with two key clauses: “Behold your God” (Isa. 40:9) and “Your God reigns” (52:7). Both of these phrases announce the good news that God will return to his people as a king, he will reign, and he will rescue them from their enemies, including the powerful enemies of sin and death. These promises began to be fulfilled with the coming of Christ. Jesus is God in the flesh, truly God and truly man, who came to rescue his people and reign over all things. God’s kingdom comes as the church spreads the gospel and more people submit to Jesus’ gracious reign, and it will come finally and fully upon his return.

Theological Soundings

A FRAMEWORK FOR PRAYER. Prayer is clearly important, but *how* should we pray? The Lord’s Prayer is not intended merely to be recited; it functions as a framework for prayer. It teaches us about the God to whom we pray (“Our Father in heaven”) and then provides two categories of prayer, each of which contains three requests. The first category is primarily Godward, focusing on (1) God’s reputation’s being honored, (2) his kingdom’s spreading, and (3) his will’s being done. The second category is primarily focused on our needs: (1) our daily sustenance, (2) forgiveness of sins, and (3) deliverance from evil. When we pray, we can use each of these requests as a summary heading and then pray various requests under each one. This is how we let the six priorities of the Lord’s Prayer shape our requests.

TEMPTATION AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD. Jesus invites us to pray “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13). The Bible teaches God’s sovereignty over all things while also upholding his good character and good purposes in all he does, yet leaving quite a bit of mystery about how this all works. God’s sovereignty over temptation is an example of this. James is clear that God does not tempt anyone with evil but that “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” (James 1:14). Nevertheless, the Bible also affirms that nothing happens apart from God’s will and that he will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability to withstand (Eph. 1:11; 1 Cor. 10:13).

Personal Implications

Reflect on how to apply what you have learned in this text to your everyday life. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole. Also write down what you have learned that can lead you to praise God, repent of sin, trust his gracious promises, and live in obedience to him.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Matthew 6:9–18

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to pray and ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Matthew 6:9–18. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Name** – In the Psalms, the name of the Lord is often the object of religious affections—such as praise, love, trust, and hope (e.g., Pss. 5:11; 7:17; 8:1, 9; 18:49; 33:21; 92:1; 96:2; 102:15). Deuteronomy 12:5, 11 speaks of God's "name" dwelling in the sanctuary; i.e., the Lord's name is a way of speaking about his personal presence (see Lev. 19:12; Deut. 6:13) or the sum of his revealed character (Ex. 34:6).

² **Sovereignty** – Supreme and independent power and authority. Sovereignty over all things is a distinctive attribute of God (1 Tim. 6:15–16). He directs all things to carry out his purposes (Rom. 8:28–29).

³ **Ransom** – A price paid to redeem, or buy back, someone who had become enslaved or something that had been lost to someone else. Jesus described his ministry as serving others and giving his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28).