

# The Prayer Jesus Taught: “Our Daily Bread”

**TEXT:**  
Psalm 121  
John 6:1-14

February 17, 2008

**T**here is a story in the rabbinical tradition of the Jews about an old man who came to the rabbi with a problem. He told the rabbi, “I do not know how to pray.” The rabbi said, “If it would help you, you can read your prayers from a book of prayers.” But the old man replied simply, “I cannot read.” “Do you know the alphabet?” asked the rabbi. “Yes.” “Then here is what you can do,” the rabbi said. “Repeat the alphabet over and over, and God will put the letters in the right order to form the prayer.”

Even the disciples had trouble with prayer. They asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. And Jesus taught them the prayer we have come to know as the Lord’s Prayer, which has been shared by Christians for centuries. At first, this prayer appears to be a simple, straight forward prayer, but as we look closer, we find it to be a prayer with a profound meaning.

Often, when we pray we begin thinking that we need help, or wisdom, or guidance. We know we’ve made a mess of life and we want God to get us out of it. Or we have some pressing needs and we want God to supply for us. But as our faith matures, we discover that God is not some type of celestial concierge who exists to fulfill our needs. The Lord’s Prayer reminds us that God’s world includes our needs

and concerns, as well as the needs and concerns of all people. This is the point we made in the first week of this series. We pray not to “my father” but to “our father.” God, we discover, is a much bigger God than we suppose.

The Lord’s Prayer touches our lives and it touches the lives of everyone who lives in God’s world. It draws our attention to our inward journey as well as the outward journey of our souls. That is, it strengthens our internal spirituality even as it increases our understanding and involvement in the world around us. It speaks to us in our daily walk of faith, and yet you cannot pray this prayer without thinking of your neighbor.

This duality, the private and the corporate, is perhaps best captured in the phrase we are exploring this morning, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

For a long time, scholars have been curious about the word “daily.” The word appears in the New Testament only two times, when Luke and Matthew speak of the prayer that Jesus taught. When biblical scholars cannot find the meaning of a word elsewhere in the Bible, they look to see where that word has been used in other Greek literature. But for years, they could not find this word anywhere in classical or common Greek. They were stumped. They could not be sure

the exact meaning of the word “daily” in this prayer. Finally, someone found the word on a fragment of a piece of paper buried in a pile of domestic papers. The paper was a shopping list a servant would take to market to buy food and supplies for the next day. So the word literally means “bread for tomorrow.”

Daily bread is a common feature among people all over the world. This past week, while Carolyn and I were on vacation, we had the opportunity to eat in a few restaurants. At nearly every one, the first thing they brought us was bread. But in the back of our minds was always the thought: if we eat too much of the warm bread with the enticing fresh aroma, we wouldn’t have room for the main entrée. In North America, bread is usually a filler in the meal; nice to have, but it is not usually necessary for our survival. But for much of the rest of the world, bread is the main meal of the day. It is not used to fill out the meal, but to stave off hunger.

This, of course, was true in Jesus’ day. Those who followed him throughout the Judean countryside were often living on the edge of starvation. The story of the feeding of the 5000 was so popular because it touched on a basic human need of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews. They were hungry and Jesus offered them bread. This idea of sharing bread with others was a primary tool for teaching

what the Kingdom of God was all about.

Now “daily bread” or “bread for tomorrow” has a rich history in the Bible. One of the great stories of the Hebrew Scriptures was journey in the wilderness following the exodus from Egypt. And one of the prominent features of that story was that God fed the people each day for 40 years. God gave them “daily bread”, the manna from heaven. Every morning they would wake up and find the bread they needed for the day. There was one condition, however. They could only collect the bread for one day. They couldn’t store or hoard it. They could only collect what they needed. From day to day the people learned to depend solely upon the Holy One for their daily bread.

While this petition about daily bread is very practical, it is also revolutionary. If we pray this prayer we are also praying for those who won’t have bread for today. We notice again, that the petition is plural, give “us” this day “our” daily bread. We are called to pray for and work on behalf of those in our world who live most days without the basic “daily bread.”

We are all aware of the hunger that exists in our world. We know that people die each day of hunger because of drought, war, ethnic strife, and government corruption or inaction. The problem isn’t that there is not enough food. Experts tell us that the most basic cause of hunger today is the inequitable distribution of the basic substance of life to all people. God has supplied for the needs of every one but not for the greed of a few. N.T. Wright, the Dean of Litchfield Cathedral in

England, in his book, *The Lord and His Prayer*, reminds us that when we pray this prayer, we should see ourselves as part of a wider Christian family, a human family, standing alongside of the hungry, and praying on their behalf.<sup>i</sup> William Barclay goes a little further when he says: “The one who prays this petition is committed to a life in which she or he cannot have too much while others have too little.”<sup>ii</sup>

When we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we recognize our interconnectedness with others in God’s world. In our modern industrialized world, the food on our tables does not come from our vegetable gardens in our backyards. We receive it from many hands, from the ranches of Argentina, the rice paddies of Asia, the wheat fields of the mid-west and the agricultural valley of California.<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, the items on our plates each day are delivered by migrant farm workers, union truck drivers and the produce managers at the local store. When we pray this prayer, we include them, all of them, as part of God’s sphere of concern and God’s gift of life.

While we are on vacation, Carolyn and I watched the old movie classic, *Mr. Deeds goes to Town*. This was the original, filmed in 1936, starring Gary Cooper. In the movie, Longfellow Deeds inherits a whole lot of money. He is an idyllic young man, always helping others in his little town. But after he inherits the money, he comes to New York to take care of business. Soon he is introduced to every type of cynicism, greed and corruption. He is almost taken in by their perspective when he meets a man who has lost everything in

the depression. After hearing the man’s story, Deed finds his perspective is changed. He decides to give his fortune away to help others who have nothing rebuild their lives.

This, it seems to me, is a good example of what is being said in this prayer: Give us this day our daily bread.

But then we have a twist in the story. Once the word goes out that Deed is giving away his money, the movers and shakers of society start to think he is crazy. They take him to court to prove he is insane for wanting to give all that money away, and worse he is a threat to the moral order of the society. They argue that this kind of activity would undercut the government and destabilize the efforts of economic recovery.

This, it seems to me, is a good example of what we would we would hear from the movers and shakers of our world, if we were to truly take seriously what Jesus is teaching here. They would argue that if we don’t make, keep and spend all that we can, we undercut the American way of life. But when we pray the Lord’s Prayer we are challenged to think and act generously, as Longfellow Deed did, and to resist the temptation toward shaping the world to our benefit alone.

This prayer brings our focus back to God and to God’s world. When we offer this prayer we are reminded again and again, that this world does not belong to us; it belong to God and God calls us to be part of the process that brings the world and all its people in line with the perspective and purpose of God.

Give us this day our daily bread.

---

<sup>i</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, (Eerdmens, 1996) 45f

<sup>ii</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, (Westminster 1975)

<sup>iii</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (Chalice Press, 1996) 108

**This sermon delivered by  
Kent Winters-Hazelton  
First Presbyterian Church  
2415 Clinton Parkway  
Lawrence, KS 66047**