

On Prayer

Excerpt*

The Lord's Prayer

The Spirit of God and the Word of God and the Reason of God — Word of Reason and Reason and Spirit of Word — Jesus Christ our Lord, namely — who is both the one and the other¹ — has determined for us, the disciples of the New Testament, a new form of prayer. For in this particular also it was needful that new wine should be laid up in new skins and a new patch be sewn to a new garment.² Besides, whatever had been in days past has either been quite changed — such as circumcision — or else supplemented — such as the rest of the Law — or else fulfilled — such as Prophecy — or else perfected — such as faith itself. For the new grace of God has renewed all things from carnal into spiritual by superinducing the Gospel, the obliterator of the whole ancient... system, in which our Lord Jesus Christ has been approved as the Spirit of God and the Word of God and the Reason of God: the Spirit, by which He was mighty; the Word, by which He taught; the Reason, by which He came. So also the prayer composed by Christ³ has been composed of three parts: in speech, by which [prayer] is enunciated; in spirit, by which alone it prevails; [and in reason, by which it is taught.]⁴

Even John [the Baptist] had taught his disciples to pray, but all John's doings were laid as groundwork for Christ, until, when "He had increased" (just as the same John used to fore-announce "that it was needful" that "He should increase and himself decrease"⁵), the whole work of the forerunner passed over, together with his spirit itself, unto the Lord. Therefore, after what form of words John taught [his

disciples] to pray is not extant, because earthly things have given place to heavenly. "He who is from the earth," says John, "speaks earthly things; and He who is here from the heavens speaks those things which He has seen."⁶ And what is the Lord Christ's — as this method of praying is — [that] is [not] heavenly?

And so, blessed [ones], let us consider His heavenly wisdom, first, touching the precept of praying secretly, whereby He exacted man's faith... that the sight and hearing of Almighty God are present beneath roofs and extend even into the secret place and [whereby He] required modesty in faith, that it should offer its religious homage to Him alone, who is believed to see and to hear everywhere. Second..., let [this heavenly wisdom]... apply to faith and the modesty of faith, so that we should not think that the Lord must be approached with a train of words, who, we are certain, takes unsolicited foresight for His own. And yet that very brevity — and let this make for the third grade of wisdom — is supported on the substance of a great and blessed interpretation and is as diffuse in meaning as it is compressed in words. For [such brevity with substance] has embraced not only the special duties of prayer — be it veneration of God or petition for man — but also almost every discourse of the Lord, every record of [His] Discipline, so that, in fact, in the [Lord's] Prayer is comprised an epitome of the whole Gospel.

The prayer begins with a testimony to God and with the reward of faith. When we say, "Our Father who are in the heavens,"... we at once pray to God and commend faith.... It is written, "To them who believed on Him He gave power to be called sons of God."⁷ However, our

*The entire book can be read here:

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.vi.iv.i.html>

¹ that is, both Lord and Christ

² Mt 9:16-17; Mk 2:21-22; Lk 5:36-37

³ that is, the Lord's Prayer

⁴ This clause is added by scholars who assume that the third part was somehow lost in our current manuscripts.

⁵ Jn 3:30

⁶ Jn 3:31-32

⁷ Jn 1:12

Lord very frequently proclaimed God as a Father to us, no, even gave a precept “that we call no one on earth ‘father’, but the Father whom we have in the heavens.”⁸ And so, in thus praying, we are likewise obeying the precept. Happy are they who recognize their Father! This is the reproach that is brought against Israel, to which the Spirit attests heaven and earth, saying, “I have begotten sons, and they have not recognized me.”⁹ Moreover, in saying “Father,” we also call Him God. That appellation is one both of filial duty and of power. Again, in the Father the Son is invoked. “For I,” says He, “and the Father are One.”¹⁰ Nor is even our mother the Church passed by, if, that is, in the Father and the Son is recognized the mother, from whom arises the name both of Father and of Son. In one general term, then, or word, we both honor God, together with His own, and are mindful of the precept and set a mark on such as have forgotten their Father.

The name of “God the Father” had been revealed to none. Even Moses, who had interrogated Him on that very point, had heard a different name.¹¹ To us it has been revealed in the Son, for the Son is now the Father’s new name. “I am come,” says He, “in the Father’s name.”¹² And again: “Father, glorify Your name.”¹³ And more openly: “I have manifested Your name to men.”¹⁴ That [name], therefore, we pray may “be hallowed.” Not that it is fitting for men to [wish] God [well], as if there were any other [god] by whom He may be wished well or as if He would suffer unless we do so wish. Plainly, it is universally fitting for God to be [blessed] in every place and time on account of the memory of His benefits ever due from every man. But this petition also serves the turn of a blessing. When is the name of God not “holy” and “hallowed” through Himself, seeing that of Himself He sanctifies all others — He to

whom that surrounding circle of angels cease not to say, “Holy, holy, holy”? In like manner, therefore, we too candidates for angelhood, if we succeed in deserving it, begin even here on earth to learn by heart that strain hereafter to be raised unto God and the function of future glory — for the glory of God.

On the other hand, for our own petition, when we say, “Hallowed be Your name,” we pray this: that [His name] may be hallowed *in us* who are in Him, as well in all others for whom the grace of God is still waiting,¹⁵ so that we may obey this precept, too: in “praying for all,”¹⁶ even for our personal enemies.¹⁷ And therefore, with suspended utterance, not saying, “Hallowed be it *in us*,” we say, “*in all*.”

According to this model, we add, “Your will be done in the heavens and on the earth.” Not that there is some power withstanding to prevent God’s will being done and we pray for Him the successful achievement of His will, but rather we pray for His will to be done *in all*. For, by figurative interpretation of “flesh” and “spirit”, we are “heaven” and “earth.”

But even if it is to be understood simply, still the sense of the petition is the same, that *in us* God’s will be done on earth, to make it possible, namely, for it to be done also in the heavens. What, moreover, does God will but that we should walk according to His Discipline? We make petition, then, that He supply us with the substance of His will and the capacity to do it, that we may be saved both in the heavens and on earth, because the sum of His will is the salvation of them whom He has adopted. There is, too, that will of God that the Lord accomplished in preaching, in working, in enduring. For if He Himself proclaimed that He did not His own but the Father’s will, without doubt, those things which He used to do *were* the Father’s will.¹⁸ To these things, as examples,

⁸ Mt 23:9

⁹ Is 1:2

¹⁰ Jn 10:30

¹¹ See Ex 3:13-16.

¹² Jn 5:43

¹³ Jn 12:28

¹⁴ Jn 17:6

¹⁵ See Is 30:18.

¹⁶ 1 Ti 2:1

¹⁷ Mt 5:44

¹⁸ See Jn 6:38.

we are now spurred to preach, to work, to endure even unto death. And we *need* the will of God, that we may be able to fulfill these duties. Again, in saying, “Your will be done,” we are even wishing well to ourselves, insofar that there is nothing of evil in the will of God; even if, relative to each one’s desires, something “other than good” is imposed on us. So by this expression we admonish our own selves to patience. The Lord also, when He had wished to demonstrate to us, even in His own flesh, the flesh’s infirmity, by the reality of suffering, said, “Father, remove this Your cup,” and, remembering Himself, [added,] “yet not My will, but Yours be done.”¹⁹ He Himself *was* the Will and the Power of the Father, and yet, for the demonstration of the patience that was due, He gave Himself up to the Father’s Will.

“Your kingdom come” has also reference to that to which “Your will be done” refers — *in us*, that is. For when does God not reign, in whose hand is the heart of all kings?²⁰ But whatever we wish for ourselves we proclaim for Him, and *to* Him we attribute what *from* Him we expect. And so, if the manifestation of the Lord’s kingdom pertains to the will of God and to our anxious expectation, why do some pray for some extension of the age, when the kingdom of God, which we pray may arrive, waits for the consummation of the age? Our wish is that our reign be hastened, not our servitude extended! Even if it had not been prescribed in the Prayer that we should ask for the coming of the kingdom, we should, unbidden, have sent forth that cry, hastening toward the realization of our hope. The souls of the martyrs beneath the altar cry... to the Lord, “How long, Lord, do You not avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?”²¹ for, of course, their avenging is regulated by the end of the age. No, Lord, Your kingdom come with all speed...!

¹⁹Lk 22:42

²⁰Pr 21:1

²¹Rev 6:10

But how gracefully has the Divine Wisdom arranged the order of the Prayer, so that after things heavenly — that is, after the “Name” of God, the “Will” of God, and the “Kingdom” of God — it should give earthly necessities also room for a petition! For the Lord had previously issued His edict, “Seek first the kingdom, and then even these shall be added.”²²

On the other hand, we may rather understand, “Give us this day our daily bread,” spiritually. For Christ is our Bread; because Christ is Life, and bread is life. “I am,” says He, “the Bread of Life.”²³ And, a little above: “The Bread is the Word of the living God who came down from the heavens.”²⁴ Then [we find], too, that His body is reckoned in bread: “This is my body.”²⁵ And so, in petitioning for “daily bread”, we ask for permanence in Christ and indivisibility from His body.

But, because that word is admissible in a carnal sense too, it cannot be so used without the religious remembrance [that comes] with spiritual Discipline. For [the Lord] commands that bread be prayed for, which is the only food necessary for believers; for “all other things the nations seek after.”²⁶ The same lesson He both ingrains by examples and repeatedly handles in parables when He says, “Does a father take away bread from his children and hand it to dogs?”²⁷ and again, “Does a father give his son a stone when he asks for bread?”²⁸ For He thus shows what it is that sons expect from their father. No, even that “nocturnal knocker” knocked for bread.²⁹ Moreover, He justly added, “Give us *this day*,” seeing as He had previously said, “Take no careful thought about tomorrow, what you are to eat.”³⁰ To the same subject He also adapted the parable of the man who pondered on an enlargement of his barns for his

²²Mt 6:33

²³Jn 6:35

²⁴Jn 6:33

²⁵Mt 26:26

²⁶Mt 6:32

²⁷See Mt 15:26; Mk 7:27.

²⁸Mt 7:9; Lk 11:11

²⁹Lk 11:5-9

³⁰Mt 6:34; Lk 12:29

forthcoming fruits and on seasons of prolonged security but that very night dies.³¹

It was suitable that, after contemplating the liberality of God, we should likewise address His mercy. For what will “daily bread” profit us, if we are really [fed it], as it were a bull destined for a sacrifice? The Lord knew Himself to be the only guiltless One, and so He teaches that we beg “to have our debts forgiven us.” A petition for pardon is a full confession, because he who begs for pardon fully admits his guilt. Thus, too, repentance is demonstrated acceptable to God who desires it rather than the death of the sinner. Moreover, debt is, in the Scriptures, a figure of guilt, because it is equally due to the sentence of judgment and is exacted by it, nor does it evade the justice of exaction, unless the exaction be forgiven, just as the lord forgave that slave [in the parable] his debt.³² For here does the scope of the whole parable hang. For the fact is that the same servant, after being liberated by his lord, does not equally spare his own debtor and, being on that account impeached before his lord, is handed over to the tormentor to pay the uttermost farthing — that is, every guilt, however small. [This] corresponds with our profession that “we also forgive our debtors.” Indeed elsewhere, too, in conformity with this form of Prayer, He says, “Forgive, and it shall be forgiven you.”³³ And when Peter had put forth the question of whether remission were to be granted to a brother seven times, “No,” says He, “seventy-seven times,”³⁴ in order to remold the Law for the better, because in Genesis vengeance was assigned “seven times” in the case of Cain, but in that of Lamech “seventy-seven times.”³⁵

For the completeness of so brief a prayer He added — in order that we should pray, not touching forgiveness merely but touching the entire averting of acts of guilt — “Lead us not into temptation,” that is, do not allow us to be

led into it by him (of course) who tempts. But far be the thought that the Lord should seem to tempt,³⁶ as if He either were ignorant of the faith of any or else were eager to overthrow it. Infirmary and malice are characteristics of the Devil. For [God] had commanded even Abraham to make a sacrifice of his son, for the sake, not of tempting, but proving his faith, in order through him to make an example for that precept of His, whereby He was, by and by, to declare that [one] should hold no pledges of affection dearer than God. He Himself, when tempted by the Devil, demonstrated who it is that presides over and is the originator of temptation. This passage He confirms by subsequent ones, saying, “Pray that you be not tempted”;³⁷ yet they *were* tempted, (as they showed) by deserting their Lord, because they had given way rather to sleep than prayer. The final clause, therefore, is consistent and interprets the sense of “Lead us not into temptation;” for this sense is: “But convey us away from the Evil One.”

In summary of so few words, how many utterances of the prophets, the Gospels, the apostles — how many discourses, examples, parables of the Lord — are touched on! How many duties are simultaneously discharged! The honor of God in the “Father”; the testimony of faith in the “Name”; the offering of obedience in the “Will”; the commemoration of hope in the “Kingdom”; the petition for life in the “Bread”; the full acknowledgment of debts in the prayer for their “Forgiveness”; the anxious dread of temptation in the request for “Protection.” What wonder? God alone could teach how he wished Himself prayed to. The religious rite of prayer therefore, ordained by Himself, and animated, even at the moment when it was issuing out of the Divine mouth, by His own Spirit, ascends, by its own prerogative, into heaven, commending to the Father what the Son has taught....

³¹See Lk 12:16-20.

³²See Mt 18:21-35.

³³Lk 6:37

³⁴Mt 18:21-22

³⁵Gen 4:15, 24

³⁶See Jas 1:13.

³⁷Lk 22:40; Mt 26:41; Mk 14:31

Tertullian's Other Teachings on Prayer Summarized

- It is permissible to add our own specific petitions to the Lord's Prayer.
- When praying to the Father, you must not be angry with a Brother.
- Not only must we not be angry, we must also not have a perturbed mind.
- Washing the hands before prayer is not necessary, but rather superstitious.
- Likewise, taking off one's cloak to pray is simply superstitious.
- ...So is sitting down after you have prayed.³⁸
- If you raise your hands when praying, do not raise them too high, because it draws attention to yourself.
- Likewise, do not pray in too loud a voice.
- If you are fasting, do not withhold the "kiss of peace", because it will let others know that you are fasting.
- Similarly, if you are fasting, you should still take part in the Lord's Supper.
- Women, including virgins, should be modest when praying, which includes wearing a veil, as Paul described.
- Usually, it is good to kneel when praying out of humility; but during times of rejoicing — such as Sunday or Pentecost — it is good to stand.
- Jesus' command to not pray "in public" does not literally mean that we cannot pray in the presence of others.
- Tertullian suggests praying at least three times a day, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours as a matter of discipline.
- We should pray for each other when we part company.
- Some like to add the Hallel³⁹ and other Psalms to the end of their prayers, and this is good.
- Prayer is a "spiritual sacrifice"⁴⁰.
- Prayer is powerful.
- Even Jesus Himself prayed!

³⁸Some began this custom due to an over-literal reading of an early Christian book called *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

³⁹Ps 115-118

⁴⁰See 1 Pe 2:5.