

Genesis 1:26-28

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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## THE POWER OF COVENANTAL PRAYER

by Ray R. Sutton

### Transcendence

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

### Hierarchy

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

### Ethics

Give us this day our daily bread.

### Oath<sup>1</sup>

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

### Succession

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen (Matthew 6:9-13).<sup>2</sup>

Prayer is at the center of all that the Church does. It is the primary means for accomplishing everything in the kingdom of God. Why? Because it is ordained by **God** as **His** divinely appointed means of bringing to pass **His** ends. It is **God's** decision to use prayer to implement **His** will, and so **His** purposes cannot be carried through without it. In other words, it is **His** doing and nothing gets done apart from the way God wants things to get done; there simply is no other way. A church or group that prays little will soon accomplish little. A church or group that prays much will soon be setting the pace for everyone else to follow. It is not magic, but merely God's predetermined covenantal way of doing things. If the Church will do things the Lord's way, then it will get results! And how it needs to get results!

If it sounds as though I'm reducing the Church down to the life of prayer, you're hearing me right. Everything in God's kingdom, and I do mean everything, is prayer in some form

or another. I know that this may be a new way of looking at life, but I hope that you will consider it this way. The ancient Church believed that **work is prayer**, and if you think about it, indeed everything that the Church does should be an expression of one of the following aspects of prayer: adoration, praise, confession, petition, and last but not least, thanksgiving. The life of the Church in and out of worship is prayer. And it is this all-encompassing place of prayer that makes our Lord's model for prayer so important.

### Good News and Bad News

I have some good news and some bad news. I know of no other portion of Scripture so familiar to the average Christian than the Lord's Prayer; the only other might be the Twenty-Third Psalm. I have found that most Christians learn it early in their Christian life, either because they pick it up from its weekly recitation in the worship service, or because they are taught it in their catechism or confirmation classes. And even those churches and groups that teach that the Lord's Prayer is not for the Church, but for some future "kingdom age," cannot resist its influence. They say, "We'll extract the principles," and by the time they're done extracting, they have perfectly duplicated it, which reminds me of some good and bad news.

The good news is that a number of churches have decided to "principlize" the Lord's Prayer into their lives. They have used it as a model for their prayer life, and they have even begun to have **daily** prayer at the church, an ancient practice by the way, which is called the "Daily office."

The first Christians replaced the times of appointed sacrifice in the Temple with appointed prayer at the same time, because prayer is the greatest form of sacrifice apart from the work of Jesus on the Cross. They prayed every three hours, as demonstrated by the references in Acts to praying at the third hour, ninth hour, and so forth, adding up to eight times of prayer during the day. In the Middle Ages, however, God's people primarily continued this system of prayer in the monasteries, until the Protestant Reformation brought daily prayer back to the layman. So the good news is that maybe we're beginning to see the start of a new reformation, judging by all of the interest in daily prayer, and especially the Lord's Prayer.

But the bad news is best summed up in a story told by Clarence E. Macartney, a famous Presbyterian minister of the earlier part of this century: As two men were walking through a field, they spotted an enraged bull. Instantly they darted toward the nearest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent that they wouldn't make it. Terrified, one shouted to the other, "Put up a prayer, John. We're in for it!" John answered, "I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life." "But you must!" implored his companion. "The bull is catching up to us." "All right," panted

1. Notice that I am changing the labels for the fourth and fifth categories of the covenant, not the concepts. I only do it because Tom George, Haltom City, Texas, read my book, *That You May Prosper*, and he persuaded me to make the change on the basis of his brilliant acrostic: Transcendence, Hierarchy, Ethics, Oath, Succession, **THEOS**, the Greek word meaning **God**. I think that it fits so well, and that it so further rivets the covenant into a person's mind that I will use this description in the future.

2. I want to express my thanks to Michael Voytek, Ruling Elder at Peninsula Christian Church, for his insightful article on the covenantal structure of the Lord's Prayer. He applied the five-fold model and it has stimulated my thinking, even though he structures the prayer a little differently. I had originally planned to run his article in this newsletter, but I did not have enough space. Perhaps I can devote an entire newsletter to the papers I'm receiving that take the covenantal model and develop various portions of Scripture according to it.



John, "I'll say the only prayer I know. My father used to repeat it at the table: 'O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.'"

John had the right idea, but he didn't know what he was doing. He knew that he needed to pray. He wanted to pray. He actually did pray. But when it came time to pray, he failed to produce the kind of prayer that would deliver him from the enraged horns of his pursuer. You might say that he prayed an empty prayer because he didn't know how to pray.

Here's where the modern Church is like John. It wants to pray; it does pray; it even fervently prays; but, it fails to pray the kind of prayers that will change civilization because it often doesn't truly know how to pray. Maybe you think I'm being too hard; after all it's the heart that counts and not the words; isn't that right? Maybe I'm just being self righteous because some of the churches doing the praying don't agree with me on everything. Maybe I'm trying to discredit other well-intentioned churches because my own church's denomination, and others like it, are such miserable failures at changing culture.

No, I'm not trying to bolster my own church's affiliation by running somebody else's down. In fact, I happen to think that many of the churches doing the praying, even though they differ theologically, are much closer to what the church ought to be. And, I commend them for it. Please don't misunderstand, I'm not attacking any particular church. I'm trying to make the point that the modern evangelical church does not really know how to pray. Does that shock you? I hope it does, so that you will at least hear me out, and allow me to tell you how I can be so dogmatic on such a point.

### Zerklappern

Before Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, He warned them of a certain kind of prayer, unfortunately the kind of prayer that I most often see in evangelical churches. Jesus says,

And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore . . . Pray, then in this way: Our Father . . . (Matthew 6:5-9).

For one, Jesus criticized the religious community for being more interested in publicly impressing the unbeliever with its spirituality by its endless street corner prayer meetings. Instead, He told them to go private with their meetings.

But Christ's main criticism, the one which prompted His giving the Lord's Prayer, was that the hypocrites were praying empty **spontaneous** prayers, meaningless repetitive prayers, what Martin Luther called **zerklappern**, which literally means, "To rattle something to pieces." That's right, Jesus was attacking vain spontaneity, because that is why He provides His disciples with a **set** prayer, one containing the proper content with which to get the ear of God. One writer has said,

[Prayer] is never a consumer satisfaction. That is already taught us by the Lord's Prayer, which is given to us as a model because it is totally different from "spontaneous" prayer, . . . It is the opposite to talkativeness, to careless words (Matthew 12:36-37), and to uncertain, inappropriate words centered on our own

needs (Matthew 6:7). The "Our Father" is both restrained and disciplined, but especially it is not an expression [primarily] of our needs.<sup>3</sup>

OK, am I against spontaneous prayer? Of course not, but I don't think people should be praying spontaneous prayers until they know a few set prayers, especially the Lord's Prayer. I encourage new believers to concentrate on set Biblical prayers, and I teach them how to model their "free" prayers after them. I have found it to be a great exercise, and it keeps me from being **repetitious**. I find that I have more diversity in my prayer life when I model my prayers after set prayers.

If spontaneous prayer is not based on set prayer it is reduced to a bunch of slogans and, "Lord, I just want to," and "Lord I just, just, just, just," if you have noticed how much modern evangelical spontaneous prayer is an endless stream of "justs." If spontaneous prayer is not based on set prayer, that is Jesus' prayer, as He Himself told them, then the prayer is focused on man and not God. If spontaneous prayer is not based on set prayer, in short, it becomes endless clamoring, **zerklappern**: it becomes ineffectual prayer; it becomes long-winded and short-on-content prayer.

The historic Church through the ages has understood Jesus' use of a set prayer as a corrective to vacuous, wordy, man-centered, spontaneous prayer. It has given us some choice, succinct, Biblical and powerful prayers, unlike the modern church which doesn't write prayers because its prayers aren't worth preserving. To the contrary, the Ancient and Medieval Church had the ability of forging effective prayers.

### Context of the Lord's Prayer

The context of the Lord's Prayer is **covenantal**. The larger context of the Book of Matthew follows the structure of the covenant, which I present in some detail in *That You May Prosper*, my book on the Biblical theology of covenant.<sup>4</sup> To be precise, the context of Matthew is Deuteronomy; as Moses addressed the nation and told them of a new national identity in Canaan, Jesus addressed the nation of Israel and told them of a new national identity in the Church. Matthew's over-arching covenantal thesis challenges us with the reality of a **new covenantal nation**, the **Church**: "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a nation [the Church] producing the fruit of it" (Matthew 21:43).<sup>5</sup>

#### Covenantal Structure of Matthew:

Transcendence: 1:1-7:28

Hierarchy: 7:29-11:1

Ethics: 11:2-13:53

Oath: 13:54-19:2

Succession: Part I - 19:3-26:1

Part II - 26:2-28:20

The narrower context of the Lord's Prayer is the Sermon on the Mount, the last portion of part one of the covenantal structure of Matthew. Since it is the conclusion of the section, it focuses on the final point of the covenant: succession through blessing. So the Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes, and the rest of it develops them in reverse order. Here is the structure of the Sermon, powerfully pre-

3. Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* (New York: The Seabury Press, [1970] 1979), pp. 145-146. Brackets mine.

4. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant* (Tyler, Texas: I.C.E., 1987), pp. 233-245.

5. Gary North, *Healer of Nations* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987). Dr. North insightfully refers to this verse as the key statement in the Bible around which a Christian world and life view of **foreign** policy should be developed.



sented by M. D. Goulder, who received his doctorate from the University of Oxford for his written work on Matthew.<sup>6</sup>

Blessing Structure of the Sermon on the Mount	
Eight Beatitudes	5:1-10
Explanation of Beatitudes	
(8th) Persecuted	5:11-16
(7th) Peacemakers	5:21-26
(6th) Pure in heart	5:27-37
(5th) Merciful	5:38-6:4
(4th) Hunger for Righteousness	6:5-6:18
(3rd) Meek	6:19-6:34
(2nd) Mourners	7:1-7:6
(1st) Poor in spirit	7:7-12
Conclusion	7:13-27

Thus, the context of the Lord's prayer is covenantal. The immediate context of the Lord's Prayer is that it specifically falls in the exposition of the fourth beatitude on hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The fourth beatitude refers to the Eucharist, eating a meal with God to become more and more sanctified, not because the sacrament of communion is magical, but because it is an act of covenant renewal (covenantal). To the point, eating with God is an act of prayer because Eucharist comes from the Greek work **eucharizo**, meaning to **give thanks**. Man's highest privilege is to say thanks to God in prayer by renewing his covenant through eating Christ's Holy Supper. So we should not be surprised that Jesus expounds the subject of prayer as He elaborates on the fourth beatitude, which brings us to the covenantal nature of the Lord's Prayer.

### The Lord's Prayer

All of the prayers in the Bible are covenantal. In the ancient world, when a vassal committed himself to his suzerain, he would join his hands together and place them between the lord's. The vassal then declared himself, "The lord's man," as a commitment of trust.<sup>7</sup> In the same way, prayer is a means whereby the church, as God's vassal, declares itself the Lord's man, and displays its trust in its Suzerain. Prayer is a covenantal commitment of trust in the God of heaven and earth! It should be based in the covenant, and it should ask God to bring about the application of the covenant in the individual and corporate world around the people of God.

### Transcendence

"Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name" (Matthew 6:9).

Covenantal prayer begins with God and not with man because God began everything. It places God at the start of the prayer. It is not focused on man, on hyping him up, or on psychologically adjusting him. It is not as though man and his needs are not important, but as Jesus indicates, prayer is not to let God know your needs; He already knows them. Covenantal prayer is to acknowledge that God is the One, the only One who can speak to those needs.

Jesus, however, begins on a transcendent note by saying God is **in heaven**, a way of actually saying that God is distinct from the creation. Does this diminish the need for prayer, the fact that God is distinct and absolutely Sovereign? No, it actually forms the only rationale for prayer. How? Since God and man are separate beings, and not one essence or being, communication is absolutely necessary for

there to be a relationship. This communication is the covenant itself manifested in many different forms. The form from God to man is His Word, and the form from man to God is prayer, although God's Word and prayer are not mutually exclusive; God's Word is perfect and infallible, and man's word is imperfect and fallible.

Jesus also significantly starts the prayer with "Our Father." God is personal, He is not abstract nor is He detached from His creation. He is present, as close as the family, yet without all of the barriers that often exist between parent and child. Moreover, He is our second and new Father, a Father by covenant. He is the new head of our lives, and most especially the head of our new family, the Church; He is also the head of our earthly family.

Finally, His name and all that it represents is to be "hallowed," which means to be set apart. It is to be made **distinct**, to be distinguished from man's name, which is human. And the requirement to be distinguished from man implies that God's name is to be raised above the civilization; culture is not to be run by man but by God. So, it is not lack of familiarity with God that keeps Him from this civilization, but it is **familiarity to the point of reducing God to a figment of man's imagination**.

### Hierarchy

"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Covenantal prayer is concerned with appealing to God for a new form of government on earth, a new hierarchy. It requests God's ("Thy") "kingdom" (*basileia* in Greek) to come, which in itself implies a different rule. For one, a superficial reading of the verse implies that heaven is some kind of rule or realm which is to come on earth, also making heaven a model for earth. For another, "kingdom" is a loaded Biblical term that can refer to the **rule** and/or **realm** of God. Most likely, however, "Thy kingdom come" speaks of the specific coming of God as King, the new hierarchy. Herman Ridderbos, former professor of theology at Kampen, has written the following in his classic work on the kingdom, *The Coming of the Kingdom*:

When the text says that the **basileia toon ouranoon** ["kingdom of heaven"] "is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, etc.), "is nigh at hand" (Luke 21:31); "cometh" or "is coming" (Luke 17:20; Mark 11:10); "should appear," (Luke 19:11); or "may come," (Matt. 6:10), we should not in the first place think of a spatial or a static entity, which is descending from heaven; but rather of the divine kingly rule actually and effectively starting its operation; therefore, we should think of the Divine **action** of the king. . . . On the basis of this meaning of the word **basileia** ["kingdom"] it has rightly been said that there is a **personal** connotation in the expression "kingdom of heaven." The manifestation of the kingdom of heaven cannot be conceived as an impersonal metaphysical event, but as the coming of God Himself as king.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, covenantal prayer asks God to set up His rule and His will on earth. It appeals to God on the basis of His covenant with man to be the world's king. This implies not a "metaphysical" rule, as Ridderbos said above, but a new ethical rule, which brings us to the third part of Jesus' covenantal prayer.

6. M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lektion in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), p. 269.

7. Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, pp. 4-5.

8. Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 24-25.



## Ethics

"Give us this day our daily bread [or, 'our bread for the coming day' or, 'our needful bread']" (Matthew 6:11).

At face value, covenantal prayer asks God for daily provision, or bread for the "coming day," depending on which manuscript reading is adopted. At any rate, the petition asks for bread. But, it assumes that the reader knows the relationship between "bread" and the "Word of God." Jesus told the Devil, "Man cannot live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Notice the play on words: Jesus spoke of bread, which goes **into** the mouth, in contrast to the Word of God, which comes **out** of His mouth. He meant that there is a cause/effect relationship between obeying God's Word and having enough to eat, "bread." Significantly, He quoted Moses who made the same kind of connection in the stipulations section of Deuteronomy, the same **ethics** segment that parallels the **ethics** petition of the Lord's Prayer. The Lawgiver said,

All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your forefathers. And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:1-3).

Moses' point is that there is a cause/effect relationship between keeping God's law and having food to eat. He warned Israel that should they forget this principle of causality, they would "perish" (Deut. 8:20). He wanted them to understand that a prayer for food should really be a request to obey God, so that the food would be given.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Jesus' petition for food is the same; it is an appeal for obedience to every word that comes out of the mouth of God. It is therefore a petition for an ethical causality to take place.<sup>10</sup>

9. Of particular note is that Martin Luther used the Ten Commandments to guide his prayer life. One day he went to his barber, Peter Beskendorf, and was asked, "Dr. Luther, how do you pray?" Luther responded with a rather lengthy tract, describing mainly how that each day he prayed through the Ten Commandments, applying a four-fold grid to each command. It can be paraphrased in a series of questions: (1) What am I grateful for? (Thanksgiving); (2) What do I regret? (Confession); (3) What should I ask for? (Petition); (4) What shall I do? (Action). Luther also used this four-fold approach to his own personal Bible study. So anyone questioning Luther's view of the law of God should consult his prayer-paradigm that literally changed his barber's life. For more detail on Luther's approach to prayer, see Walter Trobisch, *Martin Luther's Quiet Time* (Madison, Wisconsin: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

10. Interestingly, Blaise Pascal expressed in his *Pensees* that **causality** is the issue at stake with prayer. He said, "Why God has established prayer: (1) To communicate to His creatures the dignity of causality; (2) To teach us from whom our virtue comes; (3) To make us deserve other virtues by work" (#513). Thus, for Pascal there is a relationship between cause and effect, prayer and virtue, and virtue and work. Prayer, however, is the covenantal key to all of these!

## Sanctions

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

The fourth petition touches subject matter that appears in the **oath** (sanctions) section of the Deuteronomy covenant: forgiveness. At this point in the covenant, Moses instructs the people of God how to make an oath before God that would renew their covenant. It is not an actual confession of sin. It is an oath that assumes the curses of the covenant, which in turn secure the forgiveness. The oath that assumes the sanctions brings about the removal of their guilt, forming the basis for this second covenant Moses was creating.

Consistent with the Deuteronomical pattern, the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer is structured in the form of an oath. Paraphrasing the verse, it says, "On the basis of our forgiveness of others, O God, please forgive us our sins." There is a condition; there is a request; and, there is an implied promise to forgive at the forefront of the entire petition. More to the point, the fourth petition establishes an "oath of indebtedness," which William F. May says is one of the leading features of the Biblical covenant. He says,

The fact of indebtedness constitutes the chief reason for using the term "covenant," and that therefore "responsiveness to gift characterizes a covenant."<sup>11</sup>

Mays's point is simply that a sense of indebtedness produces a "response," specifically an oath before the Lord.

## Succession

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil (the "evil one"). For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen (Matthew 6:13).

Finally, covenantal prayer closes on the issue of continuity/discontinuity, just as the last segment of the Deuteronomical covenant focuses on receiving the blessing so that there can be continuity with the covenant head, and not discontinuity. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says that prayer should request not to be lead into discontinuity, but that it should appeal to the God of heaven and earth to be taken from the grasp of the "evil one," Satan. It is clearly a matter of succession. The one who is picked off by Satan is not the successor to the kingdom. Whereas, the one who is not led into temptation becomes the true successor.

God is the only one who can give this blessing of deliverance. The prayer concludes with a statement of God's sole possession of the strength to prevent discontinuity with the covenant. It says, "For Thine is the **kingdom**, and the **power**, and the **glory**, forever. Amen." It gives a reason why God is the only One who can make His covenant people successors to His covenant!

11. William F. May, *The Physician's Covenant: Images of the Healer in Medical Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), p. 110.