

The Lord's Prayer

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This sermon is accompanied by five narrators, who speak sections of the Lord's Prayer throughout, representing the voices of the family members described in the sermon's story.

The Lord's Prayer

Father: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

It had been a long day for Jay, a long day of meetings that hadn't turned out the way they should have. Sometimes the people you work with just let you down. His presentations had been in order, he had been ready. Then, someone else fouls the deal, from your own team. Work had been like that a lot lately. It's hard enough to deal with the competition without people from your own team letting you down.

He pulled into the driveway in the dark and braked just as he heard a crunching sound under his wheel. Leaving the car running, he jumped out into the freezing rain to find a scooter wedged under the left tire. Returning to the car, he put it in reverse to assess the damage. The car was ok, but the scooter, which someone had left in the middle of the driveway, was a goner. Jay's evening was not going any better than his day.

As he entered the house, his wife called out, "Did you get my message about stopping at Walgreens for the medicine? Kimmie has a cold. And why on earth are you bringing that wet scooter inside the house?"

Kimmie, wrapped up in a Sponge Bob Square Pants blanket, watching a Sponge Bob Square pants episode for the 80th time, surrounded by a sprinkling of Kleenexes, suddenly looked at her father accusingly, her six year old eyes filling with angry tears. "Dad, what did you do to my scooter?"

"Did you get the cold medicine?" his wife repeated. Jay put down the mangled scooter and pulled out his cell phone to see the blinking signal of a voicemail from an hour ago, a message he had not yet listened to. Walgreens.

The door opened and his son Mack slumped in, dropped his jacket on the floor of the front hall, and lumbered upstairs, dragging his backpack behind him so that it hit and lurched on every wooden step, chipping at the finish Jay still remembered writing a check for. Reaching down to pull the jacket off the floor and hang it on the hook, the father asked, as if to no one in particular, "What kind of person just walks in and drops a coat on the floor?"

"A teenager," his wife Marie replied.

"That's not a good enough answer," Jay thought to himself, but instead the words that came out were these, "I guess I'm going to Walgreens."

And from the couch, a sniffing voice said, from underneath the pile of Kleenex and over the songs of that annoying singing sponge, "Dad, can you at least get me a new scooter?"

Walgreens. It sounded to Jay like a trip to paradise. His own house was stressing him out and making his blood pressure rise.

Father: And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

But in the car, Jay ended up letting the engine idle and took a minute to try to center himself. He'd had a way of doing this since he had been a kid, and it always seemed to help, although he couldn't quite say why. He would just take a quiet minute to sit, and in his mind, recite the Lord's Prayer. Whenever he did that, he found that something in it, some phrase, some word even, always seemed to hit him, always seemed to apply in some important way. Every time it might be a different phrase, but always something would seem to address what was going on and help him refocus, calm down.

In this case, he got stuck on the first words of all, "our father." And in particular, the word "our." Fatherhood was hard enough for Jay, a constant test of his patience. So, as he said "our father," he wondered as he often did how one entity could be the parent of all these people. How one God could keep the whole world in his heart. And what about the bad people?

Or really, if he was honest, it wasn't the truly awful people who bothered Jay on a day to day basis. It was that larger, more common group of people who didn't hold up their end of the bargain, from the woman at work who showed up for the meeting unprepared to the kids who leave jackets on the floors and scooters in the driveways to Jay himself, who had probably let someone down that day himself, as he looked down at the blinking cell phone and a message not picked up. Our father. Not just the perfect people. The debtors, our father, all of us.

Father: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

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

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

Daughter: Give us this day our daily bread.

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

Mack collapsed in his bedroom, his school back pack on the floor, and he just stared up at his ceiling, remembering the events of the day and then his father's words, "What kind of person just leaves a coat in the middle of the floor?" Like that was some sort of marker of the heart of evil. Like a coat on the floor meant you were up there with Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and all those people who don't recycle. Heaven forbid a coat gets dropped by accident. The whole foundation of the house might shudder and crumble under the weight of that one all important, all powerful down jacket, upon which apparently hangs the future of the entire universe.

What a homecoming. Mack's head ached, and his arm too, where he had taken a punch that afternoon. Bullies. He couldn't stand bullies. They mostly never bothered Mack though. He was the kind of kid who tried to get along with everybody and didn't let little things bother him if he could help it, didn't take offense usually. But bullies, they made him mad. There was something about seeing someone else get hurt that hurt Mack more than getting hurt himself.

And that day, coming out of rehearsal, the bullies were loping behind this one kid, calling him names. Now Mack didn't really know this kid; in fact, he thought he might have just transferred to the school. But Mack did know that in his family you didn't use words like that as an insult or a way to put someone down. He had been taught in his family and also in his church that all people deserved respect. We're all God's children. Our father who art in heaven. Everybody included.

But the world of school wasn't like that. Here, words got thrown around as insults,

as yet another way of calling someone different. And heaven forbid you be different when the bullies are out. They drummed each other up and soon kids that Mack liked were joining in the teasing of this new guy. Mack hated that, to see how easily some kids caved in. He told them to cut it out.

Son: And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil:

Mack had told them to cut it out. And now, his arm ached where he'd been hit, and he wondered how the other kid felt. Probably just fine, since Mack's punch had missed. And then he'd sort of waked up and realized this was going nowhere and walked away. After all, if he was mad at the bullies who hurt people with their words as often as with their bodies, he didn't really want to join them. But as for the kid they were teasing, he just rushed off, sort of embarrassed. Had he wanted someone to stick up for him or not?

And why had Mack even done it, why had he gotten involved? He regretted getting physical, but as for the anger, he had felt in his heart how those kids were acting. He knew that was righteous. He always believed that there would be a day when the principles he had been raised with would truly work, and at church that time was called the kingdom. Every Sunday when they prayed the Lord's Prayer, they said that.

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

Every Sunday, they admitted that the world is not perfect, but that we should still want to make it better. Each one of us, in our own way, can always make a choice to bring a little bit of heaven to earth. And sometimes, when you get angry about something unfair, that's what's happening. It's God calling you to stand up and bring a little bit of heaven to this earth. Mack's arm hurt, but he was glad he had stood up for that kid.

Daughter: Give us this day our daily bread. Deliver us from temptation.

"Mom," Kimmie whined. "Mom, is Dad going to get me a new scooter?"

"I doubt it," Marie responded. "You were the one who left it out there in the driveway instead of putting it away."

"That's so unfair," Kimmie said, blowing into her Kleenex for emphasis. "And I'm sick." Marie sighed and thought about the prayer she said over and over in her head. Give us this day our daily bread.

"Ok, then Mom, can I have a motorized scooter?" Silence from her mother. "But Mom, I'm sick." Marie wondered at times about the culture in which she was raising her kids, a culture in which every problem has a material remedy, a culture of entitlement where nothing is ever anyone's fault. Leave a scooter in the driveway and it gets run over? No problem, just tell the house chauffeur, chef and servants, also known as parents, that you need a new one. Feeling sick? Then sit on the couch watching one TV ad after another that tells you that the cure lies in the next item on your Christmas list.

But in the prayer, all it says is this:

Mother: Give us this day our daily bread.

No more, no less. We can ask for that, but it's pretty clear. Give us what we need to live, to survive, and to flourish for the day, but not everything. Just enough. Yet people around Marie defined their daily bread so differently. For some people daily bread included so many extras and luxuries that they had come to view as necessities. Sometimes she wondered if those "some people" included her own children.

Daily bread for Marie was more modest. It was about being thankful for having

a roof over her head. Daily bread was about cooking a meal for someone who was sick. Daily bread was the shelter her church provided for people who had nowhere to lay their heads. Daily bread was giving thanks that she was able to cook a meal for her kids, and now it was time to eat. So she walked over and turned off the television, to a chorus of moans from Kimmie. "But I'm sick...."

Mother: Deliver us from temptation.

She thought about not having this argument right now, of telling Kimmie she could have a new scooter and watch television forever and do whatever it took to avoid an argument. But nobody ever said that being a parent would be easy. Nobody ever said that passing your faith along or your commitment to live a life that matters would be easy.

Daughter: Deliver us from temptation.

That was the other part of the prayer that kept Marie on track when the part about keeping your mind on daily bread got hard. Deliver us from temptation. Marie loved that her faith had taken this sort of thing into account. For two thousand years, Christian people had been admitting that none of this would be simple, that there would be temptations. But there was also daily bread, the simple spiritual reminder to resist a culture that tells you that you never have enough. Because it's the daily bread, the ordinary things, that in the end are the most important.

Father: For thine is the kingdom,

Coming in from the drugstore, Jay was more careful as he pulled into the driveway this time. He looked to see what modes of transport might be lurking around for him to roll over, monster truck style. Happily, in the last twenty minutes nothing had appeared, and he made it safely into the garage.

His daughter had dragged her sniffing self to the kitchen table, and Mack had made his appearance to eat a quick bite before practice. And now Jay was spooning the medicine into Kimmie, whose face was scrunched up in anguish at the terrible taste of cough medicine disguised as cherries, which just really never works. "It's disgusting, Dad," she said, as she swallowed it nonetheless.

And suddenly Jay was back in time, remembering a day when he was six years old, and someone had worried about his cold and convinced him to take a spoonful of something that must have tasted even worse than medicine does today. He was back to a time when he was young and small and vulnerable, a time when losing a scooter was of utmost importance, and staff problems at the office did not yet exist. It was the memory of his mother spooning the mixture into his mouth that reminded him of all he had received from her, and he missed her presence on this earth.

Father: For thine is the kingdom,

Son: And the power,

Father: And the glory,

Son: For ever.

Both: Amen.

"You look sad, Dad," said Mack.

"I am, a little," Jay said. "Thanks for asking."

"What is it?" his son asked.

"I'll tell you what it is," Jay's wife responded. "Your dad is sad because today would have been Grandma's 71st birthday, and he misses her very much." As Jay realized that his wife had remembered what he had not allowed himself to, there was

stillness in the room, a strange quiet, a moment of remembering.

“Well, what should we do?” asked Kimmie. “Sing Happy Birthday?”

“How about we say a prayer,” Marie suggested. And since they weren’t usually ones for making up their own prayers, they fell back on the one they all knew, the one that seemed always to speak to them in times when their own words failed.

Mother: Our Father, who art in heaven,

Father: Hallowed be thy Name.

Daughter: Thy kingdom come.

Son: Thy will be done,

All four: On earth as it is in heaven.

And that night, when they prayed it, once again it opened their eyes, each one in a different way. And although they never said this to one another, that night, all four of them did have the sense that it wasn’t just the four of them praying, but that they had been joined by those who had gone before.

Mother: Our Father, who art in heaven,

Father: Hallowed be thy Name.

Daughter: Thy kingdom come.

Son: Thy will be done,

All four: On earth as it is in heaven.

Grandmother: Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

All five: And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil:

Grandmother: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,

All five: For ever. Amen.