

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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**Series:** The Lord's Prayer  
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### The Lord's Prayer: Some Important Observations

The *New York Times* carried an op-ed piece recently by T.M. Luhrmann entitled *The Benefits of Church*. The thrust of the story is that religious activity has many therapeutic benefits. The author suggests that this really amounts to what she calls the "placebo" effect, i.e. we think something is beneficial and, as such, it helps us. It boosts the immune system and decreases blood pressure – but it is all merely due to the power of suggestion. Luhrmann, who is a social anthropologist, writes: "I want to suggest that this is a skill and that it can be learned. We can call it absorption: the capacity to be caught up in your imagination, in a way you enjoy. What I saw in church as an anthropological observer was that people were encouraged to listen to God in their minds, but only to pay attention to mental experiences that were in accord with what they took to be God's character, which they took to be good. I saw that people were able to learn to experience God in this way, and that those who were able to experience a loving God vividly were healthier — at least, as judged by a standardized psychiatric scale. Increasingly, other studies bear out this observation that the capacity to imagine a loving God vividly leads to better health. For example, in one study, when God was experienced as remote or not loving, the more someone prayed, the more psychiatric distress she seemed to have; when God was experienced as close and intimate, the more someone prayed, the less ill he was. In another study, at a private Christian college in Southern California, the positive quality of an attachment to God significantly decreased stress and did so more effectively than the quality of the person's relationships with other people... But not everyone benefits from symbolic healing. Earlier this month, the youngest son of the famed pastor Rick Warren took his own life. We know few details, but the loss reminds us that to feel despair when you want to feel God's love can worsen the sense of alienation. We urgently need more research on the relationship between mental illness and religion, not only so that we understand that relationship more intimately — the ways in which they are linked and different — but to lower the shame for those who are religious and nonetheless need to reach out for other care."<sup>1</sup> In other words, religious activities such as prayer are beneficial *only* because of the *subjective* affects it produces - and it does not matter what kind of religion or belief system we have - one is just as good as another. According to this very common perception, our religious beliefs are helpful, not because they are, in fact, grounded in truth, but because they are pragmatically useful in coping with life's difficulties. The flaw in this kind of thinking was spotted years ago by J. Gresham Machen, "If you regard religion merely as a means to attain worldly ends, even the highest and noblest of worldly ends - if you regard religion for example, merely as a means of meeting the present emergency in this world, then you have never even begun to have even the slightest inkling of what the Christian religion means. God, as He is known to the Christian, is never content to be thus a mere instrument in the hands of those who care nothing about Him. The relation to God is the all-important thing. It is not a mere means to an end. Everything else is secondary to it."<sup>2</sup> Before we begin to study the petitions of the Lord's Prayer in detail, we must stop to look at the general pattern of the prayer. We cannot fail to see that the prayer begins by giving God His own and His proper place. The first three petitions of the prayer are for the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's Kingdom, and the doing of God's will. It is only then that we turn to our own needs and our own requests. The great fault of prayer is that it can so easily become self-centered and self-seeking. We can be so busy

thinking of what we want, that we have no time to think of what God wants. We can be so concerned with our own desires that we never think of God's will. We can be so busy talking to God that we never give God the chance to talk to us. We can be so busy telling God that we never stop to listen to God. It is precisely that kind of situation that the Lord's Prayer commands us and helps us to avoid. It begins by putting not us, but God, in the center of the picture. The circumference can only be right when the center is right. All other things can only take their proper place when God is given His proper place. The Lord's Prayer begins with the memory of the majesty of God, the memory of the purpose of God, and the acceptance of the will of God.<sup>3</sup> J.I. Packer has pointed out that we are living at a time when we are plagued by unclear minds, uncontrolled affections and unstable wills when it comes to serving God, and we again and again find ourselves being imposed upon by irrational and emotional romanticism disguised as super-spirituality.<sup>4</sup> Our greatest need is to have a God-centered heart, and, as such, the Lord's Prayer begins by focusing upon God. In the words of the good old Bishop Ryle, "Perhaps no part of Scripture is so full and so simple at the same time as this. It is the first prayer which we learn to offer up when we are little children. Here is its simplicity: It contains the germ of everything which the most advanced saint can desire. Here is its fullness – the more we ponder every word it contains, the more we shall feel, 'This prayer is of God.'"<sup>5</sup>

## **I. TO WHOM ARE WE TO PRAY?**

We are never, (I repeat for emphasis) *never* instructed in Scripture to pray to angels, or dead, departed saints or the Virgin Mary! It is to God and God only, that prayer is to be made. And here, God is described by two of His most eminent attributes, His Grace and Glory, His Goodness and His Greatness: By the one, in that He is styled *Our Father*, but the other, in that He is said to be *in heaven*. And both these are most sweetly tempered together, to beget in us a holy mixture of filial boldness and awful reverence, which are so necessary to the sanctifying of God's name in all our addresses to Him. We are commanded to *come to the Throne of Grace with boldness*, (Hebrews 4:16) and yet to *serve God acceptably, with reverence and with fear* (Hebrews 12:28). Yea, and indeed the very calling of it a Throne of Grace, intimates both these affections at once. It is a Throne, and therefore requires awe and reverence; but it is a *Throne of Grace*, too; and therefore, permits holy freedom and confidence.<sup>6</sup>

## **II. IN WHAT SENSE IS GOD A FATHER?**

- A. By creation; it is He that hath made us: "We are also His offspring" (Acts 17:28). "Have we not all one Father?" (Malachi 2:10). Has not one God created us? But there is little comfort in this; for God is Father in the same way to the devils by creation; but He that made them will not save them.
- B. God is a Father by election, having chosen a certain number to be His children, upon whom He will entail heaven. "He hath chosen us in Him" (Ephesians 1:4).
- C. God is a Father by special grace. He consecrates the elect by His Spirit, and infuses a supernatural principle of holiness, therefore they are said to be "born of God" (I John 3:9). Such only as are sanctified can say, "Our Father which art in heaven."

## **III. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOD BEING THE FATHER OF CHRIST AND THE FATHER OF THE ELECT?**

He is the Father of Christ in a more glorious and transcendent manner. Christ has the primogeniture; He is the eldest Son, a Son by eternal generation; "I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was" (Proverbs 8:23). "Who shall declare his generation?" (Isaiah 53:8). Christ is a Son to the Father, as He is of the same nature with the Father, having all the incommunicable properties of the Godhead belonging to Him; but we are sons of God by adoption and grace, "That we might receive the adoption of sons" (Galatians 4:5).

#### IV. WHAT IS THAT WHICH MAKES GOD OUR FATHER?

Faith. “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26). An unbeliever may call God his Creator, and his Judge, but not his Father. Faith legitimizes us and makes us of the blood-royal of heaven. “Ye are the children of God by faith.” Baptism makes us church members, but faith makes us children. Without faith, the devil can show as good a coat of arms as we can.

#### V. HOW DOES FAITH MAKE GOD TO BE OUR FATHER?

As it is a uniting grace. By faith we have coalition and union with Christ, and so the kindred comes in; being united to Christ, the natural Son, we become adopted sons. God is the Father of Christ; faith makes us Christ’s brethren, and so God comes to be our Father. (Hebrews 2:11)<sup>7</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Leon Morris says we should not miss the balance in this opening to the prayer. We address God intimately as *Father*, but we immediately recognize His infinite greatness with the addition *in heaven*.<sup>8</sup> Touching on the expression *in heaven*, the noted Scottish preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Alexander Whyte, declared, “Now heaven, here, is not the sky. It is not the heaven of sun and moon and stars. Heaven, here, is the experienced and enjoyed presence of God – wherever that is. Heaven here is our Father’s house – wherever that is. Heaven is high above the earth – yes; but let it be always remembered and realized that it is high up, as Almighty God is high up, in His Divine Nature, above mortal man in his human nature. It is high up as goodness is high up above evil and as perfect blessedness is high up above the uttermost misery. As often as we kneel down again and begin to pray, we are to think of ourselves as at a far greater distance from God than we ought to be, and now desire to be. All true prayer is a rising up and a drawing near to God: Not in space indeed; not in measurable miles; but in mind, and in heart, and in spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/opinion/sunday/luhrmann-why-going-to-church-is-good-for-you.html>

<sup>2</sup> J. G. Machen, *The Christian Faith in The Modern World* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1947) p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Wm. Barclay, *The Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer for Everyman* (Harper & Row, 1963), p. 157

<sup>4</sup> J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Crossway, 1990). P. 24

<sup>5</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels I* (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins I* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Sections II through V are from Thomas Watson’s *The Lord’s Prayer* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (IVP, 1992), p. 144

<sup>9</sup> A. White, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* (rpt. Baker, 1976), p. 19