

ON EARTH.

**UNDERSTANDING THE
LORD'S PRAYER AS A
PARADIGM FOR PRAYER**

KATE DUGDALE

HEAVENLY FATHER,

PRAY FOR OUR

The theological content and structural pattern of the Lord's Prayer provide the church with a paradigm that teaches us how we are to pray, and consequently, how we should live. Appearing in both Matthew and Luke, it has come to have a central position among the liturgical texts of the church. As this article will explore, the Lord's Prayer was the model of prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples. It serves as a succinct encapsulation of the teaching of Jesus that reflects the already-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God.

We can be confident God wants to answer the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer, as they guide us in the concerns we should bring before God in prayer. This shows the necessity of faith as we trust that God will answer our prayers. We believe this because Jesus taught that God would answer prayer (Matt 7:7–12, Luke 11:11–13). Without this belief, we run the risk of doing exactly what Jesus warned his disciples about in the verses immediately prior to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew – uttering empty requests and repeating ourselves in vain. The Lord's Prayer must not be allowed to become a liturgical mumble, which is why taking the time to reflect on the significance of each phrase is a worthwhile exercise.

Telford Work acknowledges that a theology of prayer is not always tidy, and that, “prayerful theology is theology on the way, rather than theology on arrival.”¹ For the Christian, a theology of prayer must be rooted in Scripture, but it also transcends a solely intellectual explanation because of the role that faith in God plays. The personal impact of prayer on the individual is unpredictable – at best it requires a position of humility, dependence and surrender to God. To pray is to acknowledge human need, lack and weakness, yet prayer springs from a foundation of trust grounded in God's goodness. The Lord's Prayer is uncompromising in presenting to us a vision of the way things should be, rather than the way they are.

After commenting on aspects of the literary and cultural context and structure of the Lord's Prayer, we will work through the prayer. This part of the article will closely mirror the structure of the text, approaching each petition individually and looking at significant points of exegesis. In the final section we will reflect on the use of the Lord's Prayer as a paradigm for prayer.

The Lord's Prayer appears in three primary locations. In Matt 6:9–13 it is part of the Sermon on the Mount, in a context where Jesus is addressing the motivation for prayer. The other New Testament

location is Luke 11:1–4, where the prayer is given as Jesus' response to a disciple's request that he teach them to pray. Having compared themselves to the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus' disciples want practices that will differentiate them from other communities of belief. Having watched Jesus pray, they in turn ask to be taught how to pray.² The third location is in the *Didache*, a short work of Christian instruction, usually dated to the early second century. It gives believers specific instructions to pray the Lord's Prayer three times daily, showing that it had been adopted as a model for prayer by some parts of the Church. The text of the Lord's Prayer in the *Didache* is largely identical to that of Matthew, although in the course of this article I will note some places where it differs.³

There are notable variants between the two New Testament versions of the Lord's Prayer, probably signifying that it was preserved in oral form before either Matthew or Luke was written.⁴ James Dunn suggests that the Lord's Prayer became a living tradition, giving it a liturgical consistency which stabilised its oral development.⁵ It is likely that Jesus taught one version of the prayer to his disciples, probably the shorter Lukan version, which was then expanded in the Gospel of Matthew. It is also conceptually possible that Jesus taught slightly different forms of the prayer to his disciples in different settings, which could also account for the differences.⁶

The simplicity of the Lord's Prayer is based on the assurance that the Lord hears our requests, knows our needs, and will respond in a way that accords with the goodness of God's character. This is why, in Matthew, Jesus denounces any manipulative approach to prayer (Matt 6:7–8). In the Graeco-Roman world, gods were viewed as capricious beings that did not always have the good of humankind in mind. Thus, they were able to be manipulated through sacrifice and prayer. This is suggested by Matthew's onomatopoeic term, *battalogo*.⁷ It

2 Joel B. Green, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 440.

3 Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 356–57.

4 Hans Dieter Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 370.

5 James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 150–51.

6 Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1046. Bock argues strongly that Jesus taught different versions of the prayer, saying, “It seems more likely that these are distinct prayers in distinct settings, or at the least, distinct versions of the prayer.”

7 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 240.

1 Telford Work, *Ain't Too Proud to Beg: Living through the Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), xii.

is evocative of repetitive babbling sounds that are empty of meaning.⁸ In direct contrast, the disciples of Jesus are to **pray with simplicity and with faith, for “God is not ignorant, and already knows what we require when we require it.”**⁹

This article will address each petition individually, working with the five-petition structure found in Luke.¹⁰ Distinctions also occur in the internal structure of the Lord’s Prayer. The first half is concerned with God’s reign being fully established on earth; the second half with the ongoing realities of human life, our holistic nature as physical and spiritual beings and how we are to live in community, in relationship with God and with each other. This structure demonstrates the importance of putting God’s concerns first, yet also gives validity to human concerns.¹¹

Jesus has just instructed his disciples to pray in private, yet his use of a plural imperative adds a communal aspect to this prayer. This is also implied with the plural pronoun in the initial invocation, **“Our Father.” This prayer is not limited to either a personal or communal context; it serves as a guide for prayer in all circumstances.**¹² It may be prayed alone, but those who pray the Lord’s Prayer immerse themselves in the tradition of two thousand years of Christian prayer, and pray “as part of and on behalf of the whole community of those dependent on God.”¹³

LUKE 11:2 “AND HE SAID TO THEM, “WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY, “FATHER”

MATT 6:9 “PRAY THEN LIKE THIS: OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN”

Both New Testament versions of the Lord’s Prayer begin by addressing God as Father.¹⁴ This does not immediately appear to be unusual; however, Jesus

8 John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, WBC 35b (Dallas: Word, 1993), 610.

9 Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 141–42.

10 While the traditional form of the Lord’s Prayer is closest to Matthew and the *Didache*, the shorter Lukan version presents a simpler structure for exegesis.

11 James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 219.

12 Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco: Word, 1982), 284.

13 James D. G. Dunn, “Prayer,” in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (eds.) *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 622.

14 The *Didache* follows Matthew here, except that where Matthew uses a singular noun for heaven, the *Didache* uses a plural form.

has taken a concept that was understood in a general sense in Judaism, and redefined it in a wholly personal way. While there are many Old Testament references to the paternal qualities of God, and the acknowledgment that God was the Father of the nation of Israel, **Joachim Jeremias concludes that there is “no evidence in the literature of ancient Palestinian Judaism that ‘my Father’ is used as a personal address to God.”**¹⁵

To understand the Lord’s Prayer is to have carefully reflected on the significance of addressing God as “Father.” Its opening invocation succinctly frames the new relationship with God that we have been invited into through the life of Jesus. Boice writes, “Jesus was the Son of God in a unique sense, and God was uniquely His Father. He came to God in prayer as God’s unique Son. But now **He reveals that this same relationship can be true for those who have believed in Him.**”¹⁶ **Jesus’ relationship to God serves as an example of the way humans are now able, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, to relate to God.**

In both Matthew and Luke the Lord’s Prayer begins with the Greek word *pater*. It is likely, **however, that Jesus originally used the Aramaic term *abba*.** This highly intimate term was used by children for their father, and is found in Paul’s letters to the Roman and Galatian churches with reference to God.¹⁷ In Graeco-Roman culture, **fathers were the head of the household and had total authority.**¹⁸ Children in Roman culture were powerless, and socially dependent on their fathers, which leads Keener to consider that **“this is the prayer of those who have nowhere to turn but God.”**¹⁹ The relational qualities of intimacy and trust that are evoked by the familial familiarity of this term may have been a reason the early church retained this Aramaic term.

The language of God being “in the heavens” (found in Matthew and in the *Didache*) **is not concerned with God’s spatial location, but is the recognition of God’s transcendent authority.**²⁰ While

15 Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Norwich: SCM Press, 1977), 29.

16 Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 195.

17 The term appears in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6 in Aramaic within a Greek discourse.

18 Karlfried Froehlich, “The Lord’s Prayer in Patristic Literature,” in Daniel L. Migliore (ed.) *The Lord’s Prayer: Perspectives For Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 81.

19 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 216.

20 John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 288.

THE LORD’S PRAYER IS UNCOMPROMISING IN PRESENTING TO US A VISION OF THE WAY THINGS SHOULD BE, RATHER THAN THE WAY THEY ARE.

the address, “Father” expresses intimate love and devotion, God remains sovereign and supreme.²¹ Knowing God as “Our Father,” yet also remaining in awe of God’s incomparable supremacy over all creation, reflects different yet complementary aspects of God’s relationship to the world.²²

The first part of the Lord’s Prayer is theocentric, concerned with **God’s name being hallowed, asking for God’s kingdom to be established, and for God’s will to be done in the same way on earth as it is in heaven.** This part of the prayer is inextricably intertwined. Helpful for our interpretation of these petitions is a quote from John Webster, which points to their eschatological nature as being dependent on God’s intervention:

What does the idiom of prayer indicate about Christian eschatology? **First, it gives expression to the personal specificity of Christian eschatology. Jesus is our hope: come, Lord Jesus.** Jesus is not merely an emblematic figure in a larger historical canvas; he is the future. **Second, in praying that he may come, Christian speech indicates that Jesus is not to be handled as an available object, something or someone to hand. As the one who will come, he is other than an object or figure within the horizon of the world.** **Third, we pray that he may come; that is, we look for the action of another, we implore him to take the initiative, to act in an affair where we cannot act.**²³

These petitions are not solely eschatological, but should be approached in light of the already-but-not-yet tension that spans the timeframe from the present to the eschaton.²⁴ As the church wrestles with what it means to exist in the “overlap of the ages” **between the ascension and second coming, it must reflect God’s plan of redemption and reconciliation, initiated, but not yet complete.** There is a vital element of partnership that takes place between God and God’s people, for, in this in-between time, “the accomplishment of God’s will takes place through his [children] whose conduct expresses their relationship to the Father.”²⁵ The kingdom of God is present through his Spirit, expressed through the life of the church, and is a constant reminder of our anticipation of Jesus’ return.

21 Morris, *Matthew*, 144.

22 Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 287.

23 John Webster, “Eschatology and Anthropology,” in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 276 (emphasis added).

24 Nolland, *Matthew*, 287.

25 Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 290.

LUKE 11:2 “HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME.”

MATT 6:9 “HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME”

The first petition is concerned with God’s name being hallowed, a rather old-fashioned term that is better translated as, ‘Let your name be made holy.’²⁶ Throughout the history of Israel, particularly in the Second Temple period, Judaism was highly emphatic about maintaining the holiness of God’s name, with the result that Jewish people would not even speak it aloud. Culturally, a person’s name “was held to be bound up with the person in some way; the name and the qualities associated with the name went together.”²⁷ To speak of God’s name is to speak of the way God has chosen to be revealed through his actions in history, a concept with strong roots in Judaic tradition.

The first petition leads into the next, for the hallowing of God’s name will be outworked through the establishment of God’s reign, when his will shall be fully realised on earth. This first petition expresses “an aspiration that he who is holy will be seen to be holy.”²⁸ This is not to suggest that God needs to “prove” his holiness; instead, it is that humanity needs to recognise God as he already exists in his holiness. The supremacy and the sovereignty of God are without question. In asking the Lord to honour his own name by establishing his reign on earth, we are asking him to bring things into line with the way Scripture says they are meant to be.

LUKE 11:2 “YOUR KINGDOM COME”

MATT 6:10 “YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN”

The second petition in Luke’s version is treated as two different petitions in Matthew, but these may be considered as an expansion of the single Lukan petition. One of the most common themes of Jesus’ ministry was his teaching about the kingdom of God. Israel anticipated the future global reign of God, yet when Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom would come, he declared to them, “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you!” (Luke

26 Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 389. Betz notes that this could be a divine passive, asking God to sanctify his name, or it could also be interpreted as asking God to cause humanity to sanctify his name.

27 Morris, *Matthew*, 244.

28 Ibid.

17:21). Jesus was declaring that his presence among them signalled that the kingdom had come.²⁹

The Messiah was expected to be a leader who would lead the nation of Israel to international glory and renown, surpassing anything in Israel's history. This is why, when Jesus preached about the *kingdom*, despite his "reformulation in kingdom language of the Old Testament anticipation of the coming of God in judgment and salvation,"³⁰ **the disciples did not understand the true nature of Jesus' mission.** Jesus' incarnational identity was as the suffering servant of Isaiah, not as a politically conquering king. His eschatological identity is as the victorious, resurrected Messiah, who has dominion over the whole cosmos.

This is the petition where it is easiest to explore the already-not-yet tension inherent in the prayer, for the petitions are "all variants of the same end-time promise: everything will be set right someday."³¹ Keener's interpretation of this petition is predominantly eschatological, believing that with the fullness of the kingdom, God "will restore the perfect purpose for which he formed the world in the beginning."³²

It is important that the role of humans is not overemphasised to the point where the full establishment of the kingdom is no longer a divine prerogative but the responsibility of humans. When we ask for the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are, as John Webster has indicated, asking God to "take the initiative, to act in an affair where we cannot act."³³

LUKE 11:3 "GIVE US EACH DAY OUR DAILY BREAD"

MATTHEW 6:11 "GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD"

This petition signals a change in focus from the vast expanse of the kingdom of God being established, to the more basic concerns of human existence. This petition has often been spiritualised

as referring to the Eucharist, or as a reference to the eschatological messianic banquet. On the contrary, it should be seen as answering the pragmatic reality **that human beings need certain things for survival.** This approach is consistent with **Jesus' teaching elsewhere, where he assures his disciples that the Father knows the needs of their existence (Matt 6:25-33, Luke 12:22-34).** The justification for this is God's character and goodness, for like a good Father, **God will give good things to those who ask him (Matt 7:11; Luke 11:13).**³⁴ Such provision was also demonstrated in the miracles of Jesus, e.g. **the feeding of the five thousand (Matt 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17).**

The request is for **ton arton**, which is translated as "bread," but is a synecdoche, with the single item representing a larger category. **God does not usually cause bread to fall from the sky**, but does provide everything necessary for humans to produce all that we need – although **God's perspective of what we "need" may differ from ours!**

The term translated as "daily," **epiousion**, is obscure, only occurring in the **Lord's Prayer.** It may be derived from **epienai**, with the sense of "**forthcoming**," that is, the petition asks for forthcoming needs. Another interpretation breaks it down into two components, **epi** and **ousia**, which would then be translated as "the bread necessary for existence." Thankfully, "the most likely senses to emerge from each of these derivations converge quite closely... **the need for daily bread likely stands for all the recurring basic needs of humanity.**"³⁵ **The phrasing of the prayer depicts ongoing dependence on God, asking for provision for immediate needs, rather than those of the extended future.**³⁶

29 Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 451-52. The phrase "in the midst" could be interpreted as "inside of you," or grammatically construed as a futuristic present tense, but Bock views it as best to read Luke 17:21 as declaring that Jesus' teaching is a manifestation of the kingdom of God.

30 Nolland, *Matthew*, 287.

31 Keener, *Matthew*, 220.

32 Ibid.

33 Wester, "Eschatology and Anthropology," 276.

34 In Matthew, the text reads "...will give good things to those who ask," while in Luke it reads "will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask."

35 Nolland, *Matthew*, 290.

36 Morris, *Matthew*, 146.

LUKE 11:4 “AND FORGIVE US OUR SINS, FOR WE OURSELVES FORGIVE EVERYONE WHO IS INDEBTED TO US”³⁷

MATT 6:12 “AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE ALSO HAVE FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS”

This is the only petition in the Lord’s Prayer taken up immediately following the prayer, indicating its importance to Matthew (Matt 6:14–15). The petition has a noticeable isocolonic structure in Greek – the grammatical and literary structure of the two phrases is similar – accentuating the **parallelism between our need to receive forgiveness, and our responsibility to forgive others.**³⁸ **There must be consistency in our actions, so that they are in keeping with the forgiveness that we have received.** Matthew refers to sins as “debts,” using the plural of *opheilēma*, a word with the sense of financial and legal obligations. Luke prefers to use *hamartia*, a word for “sin” with a more religious connotation. Together, these terms paint a fuller picture of our understanding of sin. **Every human has failed in their obligation to God. “We owe God our full obedience. When we do not pay it we are debtors to God and only he can remit the debt.”**³⁹

The image of the burden of debt was familiar to Jesus’ hearers, who were more likely to be borrowers than lenders.⁴⁰ **This petition suggests that we have no foundation on which to ask for forgiveness if we have intentionally withheld forgiveness from another person.**⁴¹ **Jesus is not only concerned with us having right relationship with God, but also about being in right relationship with each other.** “The embodiment of forgiveness in the practices of Jesus’ followers is a manifestation and imitation of God’s own character.”⁴²

Jesus serves as our primary example of forgiveness in action; in the middle of his greatest time of suffering, he prayed from the cross “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Our ability to genuinely forgive others is only released through the active work of the Spirit in our lives. Just as we have been forgiven our debt to God that we were unable to pay, we

need to mirror this same extravagant grace in our relationships with others.

Jesus drew people to himself before they knew who he was, and it was through being in his proximity that they became aware of their need for forgiveness. This is powerfully illustrated in the account of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house and ate with him before Zacchaeus had repented of his theft and fraud (Luke 19:1–10). Telford Work asserts that forgiveness is apostolic mission, seen in the way that “the forgiveness that Jesus’ subjects show to each other, and to every neighbor, stranger, and enemy extends the fruit of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth, actualizes the atonement, and renews the creation.”⁴³

LUKE 11:4 “LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION”

MATT 6:13 “LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL”

John Stott, working with the double Matthean petition, writes that it “should probably be understood as the positive and negative aspects of one.”⁴⁴ Its **interpretation** has been the subject of much debate through the centuries, since it **suggests that God is responsible for testing us, or bringing us to a place where we are tempted.** This suggestion should be weighed up against **Jas 1:13 which quite clearly states that God does not test anyone.** The idea of God testing us can seem offensive, but as it stands, this text does point to God’s responsibility in bringing us to the place of testing and temptation.

The word *peirasmos* appears in extra-biblical literature with the sense of “being tested,” but when it appears in Scripture, a religious dimension is added to its connotations. The outcome of testing, whether it appears in the form of suffering, persecution, or temptation to sin, is that an individual’s relationship to God is put in question.⁴⁵ It is best to recognise the ambiguity inherent in the petition, that it **can refer either to the testing of our faith, or the temptation to sin.** The distinction that Betz makes is helpful: “although temptation and evil are not the same, the latter works as an enticement to commit evil deeds. Therefore, **God leads into temptation by allowing evil to exist.**”⁴⁶ The Matthean expression *tou ponērou* is ambiguous, because it may be masculine, referring

37 While Matthew uses the plural of *opheilēma* (debt) in this petition, the *Didache* uses the singular of its synonym *opheilē* (debt). Matthew uses the aorist of *aphiēmi* (“as we have forgiven”), while the *Didache* uses the present tense (“as we forgive”), as does Luke.

38 Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 401.

39 Morris, *Matthew*, 147.

40 Keener, *Matthew*, 223.

41 Morris, *Matthew*, 147.

42 Green, *Luke*, 443–44.

43 Work, *Ain’t Too Proud To Beg*, 165.

44 John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), 150.

45 Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 296.

46 Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 411.

to Satan, or neuter, referring to the concept of evil. There is no scholarly consensus on how this should be understood, and liturgical examples of both can be found.

Most commentators agree that we should understand this petition as asking to be kept from being tested in situations where our weak faith may fail, but also one that asks for rescue when we find ourselves there. This includes petitions that have just been covered in the Lord's Prayer – lack of provision and being trapped by unforgiveness. Ultimately, the question of asking God to keep us from being tested, recognises the sovereignty of God. God may not be the direct author of all testing, but he allows it, as problematic as this language may seem.

Conversely, Jeremias concludes that this petition refers “not to preservation from temptation, but to preservation in temptation.”⁴⁷ Scripture makes it clear that all disciples of Jesus will face testing, in whatever sense, and therefore this petition is not accusing God of being unjust, rather it is asking for protection and help in the midst of circumstances that may prove challenging to our trust in God.

Most modern versions conclude with a doxological statement similar to, “For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.” This does not appear in either Matthew or Luke, although a shortened version is present in the *Didache*, which reads, “for yours is the power and the glory forever” (*Did* 8:3).⁴⁸ This is assumed to be a later addition to bring the Lord's Prayer into a liturgical structure similar to other prayers, finishing with a doxology.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

What follows are integrative reflections which seek to recognise the connection between prayer and discipleship. They are devotional reflections intended to provoke readers towards applying the Lord's Prayer in their own life, and are intended to stimulate further thought rather than be comprehensive in breadth.

A PRAYER OF FAITH

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:
the disciples are permitted to pray because Jesus tells them they may – and he knows the Father. He promises that God will hear them. That is to say, the disciples pray only because they are followers of Christ and have fellowship with Him. Only those who,

like them, adhere to Jesus have access to the Father through him.⁴⁹

The necessity of personal faith as part of prayer is a somewhat indefinable element in an academic sense. The foundation of Christian prayer is faith in God, and a genuine acknowledgment of God as both Lord and Father is essential to truly praying the Lord's Prayer in faith. This requires a balance between familiarity and faith, recognising that even though we have been invited to address God as “Father,” this does not diminish God's sovereignty. God's acts take place in sovereign freedom. When we pray, we are communing with the one who created all that is, yet we have been assured that the Lord hears, and will answer our prayers, saying that if we ask, we will receive (Matt 7:8, 21:22, Luke 11:10). The Lord's Prayer is prayed in faith because our confidence that it will be answered is well-grounded: the prayer was taught to us by Jesus, the incarnate Son of God.

THE POWER OF LITURGY

Daniel T. Benedict Jr. has written some excellent reflections on the transformational possibilities of liturgical practice. One key aspect of liturgy he identifies is that, “[l]iturgy is worship for the long haul. It does not rush or give in to our fuming and insistence on our own way. It is patient and gentle. It simply goes on week by week and invites us to come along. It even carries us when our spiritual feet get tired and our energy level flags.”⁵⁰

Liturgy as rote repetition runs the risk of becoming lifeless, but this should not dissuade the regular use of rhythms in worship. Even in extempore prayer, it is easy to slip into using religious jargon and pray without meaning. This quote from Benedict Jr. explores the benefit of using the Lord's Prayer as a paradigm that shapes the rhythm of how we pray. Regardless of what season we are in or the challenges we are facing, approaching prayer in a way that mirrors the structure of the Lord's Prayer puts our individual needs into perspective. We find that God's name, kingdom and will are addressed before we come to our own needs. Christian maturity involves learning to recognise that God's will and God's way are of supreme importance.⁵¹ Our individual needs are put into correct perspective when contextualised within the greater concern of God's kingdom.

47 Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, 105.

48 Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 357.

49 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 145.

50 Daniel T. Benedict Jr., *Patterned by Grace: How Liturgy Shapes Us* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2007), 17.

51 Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 199.

From this perspective, the Lord's Prayer offers us a pattern for prayer that is capable of standing up to the diversity of life. It is simple in expression, yet comprehensive in a way that encompasses all human experience. This is not to say that the Lord's Prayer must form a methodological guide for the way we approach prayer, but rather that a more in-depth consideration of what it actually means will deepen our prayer journey. The Lord's Prayer is far from simply standard liturgical model. There is no denying that it runs the risk of becoming commonplace and meaningless, yet in studying it, the intentional simplicity of the prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples becomes apparent.

ALREADY BUT NOT YET

By following the structure and concerns of the Lord's Prayer, whether rigidly, or as a loose guide, we pray in a way that reflects the gospel. However, in praying the Lord's Prayer, we find ourselves both embracing and wrestling with the tension between realised and future eschatology. We affirm that the reign of God was manifested through Jesus' incarnate ministry, continues to be made present now through the witness of the Church and is not yet fully perfected. That awaits the consummation of the reign of God.

Lochman asserts that "prayer is the response and vital side of faith... it is a step into the open, with no guarantee but also without resignation."⁵² The Lord's Prayer achieves the delicate balance of eschatological expectancy, while addressing the real issues that we face as humanity now, thus informing our ethics in the present. As Webster puts it, "Christian eschatology is practical rather than speculative. It has an ethical character, in that one of its functions is to inform and evaluate the Church's practice rather than offer a theory of universal history."⁵³ This tension is what causes us to live with teleological intention, so that our lives, and the communal life of the church, serve as a signpost of our anticipation of the day when God's kingdom will be fully realised on earth as in heaven.

Prayer is an intrinsic and transforming part of the lifestyle of every Christian. Any theology of prayer will be "messy," because it must have space for the vast range of circumstances encountered in

52 Jan Milic Lochman, "The Lord's Prayer in Our Time: Praying and Drumming," in Daniel L. Migliore (ed.) *The Lord's Prayer: Perspectives For Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 8.

53 Webster, "Eschatology and Anthropology," 284.

daily human existence. Textual study must be more than an intellectual enterprise – as Koenig writes,

When Jesus and the New Testament authors offer their teachings on prayer or allow us to overhear their prayers, **they wish not only to instruct our minds but also to renew our spirits and change our behaviors.** Behind and within the biblical text is the real prayer experience of the One we name as Christ and of his first followers. It reaches out to us, inviting us to share in its richness.⁵⁴

The core themes of the Lord's Prayer, concerned with the coming of the kingdom, and also with contemporary issues and needs, encompass the central thrust of Jesus' teaching. In prayer, we come to God and acknowledge our human insufficiency. Our faith and trust in God express a confidence that

is grounded in the real and historical acts of a God who repeatedly demonstrates faithfulness to what he has promised. As we pray the Lord's Prayer, even

if circumstances do not change immediately, we are reminded to orient our lives to live in a way which seeks the fulfilment of all of God's promises.

Our lives don't always match up with what we pray, and the church is at best an imperfect representation of the way that things should be. This tension must be acknowledged, and cannot necessarily be answered. Some aspects of human existence are too profound to be explained away with pithy statements and religious clichés. We ask to be forgiven, and declare that we will forgive, but our communities are still full of broken and hurting people. We ask to be kept from temptation and testing, yet even a cursory summary of the challenges that face us in any given week provokes incredulity at the audacity of this petition. However, despite the apparent contradictions between what God has said, and the state of human existence, the Lord's Prayer is an enduring expression of faith that God sees, God hears, and God will respond.

KATE DUGDALE graduated with a Bachelor of Theology from Bishopdale Theological College, Nelson in 2011, and is currently studying towards an Master of Theology at the Laidlaw-Carey Graduate School.

54 John Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 3.

Copyright of Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought & Practice is the property of Stimulus and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.