

Our Father: Priority in Prayer

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- [0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our Bible reading this morning, and if you have one of our church Bibles, you'll find it in the New Testament in Matthew's Gospel at chapter 6.
- Somebody shout out the page number from the church Bible and then I'll tell you. Because my Bible is different. Sorry? 8-11.
- Page 8-11 in our church Bibles. Beginning of the New Testament, Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 6. And Richard is going to be focusing on that portion that we know to recall, or we call anyway, the Lord's Prayer.
- But I'm going to read from Matthew 6 verse 1 through to verse 14. Jesus said, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.
- For then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.
- [1 : 07] Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
- And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.
- Thus, truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.
- And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles, the pagans do.
- For they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him. You then pray like this.
- [2 : 15] Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
- Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
- For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses.
- Amen. May God bless us. This is his word. Good morning, everyone. I'm very glad to be with you.
- If you were not here about a year and a half ago when I was here, I'm here now for the first time for you. But for those of you who are back here for the second time when I'm here, thank you very much.
- [3 : 22] I always assume it's just sort of the luck of the draw if you are invited to a church the first time. But the second time, they probably like you a little bit.

So thank you very much. But the third time will be a sure thing. So I'm waiting for that. We'll see. God bless you all.

Now, we're going to be looking at a part of the Bible that we often call the Lord's Prayer. And I'll speak slowly at first so you can get used to my accent. Many of you will know this prayer.

Maybe you don't know it as the Lord's Prayer, but as our Father. And that is our concern this morning. But let me introduce what we're going to say today in this way. I think we all know that in one way or another, life is a series of ups and downs.

Good times and bad times. And as you go through life, you learn that more and more. As much as you wish that things could just go along steady like this, I think we all understand that if you go to a hospital room and you see someone and the monitor above them is doing this, that's not a good sign.

[4 : 33] In fact, you want it to go up and down on that monitor, don't you? And in many ways, that's just the way life is as we experience it now in this world.

Whether you are a follower of Jesus or not, life goes up, life goes down. And when the good times, I mean the really good times, or the very hard times come, we usually don't have much question about where we should give our attention.

We're going to give it to the celebration of these great times, or we're going to give it to dealing with the problem that we're facing. There's usually not much problem with that. I mean, think of it this way.

When you have a newborn child, your first child, your whole life is consumed by the fact that you have a new child. And when someone dear that you love very much passes away, your life at that time is consumed by that tragedy.

Or when you're first married, life is good. You're so excited you can't stand it. Your whole life revolves around the fact that you're married. And unfortunately, in our day, when families fall apart, your life is consumed with that as well.

[5 : 47] That happens also in churches, you know. Local churches, even like yours, where we go through up times and we go through down times. And in those high points, we're there with it.

When we're at the low points, we're there with it. But the thing I want us to ask about this morning is, what do we do? What do we think about? What should be our priorities when we're not at the top or at the bottom, but when life is returning to something of a norm?

You know, the boring times of life. What should be our priority? What should be our dream? What should be our hope at a time like that? Because those come to your life too.

And in fact, even when you're up and you're down, that steady motion in the middle is that to which you return and find comfort and strength or find orientation and destiny and sense of belonging.

It's just so very important for us to ask the question then, what do you do? What should be most important? What are the priorities when life is neither up nor down, but when it's just ordinary?

[6 : 49] And there are many places in the Bible where you could find an answer to that kind of question. Many places. But I'm convinced that one of the most succinct and special and even memorable parts of the Bible that tells us what should be our steady priority, our steady purpose, our steady goal, our steady dream is in this part of the Bible that we call the Lord's Prayer.

The reason for this is fairly obvious. For when is it that you pray? I mean, even if you're not a believer, you discover yourself sometimes praying to God, don't you?

And believers do the same thing. They discover that they're praying to God. But when does that actually happen? Except when things are going bad or when things are really, really good. And when something important is going on, that's when you pray.

And so when Jesus is asked, Lord, teach us how to pray, he's not simply telling us how to pray. He's also telling us what was important to him and what should be important to every man, woman, and child who follows him.

What are those priorities that we find in this thing called the Lord's Prayer? Now, as I've looked at Christians and as I've looked at my own life, I've discovered something.

[8 : 09] We do tend to find the priorities of ordinary life in this thing we call the Lord's Prayer. But usually it's in the bottom half of the Lord's Prayer. You know how it goes.

Give us this day our daily bread, which means basically, Lord, please take care of me. I'm depending on you for this. Forgive us our debts, which basically means, Lord, forgive me.

I've sinned. I've done it again. I'm sorry for my sins. That's normal in the Christian life. And then lead us not into temptation, which basically means, help me do better tomorrow than I did today, please.

Now, if that's where you are, if that's the priority of your life, to depend more on God, to find forgiveness of your sins in Jesus, and to do better tomorrow than you did today, way to go.

Fantastic. Because you're far ahead of most of the human race. Do you realize that most of the people who will be on the street today as you leave this church do not have even that much going for them?

[9 : 12] Not even that much sense of what's important. They tend to just bounce around from one thing to another, whatever happens to catch their fancy, or whatever is driving them neurotically to some kind of compulsion.

But followers of Jesus understand that he has given us the priorities. He's given us the goals of life. And they are in that bottom half of the Lord's Prayer.

But this morning, I want to suggest something to you. There's a reason why those last petitions say, give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts, lead us not into temptation, and a reason why we're attracted to that part of the Lord's Prayer.

Because it's all about us. Imagine such a thing as that. You and me being attracted to things that are about you and me. But you know as well as I do, that's not the way the first half of the Lord's Prayer is.

It's about someone else. You know, the part of the Lord's Prayer that you hurry through so you can get down to something that means something to you. Give us this day our daily bread. You know how it goes.

[10 : 21] Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Do you see the difference in orientation? The priority? The important things that are put first in this thing called the Lord's Prayer? I'm convinced of this, that you and I normally live our lives down here doing things that are about you and me so much that we really do find ourselves challenged by what Jesus says in the opening of the Lord's Prayer.

And at least two different ways. Let me say first, that I think the first thing that Jesus challenged both his disciples and you and me to do some adjusting on, some changing on, it has to be about what we believe, what we do, what we feel about God.

About God himself. Our Father. Man, those are precious words to Christians.

Maybe if you're not a follower of Jesus, you don't realize just how precious that is to someone who loves Jesus. Because we believe this, and we know this to be true, that the one who made everything, I mean everything, can become your personal, intimate, caring Father.

[11 : 53] It's an amazing thing when you think about that. That he can know you by name. That he can care about you and your family by name.

That he knows your problems. He knows what's coming. He knows what has gone. He can be your spiritual father. In fact, the Bible says, to as many as receive Jesus, to them he gives the right to become the children of God.

God. So maybe, if you're here and you've heard that Christians actually know God as their Father, and you've never experienced that, it's not difficult.

It's just one big step you have to take to know God as your Father. And it's simply this. Come to Jesus. Come to Jesus.

And he will make God your Father too. Unfortunately, though, when Christian people, and even people that don't follow Jesus, when they hear God as our Father, very typically, our minds almost go immediately to an image of God, an imaginary image of God that makes us think of God a little bit differently than what Jesus actually had in mind here.

[13 : 14] It's the image of God that comes to little children's minds, but then pops into our heads also, doesn't it? That God is like a sweet granddaddy. Long white beard, sitting up in heaven in his celestial rocking chair, rocking back and forth like this, looking down on the earth, noticing all of his children down there, and wringing his hands like this, and saying to himself, oh, I wish my children on the earth would just pay more attention to me and listen to what I have to say because I've done everything I can possibly do to take care of them and to make life good for them, and it would make me so much happier if they would just pay attention to me because after all, I exist for them.

That is what sweet granddaddies are like. I know I am one. I'm the sweetest grandfather there is in the whole world, and my grandchildren think that's true too.

I can guarantee it, but I can tell you this. I'm no fool. I know exactly why they feel that way about me. They love me so much, but I know why. It's because when they were little, every time I saw them, every single time, I'd hug them real big, and I'd whisper in their ears, I love you so much, and then the next thing I would say to them is this.

Do you want to go to the toy store now? And I'd take them there, and I'd buy them whatever they wanted. It didn't matter what they wanted. I can buy two. Let's have three of those. That'd be great.

Now, as they get older, of course, you have to stop that foolishness because their tastes become more expensive, don't they? But when they're young, you can buy two, three, four, five of it. It's no problem. Let's go for it, and that's why they love me.

[14 : 45] Yes, I'm a sweet granddaddy because I live for my grandchildren, but I have some good news for you. That's not what Jesus meant when he said, God is your father. We get the first clue of this by the fact that Jesus says, don't just pray our father.

He says, pray our father in heaven. And when you look at the Bible, every time the Bible describes heaven, it's the same way. Heaven is the throne room of God.

It's where God sits on a magnificent throne. A river of fire pours out from beneath his feet. A rainbow surrounds him. Lightning flashes. Thunder echoes through the halls of his palace.

And around him are creatures that are crying out day and night, holy, holy, holy, hallowed be your name. You see, that's what Jesus had in mind. Our father in heaven, holy, holy, holy be your name.

He was reminding his disciples of the number one way that the Bible describes God to us. The number one way. And it's this. God is our king.

[15 : 58] Seated on the throne over all of creation. Now, you might be surprised to know this, but in the days of the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, both in Israel and outside of Israel, it was very common for people to call their human kings their fathers.

It was a paternal image for a king. So when Jesus says, pray this way, this is what he's telling his disciples. Pray this way. Our royal father, enthroned in heaven, may your name be kept holy.

You know, I come from a country where we don't have kings or queens, for that matter.

And you know, if you've been around Americans for very long, you know that's in our blood. It's absolutely in our DNA, I'm convinced of it, that we will have no king. And in fact, in parts of the world where there are kings and queens, typically, nowadays, they're a little more than symbolic.

I mean, very few of us have ever lived in a place where a king holds our lives and our deaths in his hands. We don't want those kinds of kings around us.

[17 : 14] In America, we don't want any king at all, but even you don't want that kind of king. And why? Well, it's because they're terribly inconvenient to have around. You know why they're so inconvenient, those kinds of powerful kings?

kings, it's because, for some strange reason, kings think that their agenda is more important than yours. Imagine such a thing as that, huh?

That their desires are more significant than your desires. In fact, they actually think that their citizens ought to live for their pleasure and for their glory. These kings actually think their citizens should be willing to die for them.

Can you imagine anything more inconvenient than having a king like that ruling over your life? So in my country, we say no king whatsoever.

In fact, I come from a state in the United States called Virginia. If you've ever been to the states, if you've ever been to Virginia, you know that all states in the United States have flags for each of their states.

[18 : 18] And I want to tell you about my flag of my home state because it describes not just Americans, it describes you too. You ready for this? It has this nice, solid blue satin background and in the center of this circle, it's a picture.

It's a picture of a man lying dead on his back. And next to him is a crown that's fallen off of his head. He's a dead king. And standing over this dead king, this is, can you believe this?

Standing over this dead king is a woman. She has a spear in one hand and her foot on the chest of this dead king. And written around the edge of that circle are these words in Latin, sic semper tyrannus, thus always to tyrants.

You got the message? We will not have a king in the state of Virginia. And if somebody tries to become a king in the state of Virginia, we know exactly what to do.

We send our women after them. That's the message. We're not going to have a king who rules over us like that. I think that tells us something.

[19 : 25] The fact that even human kings are inconvenient to have around, I think that tells us something. If your religion, if your Christian faith has become convenient, and by that I mean you're never challenged anymore to change anything.

You read the Bible and it fits like a hand in glove with who you find yourself to be. If you find that your faith has become convenient, then maybe, just maybe, you're yet to know what it means to say God is your king.

Don't you know he owns you? He gives you every breath you take.

He gives you every morsel you eat. He gives you every good thing that is in your life. And for those of you who are in Christ, he bought you with the price of the blood of his own son.

You no longer belong to yourself. You belong to him. And that's where the dream begins.

[20 : 46] That's where the mission is. That's where we go back. When life is being reoriented, when we're not in crisis, when things are going along, we must remember what Jesus says here, that our top priority in life must be that God is our king, our royal father, enthroned in heaven.

May your name be kept holy. Let me live for that, Jesus. Day by day. As inconvenient as that may be, as difficult as it may be, it is why you breathe.

Okay. I know I personally, and I suspect many of us here today, have some adjusting to do when it comes to recalculating, recalibrating what it means to say that God is our king.

But Jesus also challenged his disciples and challenges you and me to do another kind of adjustment, a change in the way we think and the way we behave and the way we feel about another thing.

It's going to sound strange, but let me say it. Jesus calls on us to change the way we think about the earth. Life on this planet.

[22 : 02] What we do day by day as we breathe the air, as we go to work, as we deal with our children, as we deal with our spouses, as we deal with life as it is.

Life on this planet. And you know he does that because you know the words. Do you remember? Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Now what?

Your kingdom come. You see, I told you he was thinking of God as king. Our Father, your kingdom come. Okay. Now, I grew up in a family where my grandmothers talked about the coming of the kingdom all the time.

Now, listen to this and see how she meant it. Every time we would go to her and say, Mama, can we have some more ice cream? Or, Mama, can we have another piece of pie?

She would look at us and say, children, come over here. You can have all the ice cream you want. You can have another piece of pie. When the kingdom comes. So I learned as a very young child that what the kingdom coming meant was, no, never, get out of here, you're bothering me.

[23 : 11] Maybe when you die someday, you can have another piece of pie. How about that? So I knew it was a religious phrase I was supposed to use, the coming of the kingdom. But I didn't have a clue as a child what it might mean.

So what did Jesus mean when he said, pray, our royal father, may your kingdom come. Well, listen, he tells us right away, your kingdom come, your will be done.

Oh, I got it. That much I can get. If God is going to be the king, then his kingdom is in the place where people obey him who do what he wants done.

That makes sense to me. But Jesus, where do you want that to happen? Where do you want to see the father's kingdom come?

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Notice something here that Jesus does not make the destiny of God's kingdom and of his will heaven.

[24 : 17] heaven is the standard for the destiny of the kingdom. And what's the destiny of the kingdom? The earth. Now, if you and I had written that verse, if we had created this prayer, we probably would have done it a little bit differently.

We may have said something like, your kingdom come, your will be done in heaven because that's where we're going to spend eternity after all and we really need it to be nice up there. But that's not why Jesus came to this earth.

That's not why he taught us this prayer. It's not why he is in your life today. That you may go to the place where everything is as it's supposed to be.

Jesus came here to see something else happen. It's already like it's supposed to be up there. He says, what I want is the way it is up there to be true down here also. Your kingdom come, your will be done on the earth like it's already being done in heaven.

The earth living here is the place where the kingdom of God is to come. And that's almost the opposite of what we tend to think.

[25 : 32] Because if you are a normal Christian person, then the way you think about life is this usually, is, you know, Jesus really wants me to think about religious things and think about things that are spiritual and all that's there somewhere.

So I'm going to think about those things and I'm going to try not to pay attention much to what's going on down here. In fact, what I'll do is I'll just kind of live my life and not get too engaged in it.

And what I'll do is just sort of make it through in whatever way I have the opportunity to make it through. And then I'll be doing all that in the hopes that I'll spend eternity up there in the clouds somewhere.

In fact, it's not just you who follow Christ who think that way. That's the way many people who don't even claim to be religious think.

I mean, think about it this way. Suppose you were to ask an unbeliever. Now, I mean someone who really doesn't believe in Jesus and knows they don't believe in Jesus. And you were to ask them this question, what would be a good life?

[26 : 32] The kind of life you'll be glad to have lived. So that the last moment as you're taking your last breath, you could say, I'm glad I live this life rather than somebody else's. What would they say to you?

Well, most, by looking around here, most of you look like you'd have friends, unbelieving friends, who would say things like these. Well, I hope not to get divorced more than once because that really hurts.

And if I'm going to have a good life, my kids need to do well. I couldn't call it a good life when my kids weren't doing well, so I need that to happen too. And everybody could retire early so that I can enjoy life before I get too old to enjoy life.

That would be nice. And you know, I know everyone's going to get sick, but I want to have as little sickness as possible. I know everyone's going to die, but the best way to die is in the middle of the night because you don't even know it's going to happen.

And then the unbeliever will say to us if after I'm dead I wake up and I discover there is a God and there is a heaven I hope he will agree with me that I was good enough to get in.

[27 : 45] Isn't that where most of the unbelievers you know are? If that's where you are today hoping that if there is a God and there is a heaven he might agree with you that you are today let me tell you something I have some bad news for you nobody has been that good except Jesus that's why to make it into the pleasure of God to make it into eternal life we have to do it with him by putting our trust and our faith in him and it makes me sad to hear people living their whole lives some of them uncertain of what's going to happen to them after they die hoping at best that there may be a God and that maybe he will agree that they're good enough to get in what a sad life to live let me tell you some good news you don't have to live that way come to

Jesus and you will know that you have eternal life but suppose we were to ask a Christian the very somebody like you who comes to church and reads the Bible knows where the numbers are in the hymn book here and you know the tunes even though they don't have the music there you know the tunes already that's how Christian you are right you're really in this thing called Christianity what would we say if someone walked up to us and said what would be a good life I mean the kind of life you will be glad to have lived so that the last moment as you're taking your last breath you can say I'm glad I lived this life rather than some other this one I'm glad what would we say well nowadays a lot of us would have to say I hope not to go through more than one divorce because it really hurts a lot of true followers of Jesus would say you know

I couldn't you know everybody needs some money if I could just have a good job I can make enough money then I could retire early and enjoy life before I come too old to enjoy life that would be good I know everyone's going to get sick and die but I want to die with just as little pain as possible and even followers of Jesus will say the best way to die is in the phones they are going to record it and tweet it out to the whole world the last two minutes of my life I pray every day Lord give me two minutes to say what I have to say but that's where the story changes a bit doesn't it because we believe that once a person passes away their souls begin to shake like this and sparkle with little lights perhaps sprout wings on them and he says come on in you have the blood of

Jesus on you come in to heaven but wait just one minute and he runs over to a closet and he pulls out of that closet a great big golden harp and he hands it to you and he says that's your place now go over there start singing and start playing that harp forever and forever and forever and forever and forever have you ever been in a choir sounds more like the other side rather than heaven doesn't it now 10,000 years bright shining as the sun I can do that but forever is a lot longer than 10,000 years I have some really good news for you follower of Jesus Jesus did not come to this earth so you would have a golden harp to play forever as if somehow you would believe this was bliss no Jesus died on the cross not so you would have a golden harp to float around in the clouds Jesus resurrected from the dead not so that you could spend eternity up there

Jesus is now reigning over all things not so he can swoop you up and take you out of this world and he's not coming back to get you out of here Jesus died he returning so that he can make all things new so that he can make what the bible calls the new heavens yes but also the new earth and it will all belong to him this new wondrous earth and when he comes back again he will look at you who have followed him and he will say this it belongs to me but now it also belongs to you that is our dream that is our hope that is our destiny and nothing less than that should compel your heart every day of your life that one day you will inherit the earth in Jesus how wondrous that will be in fact we get glimpses of it even now in this horrific war torn sickness plagued world that we live in today even in this world we get glimpses don't we when that first child is born the beauty and the wonder of that moment when you first fall in love what a delight when you see that sunset that takes your breath away when you hear the concert that brings such unspeakable joy to you that you simply stand in awe of it the painting the person the worship service you name it you've had those experiences of ecstasy even in this fallen world now imagine what it will be like imagine for just a moment what it will be like to live as the image of

[34 : 02] God free of sin in a world that is free of sin no more pain no more suffering no more doubts no more fears no more regrets no more shame but a world that is filled with the brilliant glory of God and you living honoring God and enjoying him in that world forever that is why Jesus came to this earth and that is what he offers to every man woman and child who will come to him do you want that but do you see what that says to us it says to us that as we go into the ordinary times of life when we're not dealing with the highs and the lows but when we're reorienting ourselves what's our reorientation to be toward serving the will of God on this earth moving the kingdom of God forward day by day not living for ourselves but living for him you know

Jesus told his disciples that they were to go to all the nations they were to bring his teaching to everyone they were to baptize them they were to save them they were to deliver them from death but before he said that to them he said this he said all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me to Jesus all authority has been given to me now if you and I had been Jesus at that moment we would have looked at our disciples and we would have said okay I'm all that I'm really that important all authority has been given to me so you sit back and watch the show it's going to be unbelievable what I do but it's not what he did is it he looked at people like you people like me just ordinary people and he looked at them and he said I'm going to give you the greatest privilege that a human being could ever have

I'm going to let you share with me in turning the world into the kingdom of God now that is a vision for life that can compel you through the hard times and can move you forward through the good times and through the ordinary times it's so big it's so powerful so compelling that it's something you can hand to your children for them to live out of as well and not just they but your grandchildren and your children and the generations to come isn't that what you want I think it's true you don't want the monitor over your hospital bed like this no you want it to have the ups and downs and life has that and when those ups and downs come it's crisis or it's celebration so we're all consumed with the good or the bad but when you hit the button again and you reset to the ordinary when

God in his providence puts even a church like this at a time where it says okay no more crisis what are we going to be we have to find what's important what's at the top of the list and you have heard what Jesus said should be at the top of your list our royal father enthroned in heaven may your name be kept holy may your kingdom come may your will be done on this earth as it is in heaven let's pray together our Lord Jesus we bless you and we honor you for these precious words that you have given to us now Holy Spirit we say to you as much as we may want we cannot do so come upon us now fill us and empower us with the power that resurrected

Jesus from the dead that we may walk in the newness of life serving our great heavenly king serving his kingdom on earth amen to to follow the important