



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Teach Me to Pray

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“Our Sunday School class is studying the Gospel of Matthew, and we have come to the Lord’s Prayer,” he said. “Will you be our teacher for this portion of our study?”

I accepted the invitation and met the class three Sundays. This paper is one of the outcomes.

We used the following scriptures for our study:

“He was praying at a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ And he said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

Father, be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread;
And forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us;
And lead us not into temptation.”
(RSV, Luke 11:1-4)

“And in praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy 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.”
(RSV, Matthew 6:7-13)

As you know, the Lord’s Prayer is designed for liturgical use. However, it is appropriate to use it both for private and corporate prayer. In the form most familiar to us, and in later manuscripts of Gospel writing, a doxology was added, probably to make the prayer more liturgically useful.

“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”

I presume that the disciples were thoroughly accustomed to Jewish worship, and that they had some kind of concept of prayer. I wonder what they had in mind when they said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” I can only speculate as to the answer, since there

is no indication of it in the scripture. I suppose at least part of the answer depends upon what one means by prayer.

I raise that question with myself, “What do I mean by prayer? What do I believe prayer is?”

I was taught that prayer – public prayer, at least – includes praise and adoration, confession, petition, intercession, and commitment. When I read prayers, and when I listen to people pray, I notice that these elements are often present. However, I notice that the cast majority of praying involves asking for something. Since the prayer is usually addressed to God, I infer that the one praying is asking God to do something and/or to respond in some particular way.

I state up front that I have real problems with asking prayers.

Asking God for something and/or to do something suggests to me some things that people believe about prayer, about God, about the relationship with God, and about the role of the one praying.

Said another way, my prayer always expresses and discloses what I believe, the point of view from which I am speaking my prayer, and my expectations with reference to both the praying and the relationship with God. When I pray, inevitably, I state what I believe, either by implication or in direct statement.

For me, I mean that, when I pray, I am in communication with God. I believe that we have a trusting and secure relationship. I see God to be my creator, the source of my being, and one who loves me completely and unconditionally. My praying is a talk-it-over time. I state my points of view and my wishes and desires. I review my own thoughts and behavior, and consider changes and commitments that I need to make. I listen. It does not fit for me to ask God to intervene and do particular things, especially since I believe God has already provided for me.

The Lord’s Prayer has meaning for me, then, as a statement of what I believe; of what I see the relationship between God and me to be; of who I see God to be; of what God has done and does; and of my perception of my own participation. From that belief position, I turn to a discussion of the Lord’s Prayer.

“Our Father – my father.”

Do I dare address God this way? When I do, what am I saying about what I believe? In a rather inclusive sense, I am saying who God is to me, and who I see myself to be in that relationship. Given the term of address, I see God as the source of my being, my Creator, my parent, the head of my family, and am expressing this with these words.

“My Father in Heaven.”

I have to decide what I believe about heaven. Do I see heaven as another place, over there somewhere, for future dwelling? Do I see God there waiting for me? Or, am I speaking of my belief that God is present in all of God's creation, including this planet on which I dwell? The latter is more accurate for me.

“Hallowed be your name.”

I see it that “name” is a designation of the essential nature of God. “Name” designates God as holy, pure, free from sin. I acknowledge that I believe this to be true of God, whom I have addressed as father. That triggers a question about me: to what degree do I possess and manifest this essential nature, since I believe that I am created in the image of God?

“Your Kingdom come.
Your will be done on earth as in heaven.”

Could this be a prayer of commitment? Or, do I make this request of God? If it is a prayer of commitment, I am stating what I see and accept as my role in the coming of the Kingdom and in God's will being done. It is as if I say, “I commit myself to living as a child of God.” I pick up my personal and social responsibilities to do my part for the Kingdom to come through me. I seek to know the will of God and to live that will, day by day. I see myself participating in living the will of God here and now as God wills that it be lived in all of creation.

When I pray these parts of the Lord's Prayer, to whom do I look for an answer? If I look to God, then I must raise the question, “What is my role in relation to the answers?” By the same token, if I look to me, I raise the question again, “What is my role in enabling the answers to be reality?”

It appears, then, that the first part of the prayer has to do with what I believe about God, and about what my relationship to God is. The remainder of the prayer seems to be devoted to my asking God to do for me, and to take care of me in particular ways. Usually, this portion is seen as three petitions. I am choosing to see it as four. They are:

“Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
Lead us not into temptation.
Deliver us from evil.”

I ask, “Am I turning the responsibility for my well-being and my daily needs over to God?” If so, what is my role?”

I remember that Jesus said, before he told us how to pray, “Your father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:8b)

If I believe that God already knows what I need, and that God has already

provided for me before I ask, I have some problems with asking God to do these things for me. And I wonder what has taken place that Jesus has said to his disciples, “This is what you include in prayer.” Since I believe what I do about who God is and what he has already given me, what meaning can I give this petition, or any petition?

“Give me daily bread.”

I have daily bread. I have more than daily bread. I am quite comfortably situated. I have the resources to have whatever I decide I need or want. And I pray, “Give me daily bread”? If I believe that God provides daily bread for those who ask, do I conclude that people who are hungry and cold and otherwise in need have not asked God to provide for them? Do I see God as waiting to be asked before responding to the need? When I am aware that people are suffering because needs aren’t met, do I then say, “God, you aren’t doing your job. You aren’t providing them with their daily needs.”?

Or does my prayer say something else about what I believe?

I think about the hungry people of Atlanta. I see that you have food in plenty. Do I say to you, “You give them food.”? If I were to, what would my position be? I cannot tell you, or urge you, to give hungry people food without first picking up my responsibility. I can’t dismiss my responsibility by telling you to do something.

So I pray, “Give us daily bread.” How can that happen? If I have the resources, I can provide food each day, and those who are fed are simply recipients. Given that I have the resources, I can provide recipients with the opportunity to feed themselves. In either case, if I pray for them to be fed, it appears to me that I have committed myself to my own responsibility and my own participation in dealing with the issue of hunger. It occurs to me then, that this petition is, in essence, a prayer of commitment. Whatever I ask of God, if it is not hollow praying, it is a commitment on my part to do what is within my resources to bring about that for which I ask.

It seems to me that much the same thing applies when I pray, “Forgive my debts as I forgive those indebted to me. The Greek word can be translated “debts,” “trespasses,” “sins.” The issue is one of seeking to be forgiven as I forgive.

On what basis do I say, “I forgive you”?

“I forgive you,” I say. I mean that I no longer hold you accountable to me. I do not try to extract a price from you. I do not choose to be out of relationship with you until you make what I consider to be appropriate amends. I confront the reality that forgiveness is a tough issue. Do I expect God to forgive me if I am not willing to be forgiving? That doesn’t seem to be very realistic. Again, it seems to me that I make a commitment as to my part, my responsibility, my role in the matter of forgiveness.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

I don't believe that God leads us into temptation, nor leaves us to be consumed by evil. There is a special wisdom about the creation in that temptations, trials and that which is in opposition to God both make our life more difficult, and enable us to be strong in living as children of God.

No one has the experience of light without also having the experience of darkness. No one can judge the height of an object except in comparison with that of another object. I do not know anything about my courage, my strength, my ability, my anything, except as I see how I respond to testing, adversity, difficulty, and struggle, whatever it may be.

So I pray, "Lead me not into temptation." I want to be strong enough not to go the route that I am sometimes tempted to go. I renew my commitment to look into God's instructions and God's guidance, as well as into the experiences of people as I undertake to learn to be wise about my choices.

I face the reality. If I am determined to go the way of temptation and evil, God is not going to stop me from doing that.

God is love. God does care. God does guide. God does reveal to me. God does not take away from me – from any of us – both the privilege and the responsibility of deciding on the course that I will go. So when I pray this petition, I might be saying, "God, I really want to be strong enough to confront the issues, to weigh them out, and to make the decisions that are in the direction of this fulfilled life that you have given me the capacity to experience.

In reality, I don't want God to take on the responsibility and to make the decisions for my life. If God were to try to, and/or anybody else tried to, I expect that I would be rebellious and resistive.

If I turn over to somebody else – God or anybody else – the responsibility for my decision, I end up destroying me. Even when decisions are imposed upon me "for my own good", I tend to rebel and to resist. So I pray, "Lead me not into temptation. Deliver me from evil." Am I saying to God, "You make the decisions. You see to it that my path does not lead me to into any difficulty. I turn the responsibility over to you."? Or, am I saying to God, "I recognize that I hold the primary responsibility for deciding about the course of my life. I want our relationship. I want to learn to live according to the wisdom of your instructions. I want to learn to live according to the wisdom of your instructions. I want to put into practice the things you have disclosed to me."?

If the first question is what I mean, I am saying to God that it is up to God to keep me from getting into trouble. No matter what I decide, or what I do, I am asking God to see to it that no harm befall me – that I don't have to deal with temptation nor encounter evil.

If the second question is what I mean, I am saying to God that I am fully aware of

my responsibility to decide and to act; that God has made available to me all that I need to know to be wise in those decisions and actions; and that I am committed to following God's instructions, which do not lead me into temptation and do deliver me from evil.

It strikes me that, all things considered, the Lord's Prayer is a rather remarkable prayer. It is a fit model for me and for us.

“Lord, teach me to pray.”

I would see who you are, God. I would see who I am. In every aspect of my life, I would disclose our relationship and the nature of it. My prayer is both my statement of belief, and my commitment to live my life in response to that belief.

I would have my life be the prayer you have taught me.