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Matthew 6:9-13  
1<sup>st</sup> in a series on the Lord's Prayer

**“The Lord's Prayer”**  
**(Part 1: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name)**

Last week the comedian Ricky Gervais made news for slamming celebrities and athletes who took to social media, particularly Twitter, to offer prayers for the Oklahoma tornado victims.

As of last Tuesday afternoon, more than 75,000 people had used the hashtag #prayforoklahoma, including President Obama, who said on Twitter: “Our prayers are with the people of Oklahoma today.” Gervais, who's known for his crass humor, responded to the hashtag #prayforoklahoma with the following tweet: “I feel like an idiot now-I only sent money,” he tweeted, and promptly started a hashtag of his own: #actuallydosomethingforoklahoma.

As you can imagine, Gervais' tweet started a debate on prayer, because it insinuated that prayer doesn't *do* anything; meaning, it doesn't produce results. But it also raised the question, “Is anything expected of the person praying?” One person responded to the argument by saying, “If all people are doing is praying, it is worthless. If they are praying and donating to the Red Cross, that's more like it.” I'm not quite sure what that responder meant by that comment. Was he trying to say that donating money *is* actually doing something, as opposed to prayer which is *not*, or was he trying to say that God only hears prayers if they're accompanied by cash? I think it's the former, but I digress.

Yet seriously, when people say, “I'm praying for you,” what do they mean by that? Is it a: “I'm thinking of you” statement? I'm standing in solidarity with you statement? Or is the person actually praying? Does a tweet constitute a prayer? Or, as one scholar said in response to the debate, “In prayer you're actually meant to do something; prayer requires something of the person praying—a reverence toward God, for example, or a readiness to act. If all you're doing is slapping a hashtag on the end of a tweet, that doesn't constitute a prayer,” she said.

I'm intrigued by the debate; in part because I find people's beliefs about prayer and their motivations for praying intriguing, but also because prayer remains somewhat of a mystery to me. What are we doing when we're praying? What is God doing when we're praying? And I guess as it pertains to the Oklahoma debate, is prayer more than words?

In order to answer these questions, for the next five weeks we're going to delve deeply into the Lord's Prayer, which is the most well-known prayer there is. It also happens to be the prayer Jesus taught the disciples when they said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” In the early church, the Lord's Prayer was considered a basic text that everyone who

wanted to be a Christian had to learn. But it was also considered so sacred that people were only allowed to learn it at the end of their three period of preparation leading up to their baptism. Today, I find that most couples who get married at the church know the Lord's Prayer, even if they only have a fleeting record of participation in the life of a church. And as an aside, if you've ever wondered why Presbyterians say "debts and debtors" when others say trespasses, it's because debtors is the closest translation to the original Greek.

I want you to think about these questions as we watch a video that addresses just these thoughts. Produced by The Work of the People, it's an interview with Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk, who offers some thoughts on the subject. I found his comments thought-provoking and I think you will, too.

<insert video>

There are two points Fr. Rohr made that I want to delve deeper into: the first is that in prayer, action and contemplation come together. And the second, which dovetails with the first, is that prayer is a stance, it's a way of being in the world; to me that means that prayer is an action; it's more than the words we utter. It is a way of life.

That's a really different way of thinking about prayer than most of us are probably used to, but it may also be more in line with how the disciples viewed prayer because as Fr. Rohr points out in the beginning of the video, the disciples had to ask Jesus how to pray-how to put their prayers, meaning their actions, into words. And the words Jesus taught them -- to do that -- are the words to the Lord's Prayer.

The Lord's Prayer appears twice in the gospels. "Lord, teach us to pray," the disciples ask Jesus in the gospel of Luke. But in Matthew, the Lord's Prayer comes in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, when he tells the disciples not to be hypocrites. "Don't be like the people on the street corner who love to pray and want everyone to see them praying. Make sure your actions match your words," he says, and then teaches them the Lord's Prayer.

I can picture the scene; Jesus is preaching his biggest sermon yet, the Sermon on the Mount. It's his "I Have a Dream" speech. He's laying out for the disciples God's vision of what the world should look like and also instructions for how to make that vision come to life. He's painting a picture with words of what God's will looks like on earth as it is in heaven. He's telling the disciples everything they need to do to bring God's kingdom to life--all that stuff about loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself--when the disciples interrupt him to say, "Hey wait a minute. If we need to do all of that then we're going to need some help!" So what Jesus gives them as a tool to help them, is the Lord's Prayer.

Now when you know that is the context in which Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer, you begin to realize that to pray the Lord's Prayer is both radical and political. It's radical in the sense that we are praying for things that are entirely counter-cultural,

like loving your neighbor as yourself -- and political in the sense that we are called to make it happen, not just talk about it. Jesus subverts every ordinary notion of kings and kingship that the disciples had. His understanding of the way God governs the world and his vision for the way we're to relate to one another is radical, more radical than I think we give him credit for.

Just think about it . . .when we pray "our Father," we're saying right from the start that this prayer, and this God we pray to, is much bigger than my imagination or your imagination, and much more concerned with matters that relate to the world instead of just me. Which isn't to say God isn't personally concerned with us as individuals, God is; but it does mean that God transcends our own personal interests. This God is not only my God, this is our God. This God wants what is best and right and just for everyone.

As someone else wrote:

- We cannot pray and ask "our Father" to bless this nation at the expense of other nations.
- We cannot pray and ask "our Father" to bless our concerns at the expense of other people.
- We cannot pray and ask "our Father" to intercede on behalf of our military personnel without praying for all military personnel.

For some of us, that presents a challenge – especially on Memorial Day when we remember and give thanks for our military personnel. But to pray the Lord's Prayer is challenging. We forget that when we pray it week in and week out in such a rote fashion.

So part of what I hope to do in this series is to awaken you to the breadth and depth of this prayer, which challenges us to love God with our whole heart and mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, because that's what Jesus asks us to do, and for most of us that requires a total transformation. A transformation of our interior and exterior, public and private, social and personal lives. And it is a lifetime of work.

Now before I end I want to say just a couple of very brief words about the word Father and Hallowed. I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that praying to a Father is very difficult for some people. I do not believe that one must be made to use this language if it presents difficulties for them; we need to give people plenty of room to address God using many different names, and plenty of space to wrestle with father language and father issues.

But we also need to remember that God is not a human parent; as the prayer says, "Hallowed be your name." In other words, God is God, and we are humans, and while prayer erases some of this distance, it doesn't negate either.

In the Hebrew Scriptures people were not allowed to utter God's name because it was so holy; in the New Testament this isn't the case, but the Lord's Prayer does acknowledge that God is holy, and different – hallowed be your name, we pray.

And last but not least, to circle back to Gervais' comment that he was actually doing something for the OK tornado victims instead of just praying:

I believe when we pray the Lord's Prayer we are literally praying God's kingdom into existence, both with the words we say and the things the words call us to do.

As one pastor explained prayer to his congregation, in prayer God is "not us giving marching orders, but rather we are reporting for duty". That's hard to do in times of crisis, but a helpful thought when approaching God in prayer.

Amen.

Sources:

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