

Our Father!
Matthew 6:5 – 9



The Lord's Prayer

5 "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. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 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.

7 "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them,

for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven...

Do you know the feeling of being lost? Once, while I was out rowing, a thick cloud of fog, so dense that I could barely see my hand in front of my face, suddenly rolled across the water. I completely lost my bearings. I didn't know where the shore was, and I felt as though I couldn't even say with any certainty which way was up and which was down. In a situation like that, you just keep rowing because you have no other choice. You react, you dodge, and you somehow muddle through. But that is usually not a good strategy, for in doing so, you continue to lose more contact with your true coordinates.

Jesus describes the prayers of the Pharisees as being just like those of people who have lost their way in a thick fog. They stood on street corners; they spoke loudly and eloquently, yet their prayers were aimed at the wrong coordinates. They were not addressing God at all. They were not with God in the slightest; rather, they remained entirely within themselves. Their prayer was not a conversation, but a performance—a performance for the benefit of others. And, fundamentally, in doing so, they deceived not only those around them but themselves as well.

But let's be honest, are we really so different?

Not that we would go and stand on street corners to pray in front of others. Our problem is of a different nature. We are so deeply entangled in our world—so completely interwoven with its events, its pain, and its news—that we can scarcely imagine there being anyone who stands above it all. We also find it difficult to imagine that God truly takes an interest in our lives. The fog is thick. And within this fog, something happens to our prayers. We pray, yet we are left with a creeping sense of doubt: was that prayer even heard? Did the situation I just described truly reach the Almighty God, or did I remain entirely within the confines of my own mind? Was my prayer, perhaps, merely a reaction to my life experiences? Is it, in the end, nothing more than talking to myself? Especially when we are in a crisis, or when something terrible befalls us, prayer is put to the test. What happens, then, when we pray? Does our prayer even have a counterpart—someone to whom it is directed? And when we pray, "Our Father in heaven," whom exactly do we mean?

Recently, we have prayed extensively for Iran and its people. The situation there weighs heavily on all our hearts, and rightly so. It would be wrong not to be moved by it. What the people there are enduring—our brothers and sisters, mothers and sons—penetrates deep within us; it hurts, and it is right that it should hurt. Yet precisely when the pain is greatest, prayer is in danger of going astray. It can devolve into a tirade of hate. And then—much like the Pharisees of old, though for entirely different reasons—we find ourselves once again completely absorbed in ourselves: in our helplessness, in our anger, lost in a thick fog.

Jesus meets us at this very point. He does not remove us from the world. Nor does he withdraw us into a realm of inner silence, as if the world were somehow unreal. Nor does he pretend that all the terrible things happening in our world are unimportant. Instead, he does something far more decisive: he reopens the way to the Father for us. He introduces us to a counterpart, who is not part of this fog, someone who, for that very reason, can see right through it. Someone who does not react helplessly, but acts. Someone who is not bound by the limitations of our world yet remains deeply invested in it. Someone who seeks connection with *us*—not us reaching out to Him, but *Him* reaching out to us.

That is why Jesus says: go into your inner room. Yet it is not really about the room itself. It is about the fact that we can finally be wholly with God again—not absorbed in ourselves, but with *Him*, our Father!

For the Pharisees, the path was different: it led not toward the Father, but away from Him. This path—the path away from the Father—remains trapped within the confines of one's own legalism because those who remain absorbed in themselves must constantly strive to prove their own worth. One feels compelled to reassure oneself and others—to engage in an internal monologue: "I am still on the right side! I am one of the good guys! I do not belong to those who have caused this or that trouble!" But anyone so trapped within themselves and their own self-imposed rules is merely rowing aimlessly through the fog. Such a person is legalistic, and by extension, godless.

The "inner room"—the private chamber Jesus suggests here as a place for prayer—was, in His time, certainly a concrete physical space. Back then, such a small room would not even have had a window. Others could not see you, and you could not even see yourself. What Jesus means is simply this: When we pray, we are entirely with God. Nothing stands between God and us anymore. And this connection is not something we can earn; Jesus has bestowed it upon us as a gift. He did this by becoming human himself and, as a human being, praying to God. And—even more significantly—by giving us the mandate to pray in precisely this manner, He restored our status as children of God. Just like children—uninhibited and free—we can now call out to God: "Abba, dear Father!" This connection to the Father is not an imagined or dreamed one, but a real one.

We see this in the progression of the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer: If we do not barricade our hearts within ourselves, God enters in and makes His dwelling there: "Hallowed be Your name!" And if we let God be God, His kingdom becomes visible in our world: "Your kingdom come!" And the Spirit of God, who dwells within us, leads us to pray: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Thus, ensuring that everything we know of God comes to fruition in this world as well.

When we pray in this manner—emerging from our quiet inner chamber—we soon realize: We do not remain there, darkly locked away. Nor do we wander aimlessly through the mists of our emotions; instead, we pass through an open door that leads all the way into the Kingdom of Heaven. With God, we truly find open doors—for He knows what we need even before we ask. We need not coerce Him, nor wear Him down with laments about all that is lacking. Nor do we need to change God's mind; for He desires, above all, to be our Father. And when we pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," this does not imply that we will be shortchanged. For God's good will inherently includes our own well-being. That is why Jesus teaches us to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread." And He leads us directly to our neighbor when He links forgiveness to the forgiveness we ourselves have received from God.

Thus, the Lord's Prayer allows us to step through an open door into another world—into God's world, where forgiving and being forgiven reign supreme. We pass through this open door to our Heavenly Father whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer. Yet we do not pray it in heaven, but here on earth—here, where we are not yet perfect. We have not yet reached our destination. This becomes particularly evident in the petition: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." None of us can guarantee, by our own strength alone, that we will not fall. And anyone who would claim otherwise is not with Christ, but entirely wrapped up in themselves. The prayer, "Lead us not into temptation," reveals to us: We still await deliverance from the final enemy. Temptations will come—that is certain. And for this very reason, Jesus gives us precisely this prayer. He gives it to us, thereby showing us that we are not alone. Jesus Himself is in heaven, interceding on our behalf. He prays with us and for us. Thus, anyone who prays the Lord's Prayer is never alone. They are also connected with the countless people on earth who are praying in exactly the same way.

And whoever prays in this manner—"Our Father"—steps out of the dark chamber and through the wide-open gates of heaven. Amen.