The Lord's Prayer

Ralph Blair

Ralph Blair is a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City. He founded Evangelicals Concerned in 197 6. This booklet is based on Dr. Blair's keynote at connECtion1990, the summer conferences of Evangelicals Concerned, at Kirkridge and at San Francisco State University.

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An unknown gloss adds a word at the end of one of Jesus's sayings: "When you pray, don't be like hypocrites who love to pray in the synagogues and on the broad street corners to be seen by *People* magazine." But there he was, in *People* magazine: Jerry Falwell tableau vivant—bent over a bed, on his knees, hands velcroed together on top of a Bible, eyes shut, piously beseeching a disinterested French poodle on the bed beside the Bible. *People* magazine's a pretty big street corner! Now maybe the posturing wasn't Falwell's idea. Maybe it was *People's.* But why did he stoop to play the part?

"Believe me," said Jesus, "they have had all the reward they're going to get. But when you pray, go into a room by yourself," he said, "shut the door and pray to your Father privately. Your Father who sees everything will reward you." That's how Cardinal Newman could reflect: "I am never less alone than when I am all alone."

Jesus continued: "When you pray, don't rattle off long prayers like the pagans who think they will be heard because they use so many words." But there they were, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, led by Cardinal O'Connor, in vanity and in vain, rattling off the lines of The Lord's Prayer in a shouting match with ACT-UP invaders. "They think they will be heard?"

After a federal district court ruled against spoken prayers at public school ceremonies, there he was, an Iowa preacher protesting that the ruling violated his constitutional right to free speech. To whom did he intend to speak?

And there he was on *60 Minutes,* a U.S. Marine drill instructor, barking orders at his young recruit.

"Get 'em up!" He meant: put your hands together as if in prayer. "Yes, sir." "Pray! Ya' got 30 seconds. Go!" "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, ... " Evel Knievel says he can do it in 10 seconds.

After a court of appeals ruling against public school-sponsored spoken prayers at football games, protesting fans throughout the South chanted The Lord's Prayer across the field before kickoff.

They think they will be heard. Does God really have to listen to all this crap? God listens and weeps.

Standing on the 50-yard line, the mayor of Montgomery, Alabama began his protest prayer session by boasting that "Football and prayer are a tradition in Montgomery and in Alabama and in America." One can think of other traditions in Montgomery and Alabama and America.

A Southern Baptist pastor from a small town in central Texas writes in *Church and Society* magazine that he "almost got run out of Texas" for his stated objections to public prayers at the local football games. Nobody took up his offer of his church building, a mile from the stadium, for use by those who wanted to pray for the team's safety or success. He concludes: "The citizens wanted prayer that was quick, convenient and expedient ... the primary effect [of which is] advancing the majority religious perspective of the community." That's sledge-hammer prayer. And still they think they will be heard.

Prayer has become a political football. Why else did Congressman Dannemeyer introduce his Constitutional "prayer" amendment? Why else does Eagle Forum defend formal school prayers against what its spokeswoman calls "The liberals' agenda ... to dethrone God [and] deny Christian morals ... and foster greater evils?" What she seems not to know is that conservative Christians have not always championed these New Right issues of prayer and Bible reading in public schools. The most conservative theologian of the 1920's, J. Gresham Machen, wrote that such "should not be encouraged, and still less required by law." He believed that these trivializations served only "to undermine in the hearts of the people a sense of the majesty of ... God." Joe Bayly wrote in his *Eternity* magazine column: "Christians don't need ... a canned prayer over the loudspeaker in order to talk to God."

A few weeks ago a North Carolina traffic court judge defended his controversial courtroom prayer as a necessary ambiance, saying that it "sets the proper tone ... It's not done as a religious exercise," he says, "it's done for a secular purpose." This is to prayer what Muzak is to music.

Another misuse or misunderstanding of "prayer" so-called, comes from a very different sociopolitical sector: the TM movement and its scientific as well as New Age advocates of mind-power techniques. Here there is talk of "the health benefits of prayer," as it's put by T George Harris, editor of *Psychology Today.* He says that "research proves that prayer produces the same health benefit as a mantra ... lower metabolic rate, slower heart rate, lower blood pressure and slower breathing." And anyone who has suffered through some preachers' long-winded prayers can testify to their value as an effective soporific! Harris cheers so-called "aerobic prayers" used by runners and walkers who "cadence their short prayers to their steps." Now there's nothing wrong with a learned relaxation response or with a meditative method that's also beneficial to health. Real prayer would always be good for you. But is such a technique, in itself, prayer? Is it *Christian* prayer? Research cardiologists and physiologists have claimed that repeating words or phrases, including "Hail, Mary" and the first line of The Lord's Prayer, produces a relaxation

response. But, is this repetition of any familiar syllable conversation with God? In Gethsemane, maybe Jesus should have been droning a mantra. Instead of sweating blood he might have lowered his blood pressure!

Even Christians can be taken in by this confusion. According to Norman Vincent Peale, "The secret of prayer is to find the process that will most effectively ... stimulate the power of God to flow into your mind," - as though prayer's a pump!

One method, Peale says, is to "picturize" what you want and, he says, it then "strongly tends to actualize in terms equivalent to the mental image pictured." But is such visualization technique Christian prayer? It's rather an attempt to harness one's own mind over matter.

In having looked first at New Right and New Age abuses of prayer, we've been following the example set in The Gospel According to Matthew. Only after pointing out some abuses of prayer does that evangelist then go on to present what Jesus offered as a model for the prayers of his followers. Luke tells us it was in response to Jesus' disciples' request that he teach them to pray that he gave this guidance.

This prayer pattern is preserved in two versions (Matt 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4). The pattern is known to us as The Lord's Prayer. The wording of the two forms differs, but the basic simple guidance is the same in both Matthew's longer version and Luke's shorter one. And John Calvin reminds us that "The Lord's Prayer does not bind us to its form of words but to its content." It is, after all, a model for prayer, not a rote ritual.

But all who think they know The Lord's Prayer, even by rote, don't. Harry Cohn, the legendary Columbia Pictures tycoon, once bet that his brother Jack did not know and could not recite The Lord's Prayer. Jack Cohn accepted the wager and began his recitation: "Now I lay me down to sleep ... " A disappointed Harry Cohn interrupted him and forked over the money: "That's enough, I didn't think you knew it."

The so-called Lord's Prayer was not Jesus' prayer for himself. It is a prayer given by Jesus for his disciples' use. As such, it's not "The Lord's Prayer" so much as it's "The Disciples' Prayer." As William Barclay puts it, it "is a prayer which only a disciple [of Jesus] can pray." It's not for every football fan! And it's not for just any jogger who simply wants an extra plus from exercise!

Suzanne de Dietrich explains that our prayer is "less a request than an act of faith and of praise, a giving of our whole selves to God in order that his will may be done in us and by us. This prayer," she says, "focuses on God, on his Kingdom; it aims at putting our whole being and its desires in tune with God." This, you see, is far from an effort to lord it over the village "liberals" or lower blood pressure.

Our prayer begins with one of the first words the baby Jesus and his disciples ever learned: *abba*, the Aramaic form of "papa" or "dada." That word, along with its companion, *imma*, ("mama"),

utters the warm intimacy between a helpless and trusting child and a helpful and loving parent. And unlike our Western custom, the Middle Eastern use of the child-like address usually continued into adulthood. But sadly, many of us so often think of ourselves as having outgrown our need for such spiritual dependence. As spiritual teeny-boppers, we rebel, foolishly fleeing this intimacy. Jesus invites us, as his very own disciples, to come home to our tender *abba* and his. We begin our prayer in the reassuring warmth of a nursery, not in a dark and cold cathedral.

To whom does Jesus tell us to pray? Thank God we're not told to talk to ourselves. And just because some theologians are "pro-gay" doesn't mean that we who are thankful for that should follow them as well on prayer. For example, Gregory Baum says that "to pray is to be in touch with oneself" and Matthew Fox says that "prayer is not talking to God" but is "a radical response to life." And thank God we're not told to pray to some Great Gawd away out there. Helmut Thielicke said that "The lofty God has been lofted right out of my private life." Elsewhere he wrote: "Tell me how lofty God is for you, and I'll tell you how little he means to you." Thank God we're not told to pray to some abstract gob or gobbess! We're not left to mutter "To Whom It May Concern." We are to talk to our *abba*. We're invited to pray as child to Parent, person to Person. Christian prayer is a personal family relationship. That may be hard for some among us to appreciate at first, for some of us have been brutalized by parents. We dare not think of God as such a parent writ large. But no matter what horrible people our biological or adoptive parents may have been or continue to be, the One to whom we are to pray is neither a menacing Big Daddy nor a cruel Mommie Dearest. We are to pray as children to the One who really is our loving Parent.

Within the first-century milieu, Jesus happened to use the masculine *abba* and not the feminine *imma*. But male chauvinists should not read their bias into that and we should not believe them if they do. Anyway, as we've noted from Calvin's caution, we're not restricted to the exact words of the prayer. We're to pray along these lines, not parrot these exact words as if they were magical. Besides, all language for God must be metaphorical. And certainly Jesus spoke of himself as a mother hen caring deeply for her little offspring. He used a child-bearing metaphor for his own approaching death. He well knew that the Hebrew Bible repeatedly described God's compassion in terms of a mother's trembling womb, of painful childbirth, and of an ever-attentive mother. The Hebrew *Shekhinah* is a feminine noun for God's very presence in the Temple and *El Shaddai* is God, the Breasted One: Right at the center of all that ever was, all that is, of all that ever will be, there beats a daddy's heart within a mommy's breast. What better news could we have? We're invited to touch and to be touched by this Personal Reality. What better invitation could we receive? Women: God is your Father too. Men: God is your Mother too. Let's not go berserk with the he-be-she-bes. When Christians fight each other over whether to call on "Our Father" or "Our Mother," are we behaving ourselves like children of God? Let's not use the form of our prayerful address to our God to clobber Her other children, our spiritual siblings.

Matthew's version of our prayer does remind us that we are not alone in approaching God. As we pray, our sisters and brothers are also in view in the term of the familiar address in the possessive

plural: "Our." We pray to "Our Father." Luke's version lacks this possessive. Though generally thought to be the earlier form, it addresses God as Jesus himself did (Mark 14:36; Matt 11:25ft) and as Paul indicates Christians did in his day (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15f). Matthew's addition may be a Christian liturgical elaboration. But, if it doesn't go all the way back to Jesus' guidance, it does go back to Jesus' early followers as they prayed in the spirit of Jesus' guidance. And certainly, it's consistent with the other plurals in the petitions of the prayer in both versions. It's helpful for us to use Matthew's version because it enlarges our concern, as Jesus himself always taught his disciples to do. It gets our focus off of an easy preoccupation with our own limited concerns and refocuses our attention on our common concerns in the whole of the Christian community. Narcissism has no more place in prayer than it does in any other part of a Christian lifestyle.

Matthew's words of address also include "in heaven," missing in Luke's version. "Our Father in Heaven." This addition quite properly balances the initial intimacy with a due regard for the holiness, the otherness, of God. We address both "Our *abba*" *and* the One who, after all, is "in heaven," or, as C. S. Lewis noted, the One—in whom—is heaven. That One is not to be taken for granted. God is not a house-broken pet asleep on a shelf. As the sage of Ecclesiastes put it long ago: "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth." (Eccl. 5:3) When we pray to the One who is "in heaven" we're reminded of our amazing privilege, not right, to call on our *abba*. When we pray, we dare to approach the Creator of all creation, the very essence of all Power in all universes and beyond, of all Authority, all Wisdom, all Glory, all Light, all Truth, all Life, all Eternity everywhere and beyond. That we may talk with *this* One cannot begin to be understood. Mindful of such a God, how presumptuous are the illusions of a New Ager like Terry Cole-Whittaker, whose book, *Love and Power in a World Without Limits: A Woman's Guide to the Goddess Within*, promises the "Mastery it takes to have exactly the life you want ... truly without limits." This silliness doesn't belong to the New Agers exclusively. It's a favorite anthem among American health 'n wealth gospell-binders, too. Stephen Budiansky writes in *U.S. News and World Report:* "If Amep.ca has a national religion at all ... it is ... the belief that we are each in full command of our own destinies." But, he concludes, "Call it fate, Providence, or a probability-distribution function; it remains beyond our power to control, and beyond our right to claim credit for when it falls our way."

When we pray to the One who is "in heaven," we're actually speaking to the One who is Lord over all outer space as well as all inner space; Lord over the billions of stars out there and the billions of cells in each of us. In the words of J. B. Phillips in the book, *Your God is Too Small*: "We can never have too big an idea of God." And try to think of it: we're lovingly invited to call this God our *abba*! The 14th century nun, Julian of Norwich said: "It is the will of the Lord that our prayer and our trust be *large.* We must truly know that our *Lord* is the ground from which our prayer sprouts." No wonder, then, that in Luther's characteristic boldness of faithing in the presence of this God, he says: "The Lord is I great and high, and therefore He wants great things to be sought from Him" There's nothing here of that monotonous evangelical habit of false

modesty expressed by the minimizing word "just." Luther and Julian did not pray, "'We just ask Lord that you just bring in your kingdom, and we just ask Lord, just for this 'n that, Lord, and just forgive us Lord, blah, blah, blah."

"May Your name be hallowed." Each of us is known by name. Each Jew in Jesus' day was known by name. But back then, names were more closely identified with the people themselves than names are today. You and your name were very much one and the same. Their God, too, was known by name. God's name was Yahweh—"I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). Because God was holy, that is, wholly other, so was God's name and everything else about God. Because God was so fully and abundantly alive, God's name and everything about Her was living, undomesticated, free. The people couldn't corner such a God. Because God was totally different, God's name and all else about Him was to be treated in a totally different way from all else. That's what it meant to "hallow" God's name. Her name and all that that name was about was not to be bandied about. It wasn't to be used in vain—to no good purpose. But today it is bandied about in thoughtless curses, in fund-raising letters, in violence Right and Left, Protestant and Catholic, Moslem and Jew, gay and straight. Righteous Jews so reverenced God that they circumvented the use of God's name by referring to *Adonai* ("Lord") or simply *Ha-Shem* ("the name"). This was not a cowering in fear; it was a bowing in awe in the strange Presence. Knowing this God gave no license to the drivel of Divine namedropping.

In view of the careful practice of our ancestors in the faith, it's ironic that we today can be so overly sensitive to what is politically correct in terms of inclusive language and the Deity that we can be more respectful of gender pronouns than of the more direct Divine designation itself—virtually a name—habitually: substituting the supposedly blander word "God" for the apparently more potent "Him" and "Her." Anti-feminists do the same sort of thing, unkindly insisting on a plethora of masculine pronouns as though God were really a pair of giant XY chromosomes on high.

The petition that God's name be hallowed was part of the Jewish prayer known as *Kaddish*: "Magnified and sanctified be His great name in the world which He has created according to His will." That prayer went on immediately to ask that God quickly "establish His kingdom." And so does the prayer Jesus taught his followers: "May Your kingdom come."

Jesus told his followers that they should seek this kingdom of God before everything else. George Eldon Ladd of Fuller Seminary reminds us that "the Kingdom of God was the central theme of the preaching and teaching of Jesus." In his book, *When the Time Had Fully Come*, Herman Ridderbos puts it this way: The kingdom of God "constitutes the nucleus of Christ's ... entire mission and message." Hugh Anderson of Edinburgh says: "The 'kingdom of God' was without doubt the heart of Jesus' historical message. ... With Jesus everything is subordinated to the one essential declaration: *God's reign is coming*. It is as direct and unadorned as that ... the kingdom cannot be earned ... it is God's gracious gift (Lk 12:32; Mt 21:43)."

What was this central theme all about? For what did Jesus urge followers to petition in praying "Thy kingdom come?" Ladd cautions that it is "a complex idea that involves both fulfillment and radical reinterpretation of the Old Testament hope." Allen Verhey of Hope College says that Jesus "challeng[ed] both conventional expectations of the kingdom and customary rules of protocol." Says Ridderbos: "Christ's appearance and preaching in no way seemed to answer to ... [the] ... character of the kingdom [as expected in Israel]." That was John the Baptist's confusion in prison (Mt 11:2) and Peter's "confessional" confusion on the way to Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27ff). "For," as Ridderbos notes, "Jesus does not come with a winnowing fork [of judgement or political might] ... but he walks the land as a physician. He blesses the poor in spirit, and He teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that we have to love our enemies." Jesus' statement that "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it," (Mk 10: 15) reminds us of the inverted order of the kingdom of God." The reign of God that Jesus announced is for the powerless, the dependent. It's a reign of inversion with prostitutes arriving ahead of preachers and priests. It's a kingdom that is shocking, reversed, counter-conventional, up-side-down, topsy-turvy, stranger than fiction, utterly not what was expected, outlandish, disreputable, seemingly impractical, refreshingly queer, and, dare we be so unconventional as to say, ass-backwards! It's a paradise of perversion from this world's perspective.

And Bertold Klappert of Gottingen points out that this kingdom "is inextricably bound up with the person of Jesus." (Mt 12:28) Jesus said: "The kingdom of God is in your midst." (Lk 17:20f), not "within you," as New Age panentheists pretend. It's "right among you," (Cassirer), "upon you" (Conzelman). It's God *with* us: Emmanuel!

Remember what Rosalind Rinker taught us was the first step in conversational prayer? It is to acknowledge that "Jesus is here." That's where we find the kingdom of God: right here in our midst, in Jesus. And as bombs burst over Stuttgart, Helmut Thielicke rejoiced that "*The Kingdom of God is where Jesus Christ is*." He quickly added: "But Jesus Christ always lingers in the darkest places in the world." Thielicke faithed that Jesus was saying: "Here, right here in the midst of this misery, the kingdom of God has come. For *I* am here." Thielicke goes on to write: "I am not telling Christians anything new when I say that we have learned more ... about the kingdom of God in the crash of air raids and the terrors of our cellars ... than those ... times of well-being could ever suggest." And don't we, in this time of AIDS, know that?

By faith we see the reign of God even in its hiddenness in suffering because, after all, God's reign is the way of the cross. We who would be citizens of that kingdom—as Jesus' followers—need to live his way. And his way is the way of even painful love. Jesus' way allows for no retaliation. The reign of God is about the welfare of our enemies as well as our friends. It's about mutual submission in interpersonal relations. It's the lifestyle for God's new age, serious enough to pray Jesus' very words in Gethsemane: "Thy will be done" and mean by them: "Thy will be done right here in my daily life, in my workplace, in my car, in my bedroom, in my lifestyle, wherever on earth I am, as Thy will is done in heaven." To pray for Love's kingdom to come we must live Love's will now on earth as it is lived in heaven. Of course, we won't really do that, but

that needs to be our life's aim. As Ronald Goetz puts it: "I have neither the resolve to follow [Jesus] nor the consistency to tum from him. I am stuck with him and he with me. ... We can only approximate Jesus' demands in the crudest ways, which can at times seem like vulgar parodies."

We must remember, too, that the reign of God is, as Klappert states, "utterly transcendent and supernatural: it comes from above, from God alone." We cannot generate it. Loretta Young was wrong. She was wrong when, in *The Crusades*, she implored Richard the Lion-Hearted: "You just gotta save Christianity, Richard! You gotta!" The reign of God is not about saving Christendom or any other idol. It's not about organized religion. God's new age has nothing to do with what passes for conventional wisdom or common sense. It's not elitism, individualism, democracy, affluence, fame, star-spangled "Christian America" patriotism, "traditional family values," or heterosexuality. God's new age is not inaugurated by a "take-over" by fundamentalist theonomists and Moral Majoritarians or Left-wing pluralists and ecumenists. It's not about talent, brute strength or mind-over-matter. It's not gay liberation or hot sex videos. It's not an up-scale glass of sherry after the morning Eucharist. Following Jesus is more than a fashion statement.

Andrew Kirk of London's Institute for Contemporary Christianity says it well: "God's kingdom is 'not of this world;' human power, which depends on force, cannot establish it. Men and women cannot own it for themselves. They can only receive it as a gift from God, and surrender themselves unconditionally to its values of self-giving love and justice, compassion, service, non-aggression and readiness to suffer for others." We who are called to follow Jesus, the One in whom God's reign begins, are, as followers, called to serve after his example. We must put whatever we may have by the grace of God into all that leads to life and against all that leads to death, even when this may mean our own death that leads to life. We have no other viable option as citizens of the coming kingdom. None.

"You don't know what you're asking," Jesus once told his overly-ambitious disciples (Mk 10:38). So when we pray "Thy will be done" we do ourselves a big favor. C. S. Lewis observed that "If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where should I be now?" That's what Hannah More realized when she penned: "Did not God sometimes withhold in mercy what we ask, we should be ruined at our own request." Luther, too, realized this: "It is not a bad but a good sign," he said, "If the opposite of what we pray for appears to happen. Just as it is not a good sign if our prayers eventuate in the fulfillment of all we ask for." Under some circumstances it seems as though God has not heard us. But have we heard Her? Kierkegaard said: "the true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until he [or she] is the one who hears, who hears what God wills."

This can be quite difficult. Experientially, we cannot see the sense of Luther's observation because we conceive of an entire scenario of how we need something to go. Since we ourselves create the scenario, we, of course, predict a wonderful outcome if only it does go our way. But

we deceive ourselves. Actually, we don't know how we'd experience it if it did go the way we think we want. All our disappointments and all our pleasant surprises prove that.

What's the most popular prayer in the world? It's not The Lord's Prayer. It's not "Hail, Mary." It's not "Now I lay me down to sleep." It's: "Gimme, gimme gimme, gimme, gimme, Amen." You thought it was "Gimme-a-man." It's "Gimme. Amen."

So what's wrong with that? Isn't that, after all, what prayer is: asking? And whether we're praying for the bread of the Lord's Prayer, which David H. C. Read notes is "blunt materialism," or for the "bread" that Reverend Ike likes to say is cash, we're asking for material well-being. That's fine. But what's wrong is that our typical requests miss something crucial in the petitions of our model prayer. Gimme? No. Give *us.* Forgive *us.* Lead *us.* Deliver *us.* "Give *us,* this day, *our* daily bread." Who? Everybody. This means the necessities of life in all lives. It doesn't include everything that we may *think* we need, all we *want,* but what we really do *need* today. And I might guess what others need by admitting what I need. That way I'll know better what to pray for. But do white Christian men pray for the daily needs of black lesbians? Do lesbian Christians pray for the daily needs of heterosexist, homophobic males? Do middle-class Christians pray for the daily needs of rich Jews? Do any Christians pray for the daily needs of enemies, real or imagined?

Sadly, we find many examples of unChristian narcissistic prayer in so-called Christian circles. I read in a fundamentalist newspaper about some Australian fundamentalists who recently interpreted, as "an answer to prayer," a heavy rainstorm that flooded the Sydney Gay Liberation Day Parade, destroying floats and disrupting the festivities. The fundamentalists assembled themselves along the parade route in what they called a "witness and prayer vigil." As they stood there shaking their anti-gay placards at the gay men and lesbians, they claimed they were praying. They were. But it's spelled with an "e" not an "a." Of course their "prayer vigil" was also rained out in the same downpour. But these preying vigilantes did not interpret that as God's verdict on them. Their organizer said that he wasn't bothered by the rain. He was bothered, he said, by the "homosexual men revealing their true condition as 'sodomites' by turning their bare backsides as an insult toward the Christians." Well, it must be admitted that these gay men were not getting it quite right about how to turn their other cheek.

G. K. Chesterton said that it's "the hardest thing in theology to believe:" that we *all* matter. "You matter, I matter." Even those Australian fundamentalists matter. And so do those gay young men with their bare backsides down under.

It was on this day, June 2, fifty-one years ago, that Dietrich Bonhoeffer cleared Nazi air-space as his plane lifted out of Templehof Airfield, Berlin, en route to London on the first leg of the young pastor's last visit to America. At that moment, Bonhoeffer himself was out of Nazi danger. Five days later he boarded the "Breman" to cross the Atlantic for speaking engagements throughout this country. His concerned American friends tried to tie him down to a lecture tour

and teaching assignments that would keep him here and away from Nazi dangers. But he confided to Reinhold Niebuhr: "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christians of Germany. I shall have no right to take part in the restoration of Christian life in Germany after the war unless I share the, trials of this time with my people." The next month he was back in Germany. But in 1941 and 1942 he managed to make six trips outside Germany to inform the Allies about the plot against Hitler. Each time he himself was free. On June 2, 1942 he ended his last secret mission in Sweden and returned to Germany and two years of Nazi imprisonment in Berlin and Buchenwald. He was then trucked to the camp at Flossenbürg, perfunctorily tried during the night, stripped and hanged before dawn, just as the Allies got within a few miles of the camp. Several months before, Bonhoeffer had written from his cell at Buchenwald that repentance is "not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ." Bonhoeffer died because he lived the prayer his Lord taught him: "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread." But his last words were these: "This is the end, for me the beginning of life." When he died, no bells tolled at Flossenbürg. But the bells that were rung even in London and by his American friends tolled not only for Bonhoeffer but for the bell ringers themselves, and for the 74,000 Jews, gypsies, communists, homosexuals and others who were slaughtered at Flossenbürg, and, as John Donne reminds us, for all of *us*. Paul said long ago that when one suffers, all suffer. That's the Christian fellowship, our sharing, our ecosystem.

While gamblers must lose one million dollars each day to meet the Taj Mahal's gaudy expenses, Atlantic City's poor and homeless are malnourished or go without. We face the problem of whether it will be whole wheat or cinnamon raisin or an upper-crust loaf from our favorite gourmet bakery. They face the problem of nothing to eat. In God's ecosystem, don't we face what they do? As Oscar Wilde said, Christ "pointed out that there was no difference at all between the lives of others and one's own life." While we meet here this weekend, some of us complain about the food and over 100,000 young children will die from hunger-related causes. We need better perspective. And while we pray for our daily bread, "There's no use asking God to do what [we] can do [ourselves]," as D. L. Moody said. We dare not ask God to provide their bread while we refuse to give a damn dime to provide that bread. Our prayer is contradicted by our indifference. "Lord, give her attention, but not me. Lord, You meet his needs, I'm too busy." Praying without paying is phoney.

A confession from Oscar Wilde carries us into the next petition. At the end of his life, Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*: "The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. ... I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, ... I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace."

Now we come to the most unwelcomed words of The Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us." Unwelcomed, first of all, because this petition takes for granted we're sinners, and "sinner" is hardly the most

popular self-concept these days. It never was. As sinners, we tend to resist the identity. Even among the clergy, sin can be passè—in preaching, not in practice. Dorothy L. Sayers was appalled that "it hasn't occured to [a particular Anglican bishop] to mention Sin!!!" She said: "You wouldn't think anyone *could* overlook that theological trifle would you?"

Wasn't it Chesterton who called sin the most experientially verified of dogmas? It was Sayres who said: "none of us feels the true love of God till we realize how wicked we are. But you can't teach people that," she said, "they have to learn by experience." Deeper than any irrational sense of low self-esteem lies a throbbing spiritual estrangement, debris of a primal cycle of self-worship and self-destruction. But many prefer to rationalize sin, explaining it away with whatever smug determinisms may be in vogue. Naively, we speak in terms of the merely biochemical, socioeconomic, psychosocial. If only we all had equal opportunities at education, good health, money, sex—all would be pretty well. All would be satisfied. But even rationality isn't enough to cope with sin. Pioneer psychologist William James wisely observed that "There is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts, which it positively refuses to account for, are a genuine portion of reality."

Over and over we see evidence of rude indifference to other people's pain. We see this in ourselves and in others, in history, in social studies, in institutions, even among "liberationists." Even altruism research shows that we generally act only from our own perceived best interest, perhaps sometimes on behalf of others of our own group, but rarely or never for the sake of those we perceive to be different in some supposedly important way. Where is the empathy of the Golden Rule in the us/them antagonisms of gay/straight, rich/poor, Black/White, Left/Right, men/women, East/West, North/South, Third World/First World, Upstairs/Downstairs, labor/management? And what about the pecking orders in between?

In foolishly resisting the diagnosis of sin, we forfeit our only hope of effective remedy. Only in acknowledging our sin, as psychiatrist Karl Menninger concludes, can "we diminish our long-drawn-out, indirect self-reproach which despairs, but repairs nothing." Our sins, Menninger notes, "are greater than [our] symptoms and ... a burden greater than [we] can bear." In praying "forgive us our sins," we're turning to the Grace that is greater than all our sins. The point of this petition is not to be crushed by our sins but to be freed from them.

The petition for forgiveness is unwelcome for another reason. When heard afresh these few words can be shocking to even the most habituated reciter of the Prayer. "Forgive us our sins *as we forgive* those who have sinned against us." Matthew's context adds: "For if you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive those who sin against you, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matt 6:14f) Here again is that kingdom's ecosystem. In early 18th century Georgia, General James Oglethorpe bragged to a young Anglican missionary named John Wesley: "I never forgive." Wesley replied: "Then I hope, sir, you never sin." If we refuse to forgive others are we not, in effect, asking God to refuse to forgive us when we pray The Lord's Prayer? You see how very seriously God takes the

community of his creatures? His forgiving us is connected to our forgiving others. His forgiving can seem here to be conditioned on our forgiving others. But isn't God's forgiveness unearned? Look: We are not to pray "Forgive us *because* we have forgiven others;" we're to pray "Forgive us in the same way, to the same degree, as fully as, in proportion as we, here and now, forgive others." We can't earn God's forgiveness. We debtors cannot put God in our debt. Indeed, we can't receive God's forgiveness nor can we forgive unless somehow we already trust God to freely forgive us as the sinners we actually are. When we don't any longer try to water down our sins we may have our sins washed away. Then washed ourselves, we can wash others. Forgiveness is like love. Neither is generated by ourselves. Forgiveness, like love, is received from God and must be passed on to others. If, in looking to God for mercy, we nonetheless refuse to show mercy to those who either really do sin against us or those we, in the center of our universe, mistakenly think have sinned against us, how is it that we can have sincerely acknowledged that we ourselves are in need of mercy? How is it then, that we are grateful for the forgiveness we're offered for our own offenses? Any way you look at it, we have not been sinned against without also having sinned against somebody or other. But the God who has sinned against nobody freely offers us forgiveness. Dare we, who have sinned against others, ask God's forgiveness while indulging an unforgiving spirit of retaliation? Is it too much for us, the guilty, to forgive our enemies after the example the innocent Jesus set by forgiving his real enemies? In praying this petition, we're reminded of our obligation to treat others as we want to be treated. This is not earned forgiveness; this is the Golden Rule of God's gracious kingdom of sharing. How ready are we to be forgiven? As ready as we are to forgive and as easy as we make it for others to forgive us.

But this all seems so hard for even Christians to do. Donald Wildmon's American Family Association held a convention in Memphis to deplore what he calls anti-Christian bias in secular America. The AFA emcee urged that "If someone kicks us [Christians] in the stomach, we have to be prepared to kick them in the groin." Is this the joy of sinners saved by grace? How is this an expression of "doing unto others as we want them to do unto us?" How is this loving enemies as ourselves, as Jesus told us to do? Isn't such retaliation at even "one of the least of these," a brutal kick to Jesus' groin? (cf. Mt 25)

At the same time, though, there are some examples of Christians who do know the blessing of sins forgiven. Not long ago, East German Christians packed into Leipzig's ancient Thomaskirche to pray for new jobs. But for whom? They prayed for new jobs for members of the once-dreaded secret police, the Stasi. As Princeton historian Robert Darnton reported in *The New Republic*: "The Stasi have become pariahs, and so the Leipzigers prayed for them. They prayed standing in the aisles, crammed shoulder to shoulder."

How exactly are we to do the forgiving? God set the pattern. Paul urged: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, *just as* in Christ, God forgave you." (Eph 4:32) God's compassion for us is greater than our sin; our compassion for others must be greater

than their sin. "But what he did against me was a big deal!" Then what you do for him must be a bigger deal.

And don't think we're supposed to be able to forget the wrong when we forgive the wrongdoer. We won't get more forgetful the more we forgive. But we must not keep scratching at our wounds, exposing them to repeated infection and preventing possible healing. We cannot easily forget the hurt we've experienced and we dare not forget the hurt we've caused. Even after forgiveness, as Origen observed so long ago, "the scars remain." But God commands us to tum our focus from the abuse to the abuser in need of forgiveness. He or she is more important than what he or she did against us. We meet our own spiritual, physical, and psychosocial needs when we forgive, when we let go of destructive resentment, and we're healed ourselves while healing others. It's not just hell to be unforgiven; it's hell to be unforgiving.

And maybe there aren't really as many people who have sinned against us as we sometimes think. It was refreshing for me to come across a letter from a Ruth Hall to John Wesley in *The Arminian Magazine* for November 1781. She wrote: "You ask, Whether I pray, 'Forgive me my trespasses, as I forgive them that trespass against me.' I scarce find that any do trespass against *me*."

In Luke's version, Jesus' model for prayer ends with words which can be rendered: "Do not allow us to fall into the vise of temptation" and Matthew's adds: "But deliver us from evil." The word translated "temptation," as Robert Gundry notes, "can connote either enticement to sin or testing of faith." But, he says, we need not press for one over the other because, of course, "every enticement to sin tests faith, and every test of faith holds enticement to sin." Thus, Gundry makes it: "Do not let us succumb to temptation." F. F. Bruce says it means: "Grant that we may not fail in the test." What test? Remember that in Gethsemane, Jesus warned his very closest disciples, even *after* they had *already* failed a test by having fallen into temptation, to yet "Watch and pray, so that you will not fall into temptation" or, as Heinz Cassirer translates, so that you may "be spared from having to undergo the final test." (Mt 26:41) Cassirer renders our prayer text: "... do not bring us to the point of being put to the final test." He does so because, as he explains, a simple "lead us not into temptation" is meaningless since God tests his people all through the Bible. "'No,' [Cassirer is said to have chuckled] ... 'this is the driving test which nobody can pass.'" [Ronald Weitzman, in his introduction to Cassirer's translation of the New Testament.] But whatever *final* overtones may be present in this clause, surely daily pop-quizzes and mid-terms of our moral life can also be in view as tests we may ask not to fail.

What temptations are most likely to suck you in? What are my hardest tests? In what ways are we repeatedly tempted to turn from the communal priorities of God's reign to our own self-important priorities? When are we most vulnerable to the enticement of getting our own way and pretending that it's God's Way? How often do we decide for the lifestyle *we* love instead of the lifestyle of Love? It's where we fail to live what we've already prayed for: God's kingdom coming right here and now in our own lives. It's when we refuse to rest in the tender love of the

abba of us all. It's as often as we fail to take seriously that our *abba* is also the One who is in heaven and hallowed be His Name.

David H. C. Read bridges the two parts of this petition in a brilliant paraphrase: "Keep me from the tests that might be too much for me; but if they come, then deliver me from the evil." Barclay gives a more amplified paraphrase: "I know that temptation must come to me, for there can be no life without temptation. But, when it does come, as come it must, do not abandon me to it; do not deliver me helpless into its power; stand by me in my hour of need." Did you notice that both of these fine Christian teachers slipped into the first-person *singular* even though the text frames the request in the first-person *plural.* It's so easy to do. And it's quite appropriate to pray in the most personal terms of one's own individual needs. But because it is so natural to do that, we need to be alert that we don't always pray only in terms of "my" needs. We are encouraged throughout the model prayer to pray for "us." "Deliver *us* from evil."

Does it seem at first strange that a writer like Flannery O'Connor, who could cram so much menace and grotesque violence into her stories, said that most people don't recognize real evil? We don't always recognize it. Would we know the Evil one if we met him—or her or it? If we picture Freddy Krueger or the goalie masked Jason, we've surely pictured some evil from which we want to be delivered. But are we as eager to be quickly delivered from the less immediately obvious evil of a Richard Gere's *Internal Affairs* or a Rob Lowe's *Bad Influence*? Not all evil looks so bad. Paul said even Satan disguises as an angel of light (II Cor 11:14). Evil can be camouflaged in beauty. After writing, producing, and directing his feature film, *The Bloodhounds of Broadway,* Howard Brookner died last year of AIDS. In his last months he had taped a note on his refrigerator. It said: "There's so much beauty in the world. I suppose that's what got me into trouble in the first place." An invisible evil virus was hidden in the bodies of men who, if they had resembled Freddy Krueger, would never have attracted anybody.

But there's evil worse than Freddy Krueger, even worse than Freddy's evil played for laughs, worse even than AIDS, worse than the temptations which D. L. Moody said are "never so dangerous as when they come to us in a religious garb," worse than the "religious fanatics" in which Luther said the devil especially resides in this world, and far worse than whatever these fanatics fantasize about our homosexuality. Our most fearfully evil enemies, as Ladd states, are also "The ultimate enemies of God [and they] are not sinful people or pagan nations but evil spiritual powers. ... evil is not merely human ignorance, failure, or error; nor is it blind fate or irrational chance. Evil has its roots in personality [that is to say, evil is personal], and it is greater than [humanity] and stronger."

That from which we all need to pray for deliverance is this personal power of the Evil One, the stylish slanderer who has never dressed in devil drag. "The aim of the Evil One," as Barclay puts it, "is by any means to cause a breach between [us] and God. The Evil One is the personification of all that is against God and all that is out to ruin [us] in this life and in the life to come."

It can be costlier to us to be delivered from this evil than we may like, for it means a reluctant turning from what can be the very most tasty of trifles, the cheap substitutes of self-righteousness that alienate us from God. But our deliverance from evil is far costlier to God who, as C. S. Lewis said, "has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense." We may pray to our Father to "deliver us from evil" because we remember that that is why He sent His Son into this world. Philosopher Thomas Talbott writes in the tradition of Irenaeus that the "merciful reason that God punishes sin [is] to deliver us from evil. ... In Christ, the Apostle Paul proclaims, God reconciles the world to himself. In Christ, God exposes his tender and, vulnerable heart to us. Not only is the cross God's answer to evil; it reveals the very heart of God. It is God's own way of turning the other cheek." Dorothy L. Sayers helps us to see that "God did not abolish the fact of evil: He transformed it. He did not stop the crucifixion: He rose from the dead."

Finally, it is in the overwhelming light and love of that powerful Resurrection that what has been called "the defiant doxology" was appended by Christians sometime before the early 2nd century. It's based on a prayer of David (I Chronicles 29:11): "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the Kingdom."

Are you homesick for the One who made you? Do you want to say something to the God who is waiting and listening as a loving Father and Mother? Jesus helps us to put into words what we need to say. These few suggested phrases have been used for centuries by millions of our sisters and brothers whose lives on earth were forgotten within a few generations, as well as by others whose lives are still remembered. One of these, Søren Kierkegaard, reminds us that *they all now* "speak eternally with Jesus." We here today have the amazing privilege to begin or to renew or to continue communication with our *abba*, our *imma*, that will become, face to face, eternal conversation.

Mamma and Daddy of us all,
Lord of highest heaven:

Only You are holy.
May Your reign come and Your will be done right here in us as it is in heaven.
Give all of us what we all really need today.
Forgive us as we here and now forgive others.
May none of us fail the tests.
Save us all from the powers of evil.
So be it, Amen.