

ESSAY

The Lord's Prayer: The Ultimate Moral Exemplar

Mario J. Miranda, Victoria University, Australia

The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-13) is used frequently in Christian worship, and is a classic example of the unreserved effort by humans to connect with God. Although theological differences and various modes of worship divide Christians, Fuller Seminary Professor Clayton Schmit observes that "there is a sense of solidarity in knowing that Christians around the globe are praying together... and these words always unite us" (*Houston Chronicle*, p. A13, April 8, 2007). In the spread of Christianity historically, one of the first texts to be translated into new languages has been the Lord's Prayer, long before the full Bible would be translated into the respective languages.

Unfortunately, we conventionally read the Lord's Prayer too narrowly, and even fearfully. Its potential social dimensions are much broader and richer than we normally realize. Indeed, it is a vibrant exemplification of the functions of religion first detailed by Émile Durkheim, including giving meaning to life, reinforcing social unity, and serving as an agent of social control.

Bible commentary on the Lord's Prayer describes it primarily as an expression of human needs and concerns that becomes a petition to God. While implicitly acknowledging that the Lord's Prayer is a summary of the whole gospel, commentary rarely highlights the connection of the Lord's Prayer to other illustrated teachings of Jesus. For example, substantial parts of the Lord's Prayer rely on the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19) and the parable of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13:1-23). Both of these parables serve the thesis of the Lord's Prayer admirably, and elucidate Jesus' instructions on how to pray. Arguably, the Lord's Prayer foreshadows Jesus' later teachings, which in turn recall the invocations in his prayer.

Nevertheless, it would be foolhardy to claim any success in trying to mine the mind-set of Jesus when he responded to his disciples' request to teach them how to pray. After all, as Isaiah explained, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (55:8). Yet a broader and deeper understanding of the Lord's Prayer could extrapolate its virtues and apply them to myriad facets of life that seem to lack a moral compass. The vernacular Episcopal English version renders the Lord's Prayer in its ancient form, abbreviated for contemporary readers, as follows:

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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

The intimate salutation of Jesus' opening words, "Father" (*Abba*), sets a tone of candid and uncontrived communication, suggesting interaction between little children and their organic father. Jesus' collective representation of the prayer through the use of first person plural ("Our") conveys conviction that when good is sought for oneself, this good also benefits others.

While teaching how to pray, Jesus does not appear to follow any ceremonial courtesies. Rather, he extols Father God "who is in heaven" as "hallowed." By referring to the awesome character of Father God, the faithful affirm their embrace of the Father's plan. St. Thomas Aquinas, an eminent Doctor of the church in the 13th century, asserts in *Contra Gentiles*, IV, xix that God does not direct creatures to their ends from outside, but through their own nature. The Divine plan of creation is meant to be carried out by humans themselves through acting in conformity with their own nature. The corollary of unequivocal acceptance of the Divine plan is to trust that all things given by God are latently good, even when the goodness is not evident. Jesus naturally upholds engagement with goodness ("Thy Kingdom come"), and, by affirming Father God's "will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven," vows to pursue the Heavenly Father's script in all manner of "seeking first His Kingdom and His righteousness on earth" (Mathew 6:33), just as Jesus implored his disciples in his later teaching.

The quintessence of engaging with Divine goodness is well summarized in the following passage by Aquinas:

The natural necessity inherent in things that are determined to one effect is impressed on them by the Divine power which directs them to their end, just as the necessity which directs the arrow to the target is impressed on it by the archer, and does not come from the arrow itself. There is this difference, however, that what creatures receive from God is their nature, whereas the direction imparted by man to natural things beyond what is natural to them is a kind of violence. Hence, as the *forced necessity* of the arrow shows the direction intended by the archer, so the natural determinism of creatures is a sign of the government of Divine Providence. (*Summa Theologica* I:103:1 ad 3um)

Elsewhere, in his illustration of the government of Divine Providence, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a seed as tiny as the mustard seed (Luke 13:18–19; Mathew 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32) that is manifest in little acts of righteousness which have potential to reproduce, grow, and give comfort to others indefinitely. In that sense, the coming of the Kingdom is immanent in tiny human acts of goodness, has no bounds, and tends to grow exponentially. And like the boughs of strong mustard trees, it allows tired birds a place to rest.

Psychologists Bargh and Chartrand (1999), writing in the *American Psychologist*, noted that the ability of humans to process information is limited by their attention, and is not always done at a conscious level. Rather, it sometimes occurs automatically and

manifests as “mindless” responses. Social researcher Chaiken (1980), when describing heuristic versus systematic information processing, points out that reactive mindlessness can grow into habitual behavior and routine use of simple heuristics to make decisions. Jesus was obviously aware of what social science has only now identified, that human attempts to control decision-making consciously by overriding their natural autonomous restive behavior and habits can in fact consume considerable cognitive energy or strength. These efforts by humans to ensure better outcomes from their actions invariably sap their brain's energy.

Other social scientists, Baumeister, Muraven and Tice (2015), in their studies of self-regulatory fatigue and “ego depletion,” have also corroborated that tiredness of the brain often leaves individuals depleted, with less cognitive resources to make well-considered decisions, which may then result in harmful or negative consequences. Social researchers have recognized that actions resulting from a fatigued human brain's consequent over-reliance on the limbic system may frequently be against the grain of the individual's rationale, militating against the government of Divine Providence, as described by Aquinas. With his understanding of the frailty of the human mind, Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, implores the Heavenly Father to “give us today our daily bread” in order to replenish our depleted resources, so that we may conduct ourselves in optimal ways that do not mindlessly abrogate the Kingdom of heaven. And if we do mindlessly repeal the Heavenly Father's script, Jesus begs the Heavenly Father to “forgive us our trespasses.”

John Dewey, the 19th century social philosopher whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform, in his essay “Morals and Conduct,” asserts that humans in their deliberate actions invariably have alternative possibilities. Dewey postulates that, in deliberation, and before choice, no evil presents itself as evil. Until it is rejected, the possibility is perceived as a competing good. After rejection, that possibility figures not as a lesser good, but the bad of that situation – an evil good! Dewey held that only deliberate conduct into which reflective choice enters is distinctively moral, for only then the question of good or evil enters.

Jesus understood that it is perilous to draw a hard and fast line between action in which deliberation and choice are present, and action due to impulse and matter-of-fact habit. Jesus well appreciated the human conundrum of trying to discover just how far to carry the inquiry of deliberate choice, what to bring under examination, and what to leave as unscrutinized habit. That is perhaps why he exonerated the woman who was about to be stoned, saying to the baying mob who quietly dispersed when he chastised them, “He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone!” (John 8:7). Jesus was well aware that any and every human act is potentially subject to possible moral judgement, but because he held no final formula by which to judge morality, and at the same time seek forgiveness, Jesus beseeches the Heavenly Father to grant the faithful the grace to “forgive those who sin against us.”

When illustrating the kingdom of heaven through the parable of the sower, Jesus seems to imply that the quantity and quality of talent that one possesses is a random endowment not unlike the outcome from the unwitting spread of the sower's seeds, drawn

by pure gravity, on different terrain. It appears that the seed sown may not find fertile ground, but instead land on paths, shallow soil, or thorns. Just like sown seed is drawn by gravitational force onto indifferent land, thus yielding suboptimal outcomes, so too contextual situations and genetic proclivities conspire to consign all people some sub-optimal coordinates in life, leaving us only limited quantity of seed left to fall on fertile ground. The continued use of the term "fell" on fertile ground leading to thirty-fold, sixty-fold, or even a hundred-fold crop gives a sense that the extent of germination in fertile ground may be a random attribute of the portion of seed falling on good soil. The random yield of thirty, sixty, or one hundred-fold crop represents the talents that are by chance given to us, with which we are expected to engage productively and maximize their dividend. Some individuals are fortuitously blessed with more talent than others, for which they can take no credit, and the corollary is that no one can be blamed for having less or boast for having more. The Parable of the Sower is an admonition to accept whatever quantity of seed has fallen on good soil, and produce a crop with maximal effort accordingly.

In sum, the seed can be understood as human talents. Some of us will inevitably have more talents while others will have different or less talents, but what we have received is not a result of having deliberately sowed seed of good strain quality or quantity in good soil. This fortuitous talent that we possess, which might perversely encourage us to grow beyond ourselves, appears to be the motivation for Jesus seeking the Heavenly Father's restraint of "not leading us into temptation," but rather pleading for the grace from Providence "to deliver us from all evil" that distracts mortals from seeking first His Kingdom and His righteousness on earth.

Of course, Jesus well appreciated that in any society, however ordered, there will always be a tendency to act contrary to the imperatives of social norms. Jesus fully realized that the price of social regulation is individual constraint, and that conformity to rules can often lead to individual frustration. Psychologically rooted impulses are inevitably inhibited when humans are compelled to conform. Jesus recognized that our mental states and emotions therefore do not always align automatically with social regulation. From the perspective of Durkheim's functions of religion, faith in Divine Providence can therefore be seen as a social mediator of behavior and well-being, preventing us from potentially malevolent distractions. However, Durkheim acknowledged that society cannot act solely as a control mechanism, and vigorously asserted in *L'Annee Sociologique* that society is also a source of expression of life and purpose. Unfortunately, humans trapped in the thrall of depravities, wittingly or unwittingly, will often find relief and pleasure in perverse ways.

The "Our Father," as it has traditionally been known, has been the most repeated prayer and perhaps the most respected biblical text for the past two millennia. Unfortunately, there appears to be systematic reluctance for deeper understanding of it, much less its advancement as an archetypical model of social practices. The fear and/or threat posed by embracing the sentiments expressed by Jesus in his overtures to His Heavenly Father have always been the bane of those who foster the antithesis of the Lord's Prayer among humans, and who profit from the iniquities thereof. However, engagement

with the Lord's Prayer could be a template for a moral order by which societies could conduct themselves, motivated by a richer purpose that all life holds for them. The Lord's Prayer provides the invocation for the most fundamental aspects of human sustenance and fulfilment. Yet institutions with vested interest in wielding power over their constituencies often peddle the notion that the principles enunciated in the Lord's Prayer stifle the reach of greater human potential. These worldly orders cast aspersions on the eschatological bearings of the Lord's Prayer, and in the process reject the deeper tenets of its message.