

# Your Kingdom, Your Will

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Date: 23 June 2024

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- [ 0 : 00 ] All right. If you would, would you pray with me? God, this morning I am aware that we have sung so many songs about your promises, about victory, songs of hope.
- And yet, Lord, I know that we come and hear all of us from different weeks, different months, different years, some hard, some making it difficult to believe in your promises.
- And yet, Lord, surely your goodness does pursue us, does chase us all the days of our lives.
- So please make us patient for your coming. Help us to learn to wait on you and to rest, even when that's so difficult.
- Please fill us with your spirit and fill us with joy today. And in this summer season, I pray that all the light pouring into our windows would illumine our hearts, would help us to make fresh starts in faith, in relationships, in all the ways that matter.
- [ 1 : 44 ] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So one of my favorite pastors and scholars to read, the late Eugene Peterson, tells a story in one of his books, Practice Resurrection, that has given me a lot of food for thought when it comes to prayer.
- Peterson relates this occasion when a renowned Christian leader, a man who's regarded as a saint in Peterson's community, comes to visit his home.
- Eugene Peterson grew up in Montana, and they had a house or a cabin on the lake. So this man, this holy man, loved to come and to spend time at their lake house and retreat.
- He was a friend of the family. And one day when Eugene Peterson and his mother were out, he was about 16 years old, this man came for a visit for the day.
- And he was like, this man, this great holy man, spent the afternoon with the family and most of the day just relaxing and reclining in a hammock by the lake, laying simply with his eyes closed.
- [ 3 : 03 ] And this young boy, Eugene Peterson, this teenage boy, he realizes that he desperately wants to go and ask this holy man some questions and specifically wants to ask some questions about prayer.
- So he asks his mother, she thinks it'll be okay. He's sleeping. Can I go interrupt him? And his mother says something like, I don't think he's sleeping.
- He likes to be quiet and listen to the spirit. So Peter, Peterson, Eugene Peterson decides to go out and ask this question since he thinks maybe he's not asleep.
- Dr. Follett, can I talk to you about prayer? And without opening his eyes, this great holy man, this Christian leader, basically barks out, I haven't prayed for 40 years.
- And Eugene Peterson is stunned, like one, a little aggressive, two, like, okay, you haven't prayed for 40 years. How could this great holy person have not prayed for 40 years?
- [ 4 : 15 ] So Peterson relates being scandalized by this. Like, okay, I can't even trust or believe in, you know, this person and his ministry anymore. But then, years later, Eugene Peterson starts to realize what had actually happened.

And here's what he writes. Five or six years elapsed before what had taken place dawned on me. This great holy man was, in fact, wise and holy.

He knew intuitively that the callow adolescent that was me that day would have swallowed whole anything he said and slavishly imitated it.

No matter what he said, no matter how wise and holy, it would have set me off for years of trying to be Dr. Follett at prayer.

Wasted years of imitating an icon when I needed to be experimenting, practicing, internalizing the way of language that would bring me into the God-initiated conversation that is prayer.

[ 5 : 23 ] I love that story because it conveys that each one of us must become ourself in prayer.

That slavishly following the practice of others will not help us grow up in Christ. And I'll admit at the same time the story is pretty opposite of my own story.

In my early teenage years when I was 13 or 14 years old, something like that, my youth pastor told me in no uncertain terms that there are five things that a disciple of Jesus has to do each day.

Pray, read scripture, intentionally praise and worship with other Christians, or intentionally praise and worship, fellowship with other Christians, and engage in some kind of service.

Five things every day. And y'all, I was that kind of young Christian. I was on fire for Jesus. Y'all know what I'm talking about. The youth group was called On Fire. It was called Ofi, On Fire Youth.

[ 6 : 32 ] Okay, everybody was on fire back then, all right? And I was one of those teenagers and you didn't have to tell me twice to do something. If that's what you told me would please God, I was about it.

And I recognize now that some of that daily prayer practice probably grew from the advice of this person, maybe not for the right reasons, maybe some people please I'm still processing out of.

But I am sure that that advice deeply, deeply shaped my faith. And it's one of those things that when I read things about how your neural pathways are formed, I'm like, oh, maybe that advice has helped me.

Like it's one of those things where I don't pray for at least a couple of minutes every day, I'm like, something is wrong. Some of y'all feel like that about exercise or other things in your life. If something's happening, you know, you don't feel right if you don't do it in the day.

That's how I feel about prayer. I've certainly learned to be less rigid, but there's also still something there that I really value. So, in the story that Eugene Peterson tells about this great holy man not giving him a model, Peterson talks about feeling saved from slavish imitation that would have rendered him immature.

[ 7 : 56 ] And the irony is that I also feel that the specific advice that my youth pastor gave me created a practice that led me away from people pleasing and helped me to learn to listen to the spirit.

spirit. So, when it comes to prayer, I just want to say, first off, that I think the truth is that it's not either or, but it's probably both and. That in most, as in most things in our lives, we benefit from some structure.

And I do think as well that nobody can teach us exactly for ourselves how to pray. For some of us, it's walking prayer. For others, it's drawing and art as prayer.

There are all kinds of forms of prayer. And I think there is a level at which no one can tell you what nourishes your soul and what connects you to God exactly. Prayer is this particular form of attention that we cultivate.

For a Christian, it's attention focused on God, toward God. It requires a certain pace. And it opens the door to reverence.

[ 9 : 09 ] Connects us to the creator and it reminds us that we are creatures, which can be hard to remember in our society that is always teaching us to become like gods.

That that's the goal. Reflecting on the writing of a philosopher named Paul Woodruff, Barbara Brown Taylor has this to say. To forget that you are human, to think you can act like a god, this is the opposite of reverence.

Reverence stands in awe of something. Something that dwarfs the self, that allows human beings to sense the full extent of our limits.

And a reverent soul who is unable to feel in awe in the presence of things higher than the self is also unable to feel respect in the presence of things it sees as lower than the self.

This raises real questions about leaders, especially religious leaders who cite reverence for the good as their warrant for proclaiming whole populations evil. To be attentive to God in prayer draws us deeper into reverence.

[ 10 : 25 ] And to practice prayer is always, always to engage mystery. It's to abandon our uncompromising insistence on logic and reasoning and to choose openness, which is in large part what faith is about.

Openness. As a pastor, I won't ever be able to answer every question that you have about prayer. And the truth is, I don't really want to.

what I want is for us to live into the mystery. I want us to embrace this pursuit of God that is central to our spiritual formation.

And I'll say this as well. I suspect that if we can't live with the mystery of prayer, that there is much else about the Christian life and within the Christian life that we will not be able to stomach.

Biblical scholar Carrie Walsh makes this brilliant insight about mystery. And I have to admit that when I started reading some of this about how history, and particularly the Enlightenment, has affected how we think about mystery, it was really, really helpful for me.

[ 11 : 47 ] So the theological notion of mystery has had a strange career from biblical times to modernity. Traditionally, mystery was viewed as a fundamental aspect of God and a positive one.

But with the Enlightenment, mystery became problematic, an impediment to reason, a primary arbiter of knowing. Knowledge itself came to be viewed as a rationalistic enterprise, where one gained control of mastered subject matter.

Where knowledge is understood to be essentially acquisitive in nature, mystery proves uncooperative. So mystery, including things like the mystery of prayer, was not always a problem.

It once was considered this, not a gap, but a surplus, a fullness, something that is weighty, that is expansive, something that we don't solve, but something that rather we move deeper into.

And that forms us. Prayer as attention to God is an avenue to that kind of fullness. Now, last week Pastor Anthony said that as we started this series of Lord's Prayer, that maybe our most important task as preachers is to help you grow in prayer.

[ 13 : 09 ] And I will say, basically, all the great spiritual masters in the Christian tradition they echo that. Like, they basically say growth in prayer in some way is growth in the spiritual journey.

It's, honestly, it's not, oh, you can exegete the Bible more fully. It's not. It's not. It's really about, like, communion with God. And I'll just say this before we get into our scripture.

I know that many of us don't know where to start when we talk about prayer. I know that that has a lot to do with bad theology regarding prayer and also a reduction to just asking for things and being taught that that's the only form of prayer.

Prayer has become just another way of consuming and transacting in this capitalist society. I also think probably it's hard to start or continue because it's hard to know how to quiet ourselves or get to this place of inner stillness and a culture that encourages us to just be distractible to be entertained.

Honestly when I was writing the sermon like this past week I was praying and I was like okay let me let me just you know throw the Lord's Prayer in here a little bit and one of the things I realized is how easy it is as we pray to just be distracted to like the Lord's Prayer is this very particular structure and I also realized that as I Lucola and me this is not approved so I hope it's okay if I say this as I realized that as Lucola and me have been teaching our son how to pray I mean mostly just at night praying in front of him and letting him pray I realize that very little do we say let's just listen together let's just remember that God loves us we don't have to ask for anything tonight and I realize that so much of that is my own theological formation that basically if I'm to teach someone to pray

[ 15 : 24 ] I control the process there's content there are petitions and I realize what am I passing on to my child so I would say we are all related to that way of being all right so what I want to do now is get us into the prayer and talk about this one particular clause so this will be on the screen it's Matthew 6 5 through 15 and you can read along or you can pull it up if you would like to on your phone or open your Bibles and whenever you pray do not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others truly I tell you they have received their reward but whenever 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 when you are praying do not heap up empty phrases as the

Gentiles do for they think they will be heard because of their many words do not be like them for your father knows what you need before you ask him pray then in this way our father in heaven may your name be revered as holy may your kingdom come may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven give us today our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors and do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one for if you forgive others their trespasses your heavenly father will also forgive you but if you do not forgive others neither will your father forgive your trespasses now when we encounter the Lord's prayer for some of us it can seem old hat like I'm one of those people there are many things that I can tell you I know when I learned about the atonement

I have no idea when or how I learned the Lord's prayer it feels like one of those things that has always been a part of my life so it can be one of those things that we forget like this prayer has been prayed all over the world for 2,000 years it's a prayer that tells us what Jesus cared Tertullian one of the church fathers believed that the Lord's prayer contains the epitome of the gospel and the prayer which again we usually read in isolation it's in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount it's actually the structural and theological center of the Sermon on the Mount it's the only time that Jesus says pray in this way the early church saw it as a foundation of prayer and a yardstick of prayer the kind of thing that when you are praying you kind of like if you just drop the

Lord's prayer in the middle of your prayer you're like oh maybe maybe a little self-centered today okay let me shift back over to your kingdom come all right maybe I'm thinking about things that that are not you know around the honoring of God's name let this prayer to the early church in the context of baptism and in the context of communion so in the early church people would say you know underground church I want to become a Christian I want to be part of this community and these people would be trained for two whole years before they could be baptized and they were taught two things primarily they were taught from the creed usually the apostles creed and then they were taught before they were baptized the Lord's prayer it was something to receive as this gift and the prayer has these positive and negative aspects it assumes that you pray whenever you pray that's what the passage says whenever you pray you don't pray for public approval or to attract attention or for the sake of performance but we pray with

God as a primary hearer we don't pray believing we need a correct formula or that we need some kind of like incantation prayer is not about this manipulation grounded in self interest it's not a transaction it's about an expression of trust in a God who this text says already knows what we need so it has to be fundamentally about trust it's about alignment it confesses our lack of self sufficiency and then we get to the other part of this passage which is do pray in this way and last week pastor Anthony talked about the our father in heaven hallowed be your name part of this prayer this week I'm focusing on the next part your kingdom come you will be done on earth as it is in heaven N.T. Wright has said that this prayer is a risky crazy prayer of subversion and subversion conversion and subversion that's actually what I want to focus the last part of this sermon around every time we pray the

[ 21 : 02 ] Lord's prayer we are led further down a path of conversion in the King James version of this prayer that I grew up with maybe some of us know we get these different words thy and thine before kingdom versus my and mine and those rhyming opposites they're a way to get at some pretty fundamental questions who are we following whose will do we want to be done whose kingdom are we building even Jesus himself has to answer that question and answers it in a garden of gethsemane with my father if it is possible let this cup pass for me yet not what I want but what you want and I think that particularly in a community like ours the issue of surrendering will surrendering our wills can be particularly hard in past versions of ourselves we might have been too trusting we might have given over too much of what we wanted or too much of our desire and will and feel like we're never ever going to make that mistake again there's a scene in the fire next time by

James Baldwin I'm going to try to describe it that I think captures that predicament he talks about this summer in which he he's a teenager and he's growing up in Harlem and there's a sense that he that all these people are vying for his allegiance all these people these people on the street he talks about pimps and racketeers and all these different kinds of people are like you are a young black boy I want you and then he talks about meeting the pastor of one of his friends and this woman who's charismatic and sees him and looks right at him and says whose little boy are you and he talks about how that hit him so deeply and he ends up saying amidst all the tension of that summer of his adolescence he ends up saying essentially in his heart why yours I'm your little boy and then he goes off and he becomes a preacher and all of that why yours many of us answered in the past and then

Baldwin later in his life goes and he meets Elijah Mohammed the leader of the nation of Islam and again he's a charismatic leader but now he's an adult James Baldwin is an adult and he realizes I'm drawn in this is really lovely what's being said and he senses again that question whose little boy are you and he says he couldn't respond in the same way he says I did not respond now as I had responded then because there are some things not many alas but some things that one cannot do twice and I think that many of us feel like that there are some things that we cannot do twice like giving ourselves over wholeheartedly like surrendering to another's will and even if that other is God God's self and when we catch ourselves realizing that about ourselves it's important to remember that

God's will is reflected in God's coming kingdom and we know the parameters of that kingdom the prophets give us compelling visions of that kingdom wolves laying down lambs and predators who no longer feed on the prey and things that are poisonous becoming domains of joy people no longer learning or even having any interest in studying or making war and yet it's still scary your kingdom come over my kingdom your will be done over my will to pray that is to pray for holy indifference to pray more for the desire of God in our lives and then I want to say that in addition to being led down this path of conversion every time we pray this prayer we're also led down a path of subversion the prayer starts with the our father which particularly doesn't feel subversive but we have to remember that the prayer starts off the very first time that the children of

Israel the children of Israel the Hebrews use familial language that language of father child is in the context of the exodus it is in the context of proclaiming truth to power they essentially say here's the tip this is exodus 4 thus says Yahweh Israel is my son my firstborn let my people go that is what Moses says to Pharaoh and that's where father language comes from it was a radical liberation of identity and that's what roots the prayer this sense that we are not slaves that none of us are destined or meant to be slaves that we are meant to be children sons and daughters and children and then the same kind of subversion is also at play in your kingdom come this is the kingdom of God is the really the heart of Jesus message on the earth your government come it's political it involves a different ordering of power on the earth from the very beginning the children of Israel had this fundamental belief that God was the sole sovereign of the world the faithful in Israel held to this long tradition of refusal to accept the domination of anyone but God because God was the ultimate ruler here's how

[ 27 : 27 ] Obery Hendrix draws this to a point of clarity despite the various ways don't worry about this word Hebrew word the rule of God could be understood its first stream of meaning God is universal king became the basis for all the resistance movements in Israel to come the radicality of this notion lay in its rejection of human domination its impeccable logic was that if God is the sole king of the universe no other can claim to kingship no other claim to kingship is legitimate for common people to declare that they would bow before no earthly king was a dangerous and radical political statement in the ancient world and they knew it to pray your kingdom come is scandalous in the world of empire it expresses discontent with all the babylons and all the romes and all the colonizing forces even in our own society that we can possibly think of it serves as a foundation of resistance at the level of the heart and hopefully at the level of the hands your kingdom come may all have food your kingdom come may all debt be canceled can I get an amen on that your kingdom come may every harm we've committed and every harm that we've received be accounted for and redeemed your kingdom come may we be delivered swiftly from all the things that might push us beyond what we can take your kingdom come your creation be rescued from structural evil and moral evil and natural evil your kingdom come this converting and subverting prayer should be an important part of our following

Jesus and to follow Jesus we need as Pastor Rich Valota says a different pace different relationship to power and different priorities and this prayer the Lord's prayer forms us in a different pace different relationship to power and different priorities it can transform us the last thing I just want to say is the most beautiful thing about this prayer is that it is something that we receive by grace in just a second a minute the communion host is going to come up here and they're going to preface the communion with and the Lord's prayer with indeed we are bold to pray we are bold to pray I say it every time I serve communion we are bold to pray and then

I hear us together proclaim the Lord's prayer we are bold because the Lord's prayer we pray it as if we understand it we pray it as if we can attain to it we pray it as if we fully believe it as if we have been converted by it as if we have entered into the subversiveness of it but the truth is that we have it yet with hope N.T. Wright reminds us we don't have yet have the right to say this prayer but it's part of the holy boldness the almost cheeky celebration of the sheer grace and goodness of the living God that we can actually say these words as though we really meant them through and through it's a bit like a child dressing up in his grown up brother's suit and having the cheek to impersonate him for a whole morning and just about getting away with it and learning to his surprise as he does what it must be like to be that older brother we are those who are becoming like our older brother

Jesus may this bold prayer root that becoming amen I think what I want to do now is just take sorry I'm sorry I actually want to it feels like I should we should actually take a couple minutes before we start communion maybe to just pray so what I'm going to ask us to do I'm going to do what I get I don't do enough with my own family is to just say let's just be still for a moment let's just be quiet let's just listen to God and receive God's love for us so two minutes and then I'll ask the older Katrina to come thanks