



The Lord's Prayer: Empowerment for Living the Sermon on the Mount

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“CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS,” WRITES RICHARD LISCHER, “HOWEVER MUCH they may admire the Sermon on the Mount, want even more to *use* it or to know if it is usable in the congregation.”¹ Is the Sermon on the Mount usable? Is it possible to live the ethic of the sermon? If so, what (or who) makes it possible? This article proposes that material within the Sermon on the Mount itself, especially the Lord's Prayer, offers a means of empowerment for the ethic that the sermon proclaims.

Discussions of ethics include three types of subject matter: norms, warrants, and empowerment.² To ask what norms are advocated by a particular ethical position is to ask, “*What* should we do?” The sermon's norms of behavior are the commands that Jesus issues to those listening to him. Warrants for a particular course of action answer the question, “*Why* should we do it?” In the Sermon on the Mount, warrants include the character of God, proverbial wisdom, and the sheer

¹Richard Lischer, “The Sermon on the Mount as Radical Pastoral Care,” *Interpretation* 41 (1987) 157.

²Cf. Richard Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 19.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus' followers ask for what they need to enact the ethic proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount. As God answers their prayer, God creates the community that Jesus defines in the sermon.

force of Jesus' own teaching authority.³ Discussions of the empowerment for an ethic address the question, "How can we do what we should do?" The question of empowerment is critical for any practical study of the Sermon on the Mount: its ethic of non-violence and its imperatives against lust, anger, worry, and retaliation are at odds with what is generally regarded as humanly possible or even advisable. If Jesus meant to inspire ethical behavior toward the neighbor, instead of merely a paralysis of guilt over sins real and imagined, *how* did he expect his followers would be able to live such an ethic? How are disciples to be shaped into people who live the norms of behavior exhorted in the sermon?

I. AN ETHIC OF EMPOWERMENT

Dale Allison notes the criticism of the Sermon on the Mount as a compilation of norms with no attention paid to how the ethic exhorted might actually be accomplished: "Often expression has been given to the conviction that the Sermon on the Mount is unremitting in its requirements, that it does nothing more than make demands."⁴ Allison disagrees with this assessment and finds in the sermon and its context three sources of empowerment for the ethic exhorted in Matthew 5-7.

First, Allison notes that the sermon is delivered after Jesus has spent time among his hearers "curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Matt 4:23b). "So before Jesus makes any demands, he shows his compassion by healing the sick among the crowds....Jesus' first act is not the imposition of difficult imperatives but the selfless service of others. Today's command presupposes yesterday's gift."⁵ Allison might add at this point that Jesus' healing ministry is not only the last thing we see before Jesus begins the sermon. It is also the first thing we see after Jesus concludes the sermon. Chapter 8 of Matthew's gospel narrates the healing of a leper, the healing of a centurion's servant, and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law; in addition, it offers another report of widespread healing by Jesus like the report in 4:23 (cf. 8:16-17).

Secondly, Allison points out that the Beatitudes which begin the sermon are a combination of present and future indicatives; no imperatives are issued until the final blessing, and even then the imperatives are, "Rejoice and be glad!" (5:12). Far from offering exhortation, the Beatitudes give a blessing in the present, as they are heard. Furthermore, that blessing is a down payment on the future reality described by the second half of each sentence. The result is that "the imagination,

³Jesus calls on the character of God as warrant when he exhorts hearers not to worry about food and clothing because, "your heavenly Father knows you need all these things" (Matt 6:32; cf. 6:8). Hearers need not have anxiety because God knows their need and will provide for it. Proverbial wisdom is the warrant when Jesus counsels against worry about tomorrow, "for tomorrow will bring worries of its own" (6:34). Sometimes, such as when he quotes the law of Moses and then revises the norms of the law by saying, "But I say to you..." Jesus offers no warrant for his ethic beyond the fact that he himself is teaching it.

⁴Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 28.

⁵*Ibid.*, 29.

through contemplation of God's future, discovers hope and so finds the present tolerable."⁶

Finally, Allison finds empowerment in the sermon's two arguments from the lesser to the greater concerning God's care for those Jesus addresses. If God cares for the grass of the field and the birds of the air, how much more will God care for those who are listening to Jesus (6:30)! And if evil parents know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will God give good gifts to those who ask (7:11)! Allison says of 6:25-34 and 7:7-11, "They are inserted because of Matthew's pastoral concern. He knows how hard the instruction delivered in Matthew 5-7 really is and therefore how much need there is to be reminded of the Father in heaven who gives good gifts to his children."⁷ Reminding hearers that God may be trusted to give good gifts to God's children is another way the Sermon on the Mount gives hearers the freedom to shift their focus from worrying over their own needs to demonstrating love for the neighbor.

II. AN EMPOWERING PRAYER

To Allison's excellent work on ways that the sermon includes words of blessing and empowerment among its exhortations to hearers, I add one more observation. Not only does Matthew offer empowerment for the sermon by sandwiching it between displays of the great power of Jesus for healing. And not only does the sermon itself equip its hearers for the behavior it exhorts by offering immediate blessings that inspire hope and by reminding hearers of the Father in heaven who gives good gifts to his children. The sermon also equips its hearers by providing a way for them to remind the same Father in heaven of specific good gifts needed to live the ethic of the sermon. In the midst of a seemingly relentless barrage of imperatives addressed to disciples is a small collection of imperatives addressed to God. At the heart of the intricately structured Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer.⁸ In this prayer, the community of Jesus' followers asks for what it needs to live the sermon. As God answers this prayer, God is empowering a community to live the sermon as a whole.

A look at the petitions of the Lord's Prayer will help to demonstrate the connection between the imperatives that Jesus addresses to hearers of the sermon and those that his audience will address to God. Each of the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer focuses on something that belongs to God: "your name...your kingdom...your will."

1. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

⁶Ibid., 30.

⁷Dale C. Allison, Jr., "The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106/3 (1987) 436.

⁸Commentators have offered various ways of delineating the structure of the Sermon on the Mount, yet most agree that the Lord's Prayer is at the heart of the discourse. See Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 27-40; also, Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Place, Structure, and Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount within Matthew," *Interpretation* 41 (1987) 131-143; and Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 211-213.

2. Your kingdom come.
3. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

How does God's response to these petitions empower those praying so that their common life reflects the ethic of the sermon? I offer some examples related to these petitions.

1. Hallowed be your name

Leviticus makes it clear that God's name is not hallowed but rather profaned when God's people use that name to swear falsely: "You shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD" (Lev 19:12). Jesus echoes this sentiment when he says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord'" (Matt 6:33). From of old, God's people have been forbidden to invoke God's name to give credence to a lie because such an invocation puts God's reputation for fidelity and truth at risk by implicating God in falsehood. In such close association with words and deeds that are not in concert God's good name is threatened.

When Jesus alludes to the Levitical proscription against using God's name to bolster a lie, he does so in order to contrast it with his own related but even more rigorous rule. He says, "But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one" (5:34-37).

Do not swear at all. Let your word be "Yes, Yes," or "No, No." How? How may God's people ever be so consistently truthful that those listening to them will no longer need to differentiate everyday speech from sworn testimony?

Part of the answer comes when Jesus says, "Pray then in this way: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name'" (6:9). According to Leviticus, the deceit of the one swearing falsely profanes God's name. The first petition of the Lord's Prayer is an appeal that the effects of association would travel in the other direction. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus sends the disciples to baptize all nations "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). As God answers the petition to make God's name holy, such holiness comes to define those who are known by the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to empower them for the ethic of the sermon. Love of enemies, then, becomes possible, not on account of any human capacity for love or longsuffering, but rather because those who bear God's name are being "children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (5:45). Likewise, as God makes God's name holy, those who bear that name are empowered for trustworthy speaking. When this happens, God's people will no longer need to differentiate everyday speech—with its mixture of truth alongside truth that shades into deceit—from sworn testimony ("the truth, the whole truth,

and nothing but the truth”), but may instead be trusted to speak the truth by saying merely, “Yes, Yes,” or “No, No.”

2. *Your kingdom come*

From the start of Matthew’s Gospel, it is clear that God’s reign is contested.⁹ At the beginning of the gospel, the magi ask one king of the Jews where another may be found (cf. 2:2). In the temptation, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain, shows him “the kingdoms of the world,” and says, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (4:9). Jesus does not argue with the devil over whether these kingdoms and their splendor are the devil’s to give or withhold but instead rebukes the devil for requesting what is for God alone, that is, worship. In the Gospel of Matthew, God’s kingdom is not the only kingdom.

Nor is the coming of God’s kingdom the only possible future. Apparently if the scribes and Pharisees have their way, people will be shut out of the kingdom. It will have no inhabitants at all! Jesus reproaches the scribes and Pharisees for neither allowing others access to the kingdom nor entering it themselves. They tie heavy burdens on others; they exalt themselves; they neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. All these actions threaten to lock people out of the kingdom (cf. 23:4-23).

While the Pharisees’ ethic is a picture of life locked out of the kingdom, the Sermon on the Mount describes life within the kingdom of heaven. In this kingdom, the law and the prophets are fulfilled as people keep the commandments of God (cf. 5:17-19). Inhabitants of this kingdom lay up for themselves treasures that are beyond the reach of moth, rust, and thieves (cf. 6:19-21), and they ask without worry for what they need, trusting that the one who reigns will surely give good gifts to those who ask (7:11). In these and other ways, life in God’s kingdom is distinct from life in “the kingdoms of the world.”

How may we live in such a place, with such a sense of trust in God and faithfulness to God’s commands? “Your kingdom come,” we say in the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer. As God answers the prayer to reveal God’s kingdom and open the door to it, God brings into being a realm that is characterized by the manner of life that Jesus speaks of in the sermon. Those who pray the Lord’s Prayer are asking for *God’s* kingdom, not the kingdoms of rivals who want worship for themselves and whose realms come always with an abundance of moth, rust, thieves, and anxiety for the morrow. And those who pray the Lord’s Prayer are asking also for God’s kingdom to *come*: let it neither be delayed nor be shut up tight by actions in any time or place that mimic those of the scribes and the Pharisees.

3. *Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*

As he concludes the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who

⁹For a description of this gospel in terms of its overarching conflict between God and Satan, see Mark Allan Powell, “The Plot and Subplots of Matthew’s Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992) 187-204.

does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt 7:21). And what is God’s will? In the sermon, God’s will is not identified with saying, “Lord, Lord” to Jesus, nor even with having accomplished prophecy, exorcisms, and many deeds of power in his name (cf. 7:22). God’s will is not that the disciples’ works should be spectacles in themselves but rather that those works point beyond themselves and inspire on-lookers to “give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:16). God’s will is described in less dramatic terms than all those “deeds of power.” God’s will is love for enemies and prayer for those who persecute (5:44). God’s will is that not one of the little ones should be lost (cf. 18:14). God’s will is that, in everything, the hearers of the sermon “do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (7:12).

Of course, to say that God’s will is described in less dramatic terms than “deeds of power,” is not to say that it is necessarily achievable by those who hear Jesus speak of it. Again, the question of empowerment surfaces. How is the community to accomplish the will of God? How may human deeds be brought into line with God’s will?

Jesus had his own concerns related to this question. The gospels report that by the end of Jesus’ ministry, the command to love enemies and pray for persecutors took on existential relevance for the one who had first addressed it to his disciples. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays about the persecution that is about to descend on him, saying, “may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matt 26:39 NIV). Following Jesus’ command in the sermon and echoing his example in Gethsemane, the church prays, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” The prayer asks God to do among God’s people what those people often cannot even will without God.

The second half of the Lord’s Prayer, though still addressed to God, calls to mind three specific needs of those praying. In these petitions, as in the others, those who pray the prayer ask for what they need to live in the kingdom Jesus describes. In each case, the second set of petitions employs a first person plural pronoun: “give us...forgive us...do not bring us...”

4. Give *us* this day our daily bread.
5. Forgive *us* our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
6. Do not bring *us* to the time of trial, but deliver us from the evil one.¹⁰

Again, I offer some examples of how imperatives in the Sermon on the Mount may be carried out as God responds to the imperatives in the Lord’s Prayer.

4. Give us this day our daily bread

Under what circumstances might it be possible for Jesus’ hearers to follow his commands to “give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who

¹⁰The NRSV text is reproduced here. Footnotes in the NRSV draw attention to the two translation difficulties within this petition: *πειρασμός* can mean either a temptation (cf. Matt 26:41; 1 Tim 6:9) or a test (cf. Gal. 4:14; 1 Pet 4:12), and *τοῦ πονηροῦ* can be either a masculine form (“the evil one”) or a neuter form (“evil”).

wants to borrow from you” (5:42)? The question is not whether this course of action is wise, but under what circumstances it would be possible. How could anyone—or any group of people¹¹—behave this way? Related to this question is another. How is it possible to have no treasures stored up on earth, yet not worry about even the barest of necessities, food and clothing (cf. 6:25-34)? Conventional wisdom suggests that freedom from anxiety is a function of preparedness, yet Jesus seems to be commanding one without the other. How are those who hear the Sermon on the Mount supposed to live these parts of it?

“Give us this day our daily bread,” Jesus commands his followers to pray. The Greek text may be translated more precisely, “Our bread for the coming day, give us today.” Davies and Allison comment, “ἐπιουσιος means ‘for the following day’ in the sense of ‘today’ (as in a morning prayer).”¹² In a further comment that is suggestive of the empowering work that the Lord’s Prayer does in the Sermon on the Mount, they note that this petition may be seen as request for provisions needed by those who will be living in the eschatological age: “One might also just possibly think in particular of the gathering of manna for the sabbath (Exod 16:22-30), for the sabbath came to be a symbol of the new age.”¹³ In this interpretation, the petition asks for what is needed to live the new age *before* the new age actually arrives, including not only material provisions like food and clothing but also that sense of a secure future that is necessary if people are to be able to give to those who beg, to lend to those who ask, and at the same time have no anxiety for the morrow.¹⁴

5. *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*¹⁵

At various places, the Sermon on the Mount weaves together attention to the relationship that God has to hearers of the sermon with the relationships that hearers have among themselves. The vertical (concerning relationships between God and people) and horizontal (concerning relationships among people) intersect. In the context of love for enemies, Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt 6:48). As God sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous, so those who are “children of your Father in heaven” are to understand the

¹¹The Sermon on the Mount alternates between singular and plural imperatives. For example, “Give to everyone who begs from you” (5:42) is in the second person singular, while the nearby “Love your enemies” (5:44) is in the second person plural. Commentators generally explain the shifts by appealing to theories of different sources having been merged into the sermon as it appears in Matthew 5-7. While we cannot be sure about how singular and plural forms came to be alternated within the sermon, the rhetorical effect of this feature is to lead hearers to have both the individual and the community in mind as they imagine the rule of God as the sermon describes it.

¹²W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-1997) 1:609.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Apt here is Richard Lischer’s characterization of the Lord’s Prayer as “the eschatological prayer of the new community, of the community now committed to live by the promise of the kingdom” (“Sermon on the Mount,” 169). See also Raymond E. Brown, “The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer,” in *New Testament Essays* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965) 217-253.

¹⁵The identification of debts with sins in Matt 18:21-35, as well as 6:14, makes it clear that forgiveness of sins is in view in this petition. Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4) uses ἄμαρτι(α)s (sins) where Matthew has ὀφειλήματα (debts).

command to love the neighbor as applying to all neighbors, even enemies. Likewise, saying “You fool” to a brother or sister is not just a problem between humans, but rather makes one liable to judgment from “the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (cf. 5:22; 10:28). Care of the relationships that members of the community have with one another is so important that offering a gift to God at the altar is to take second place to being reconciled to a brother or sister who “has something against you” (5:23-24).

Where is the empowerment for such activities of reconciliation? How is it possible for hearers of the sermon to offer forgiveness to brothers and sisters and seek forgiveness from them? The horizontal expression of forgiveness is empowered by its vertical dimension.¹⁶ “Ask, and it will be given to you,” Jesus says, with words that could just as easily apply to each of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. Those who pray the Lord’s Prayer ask for forgiveness from God; forgiveness of the brother or sister follows from the forgiveness that God offers.¹⁷

6. Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one

The last of the Beatitudes pronounces blessing on those who are persecuted because of their connection to Jesus. Those who endure such persecution are exhorted to “rejoice and be glad,” for their reward is great in heaven and their experience mirrors that of the prophets (Matt 5:11-12). Also in the sermon, Jesus revises “an eye for an eye,” saying, “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (5:39).

By blessing the persecuted and counseling hearers not to return violence for violence, does the Sermon on the Mount urge followers of Jesus toward their own self-defeating surrender to evil? Without the last petition of the Lord’s Prayer, it would be possible to read these two portions of the Sermon on the Mount and judge its ethic to be masochistic and self-destructive. Such an argument might be plausible, except that the sermon also contains the Lord’s Prayer, with its exhortations to God, “Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one” (6:13). “Rescue us....” One is reminded of Luke’s reference to God’s elect who cry out to him day and night and Jesus’ promise that God will quickly grant justice to them (cf. Lk 18:1-7). Those who pray the Lord’s Prayer, and otherwise follow the exhortations of the Sermon on the Mount, do not seek suffering; rather, they appeal to God for rescue from the evil one.

Situated at the center of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord’s Prayer inter-

¹⁶The forgiveness that God offers to God’s people is particularly important in Matthew’s Gospel. Only in this gospel do readers receive an explanation that Mary’s son is to be named Jesus “for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). Only in Matthew’s version of the words of institution at the Lord’s Supper does Jesus say that his blood is poured out “for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28).

¹⁷The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35) functions as a hyperbolic example of what should by no means happen as a response to God’s forgiveness. The story works by making it ridiculously obvious to those who observe the unforgiving servant’s behavior that he is acting in direct opposition to the behavior one would expect from someone who had been forgiven such a huge debt.

rupts the collection of imperatives that Jesus addresses to his followers in order to give those followers a set of imperatives they may address to God. For those who pray it, the Lord's Prayer is a way to ask for what they need to enact the ethic that Jesus proclaims. Integral to the logic of the Sermon on the Mount is the fact that as God answers the prayer that Jesus teaches, God is creating the community Jesus describes as "the light of the world" and empowering it to "give light to all in the house" (Matt 5:14-16). ⊕

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