

ADULT STUDY PACK

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PARTICIPANT'S HANDOUT: SESSION 2

Reflections on the Lord's Prayer

A Lenten Study

Scripture Reading

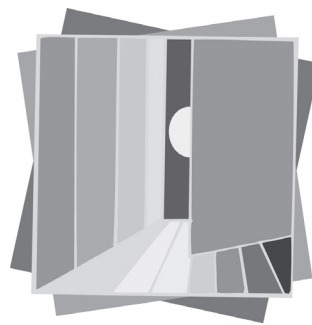
Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

The Prayer of Complaint

We don't usually think of complaining as a virtue. Most of us carefully avoid professional grumblers. Yet we can't speak the Lord's Prayer—this prayer that is a model for all our praying—without registering a complaint. It is written into the prayer.

In one sense, this isn't surprising. Students of the Old Testament often remind us that the basic prayer book, the book of Psalms, contains more prayers of lament and complaint than any other kind. Good religion produces two moods that seem quite contradictory. On the one hand, good faith makes us grateful people, always inclined to give thanks, always disposed to see reasons for gladness that other people miss. But good religion also teaches us to complain. We sense that the world is not what it should be because it isn't what God meant it to be. Thus, godly people are dissatisfied with things as they are. Mind you, godly people aren't by any means the only ones who would like to see improvements in our world; it seems to me that something of this quality is built into all of us humans, as part of our genetic code. But godly people are more likely to be sensitive to what is wrong and of how to make it right, because they have a standard of rightness by which to make judgment.

So let me pause for a moment to pay tribute to those persons in human history who have become *effectively*



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dissatisfied. If someone hadn't become unhappy with things as they were, we would still be beating clothes on rocks by some passing stream rather than throwing them into automatic washers and dryers. If someone hadn't become exercised about the issue of human pain, we would still have surgery without benefit of anesthesia. And if someone—numbers of someones!—hadn't become unhappy with the quality of life and health, our life expectancy would still be somewhere around thirty or forty years instead of twice that. Thanks be to God for people who complain! Provided, of course, that they give power to their complaints by constructive action.

Do you think that some things ought to be better than they are? Are you troubled that crime statistics in America are measured by the minute?—so many thefts, so many rapes, so many murders every so many minutes? Does it bother you that in almost any American city acres upon acres of land are covered by a jungle of ramshackle houses and poverty? Are you uneasy that the nations of the world spend literally billions—indeed, trillions—of dollars every year developing weapons to destroy fellow

members of the human race and that violence in the Middle East or in Africa is so commonplace that it is often crowded off the front page by the manufactured news of some passing personality? Are you still able to feel shock that every day the newspapers report the mistreatment of infants and children by their own parents, stepparents, or foster parents? Are you content to live in this kind of world, or does it upset you and anger you?

Well, if these things do trouble you, and if you think they shouldn't be this way, then the Lord's Prayer includes a sentence just for you. Listen: "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). This is a prayer of complaint; indeed, it is the ultimate prayer of complaint. This is a cry for a revolution. This prayer says that the powers that now rule our world ought to be overthrown and that a new government should be set up. After all, you can't call for a "kingdom to come" unless you intend for the present kingdom to go. Has it occurred to you that the words we slip through so casually and so routinely each Sunday are in truth among the most revolutionary phrases the world has ever heard?

Let's think about it for a moment. What does this little phrase mean, this prayer, "Your kingdom come"? We pray it week after week—some of us oftener than that—without examining what we're saying. Is it possible, in fact, that we are praying for something that we don't really want?

For many centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Jewish people prayed and looked for the coming of God's kingdom. They believed his kingdom would be a place where God would reign and where therefore all would be well. The Hebrew prophets portrayed it as a world of peace and plenty. In the language of those ancient poets, every person would have his own vine and his own fig tree; that is, everyone would have all that he or she needed—not only the necessities of life but its luxuries and comforts as well. One of those prophets said it would be a place where the streets would be safe for both children and elderly, the two most defenseless elements of society. A place, in fact, of such peace and well-being that even traditional enemies within the animal kingdom would dwell in natural harmony.

What Kingdom?

When Jesus began to preach, it was as a preacher of the kingdom. What kingdom? The kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven. Jesus made this message central to everything that he taught.

Jesus often described this kingdom with succinct little parables. The kingdom of God, he said, is like a mustard seed. This seed is so small as to be lost easily between the fingers, yet it grows into a tree that can lodge birds in its branches (Matt. 13:31–32). And again, the kingdom of God is like a bit of leaven that a woman puts into three measures of meal. Small as it is, that leaven spreads its influence through the whole lump, transforming its size and quality (Matt. 13:33). And this kingdom, Jesus said, is of such worth that it can be compared to a pearl of such great price and perfection that a connoisseur sells everything he has in order to get it (Matt. 13:46).

Sometimes Jesus spoke more directly of the kingdom, not using the picture language of parables. One time, for example, when a man spoke to Jesus in a way that was exceptionally perceptive, Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Then again one day when some religious leaders asked him when the kingdom of God was coming, Jesus answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. . . . For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20–21). And when, on his way to crucifixion, Jesus was standing trial before Pilate, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36).

When you put together these and other statements that Jesus made, you will probably be both baffled and unnerved. It is clear, on the one hand, that Jesus is describing a kingdom utterly different from anything our world has ever seen. And yet, it is also clear that he is describing something we long for, as if it were something in our primitive memory, something we feel instinctively ought to be.

Then, to complicate our feelings still further, we have Jesus' explanations. His subject is a *kingdom*: that word raises images of splendor and power. But Jesus goes on to describe this kingdom as something that is apparently insignificant yet somehow capable of transforming all of life: like leaven, which is powerful out of all proportion to its size. Or like a seed, especially a tiny seed: it grows and grows and grows. But unpromising as this kingdom looks, when you come to realize its value you know you should sell everything to get it. Indeed, he suggests that you won't get it at any lesser price. And this kingdom, Jesus said, is in the world even now, today. It exists at this very moment, within certain people. Any person can enter into this kingdom at any time. Someday, however, this

kingdom will cover the whole earth and will be its controlling power. When that happens, earth's blessed day will have come.

Your Will Be Done

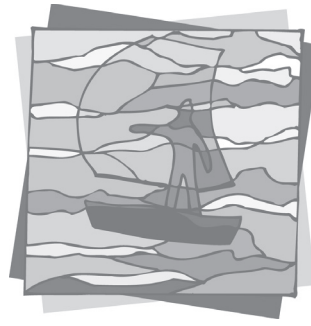
The best way (in fact, the only way) to describe the kingdom of God is with the phrase that follows in the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done." That is, *the kingdom of God is that place where the will of God is done*. It's really quite simple and quite logical. It is the right of kings to rule a country according to their will and wishes. Thus, if this kingdom is the kingdom of *God*, then of course it will be a place where God's will is done.

So here is the interesting part of this prayer as far as you and I are concerned: this kingdom has a kind of "spot" existence today. It exists wherever and whenever a single human being has given up fully to God and thus has entered into the kingdom. And these spot kingdoms are often somewhat larger in size, too. When a family, a church, an institution seeks fully to do God's will, the kingdom has come within that circle of life. The kingdom exists each time love conquers hate, peace triumphs over conflict, or fear and selfishness have been vanquished.

Thus, in a very real sense, Christians belong to an underground movement. We are not satisfied with things as they are, so we are working quietly, doggedly, and unrelentingly for a revolution. It is a revolution unlike any other. Other revolutions deal with geography and with politics, economics, and military power. But the kingdom of God recognizes that the ultimate battlefield of our universe is not economics or politics or social structure, as important as these elements are. Ultimately, the battlefield is the human heart. From the heart proceed the issues of life and death. Change this heart, and you have begun a deep and far-reaching revolution.

So how can we bring this kingdom to pass? We have a variety of weapons. One of the most important (and unfortunately, one of the most neglected) is prayer. Doesn't it strike you as profoundly significant that Jesus included this petition in his model prayer? And more than that, that this is the first petition in this prayer? It would seem that Jesus is telling us that we should give our attention to the kingdom—and the will of God that it presupposes—before we ask for anything else.

Consider, too, the style of this petition. In a sense, it is more of an affirmation than a petition. There is no uncer-



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tainty about it, no cautious, tentative pleading. It sounds more as if we are simply declaring that we are on the side of this petition: "Your kingdom come." It reads like a pledge of allegiance.

But this leads us to a pertinent question. Why pray for God's kingdom to come, if this is the will of God? If it is something God wants, then what need is there to ask God to bring it to pass? Are we trying to convince God to do what God already wants?

I think two issues are involved. First and foremost, God has put this planet in our control. We humans determine what will happen on the earth. God intervenes at our invitation. Even when God invaded our planet in the person of Jesus Christ, it was an invasion for which generations of godly persons had prayed. And more: it was a peaceful invasion, successful only to the degree that humans permitted. So when we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are making our own commitment to the kingdom, and we are seeking God's help in bringing others to this commitment.

Here is a second issue—an extremely important one, but one that is difficult for our modern or postmodern minds to grasp. We live in a world where there is opposition to goodness. This shouldn't come as any surprise to us; after all, we deal with the conflict within our own souls every day. Each time we say "I shouldn't have done that," or "I wish I hadn't said that," or "I wish I could take that back," we are acknowledging that this conflict exists.

It is as if our world is under the control of some foreign power, or as if some foreign power is seeking to take control. This insistent, invasive power expresses itself in so many ways that all of us recognize and cope with—hate, sickness, fear, immorality, prejudice, lying, deceit, brutality, to name just a few; the forces are legion. So how do we fight back against such evil? By deeds of love, by service to others, by our giving, by worthy community involvement—and by *praying*.

Why Prayer?

Prayer is important because evil is not simply an accumulation of events and deeds; it is also a spirit in our world. “For our struggle,” the apostle Paul wrote, “is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). In a sense, this is exotic, mystical language, but at the same time it is a reality that we cope with every day. We may not grasp everything Paul is saying, but we experience the truth of it. It seems so often that a voice in our universe says, “Evil will win,” and we can’t even sense from whence this feeling comes. But when we pray, “O God, your kingdom come!” we are thrusting our convictions and our commitments into the teeth of hell’s claim.

Perhaps that’s why the marching quality of this prayer phrase is so right. We don’t cry, “Will you send your kingdom?” nor do we explain, “We want your kingdom”; rather, we declare our expectation to the whole universe: *Your kingdom come*.

But you and I live in an activist age—or at least, we like to think so. Thus some would say that for those who want to pray, prayer is fine, but the big business of our world is done in the halls of power and in the offices of economic maneuvering. However, the late Werner von Braun, the premier nuclear physicist, would have disagreed. He insisted that prayer is the hardest kind of work—and the most important, too. The philosopher George Santayana said that prayer isn’t a substitute for work but “a desperate effort to work further and to be efficient beyond the range of one’s powers.”

Prayer is not the lazy way out. It isn’t for those who want to escape life and its realities. David H. C. Read

once wrote that the great men of prayer have also been “great men of action—from Jesus himself right on through St. Francis, and Luther, and Calvin, and Wesley, to Schweitzer and Dag Hammerskjold.”¹ I want only to add some names to Read’s list, such as Teresa of Ávila and Mother Teresa and some lesser-known saints of my own acquaintance. In truth, we work with new purpose and energy and hope after we have prayed, and we pray with more integrity after we have worked.

So I confess—indeed, I boast!—that I intend to be one of the complaining people. I would be ashamed of myself if I were not. Our world is not all that it should be. We are very sure of that. It is not what God intended it to be. This is even more certain. So Jesus gave us a prayer, a model for all times. Each day you and I walk through territory that ought to be taken captive for the kingdom of God. With this the case, we ought to begin the holy conquest by prayer, by a complaint that rises from our souls: *Your kingdom come*.

Jesus once asked if God would grant justice to those who cried for it. Then he answered his own question: “I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” But then our Lord added a haunting question: “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:7–8). It’s up to us complainers to answer that question.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. David H. C. Read, *Holy Common Sense: The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 25.