

Our Father: The Necessity and Wonder of Prayer
Part Six – Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

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Matthew 6:11

He Who Withholds Grain

Sourdough has had a revival since the pandemic, as has ‘homesteading’. Maybe, during political and social upheaval, we just want to know we can provide for our most basic needs.

Bread is the most basic need. Michael Pollen, a food journalist, once said:

"Every political leader knows you could lose your head if the price of bread goes up too fast."¹

The Arab Spring of the 80s and the French Revolution have both been tied to an increase in the price of grain. Perhaps Pollen knows the proverb:

"He who withholds grain, the people will curse him..." – Proverbs 11:26 (NASB)

Our interconnected economies bring into sharp realization the sensitivity of something like the price of bread. In the face of uncertain provisions and being at the mercy of powers beyond us, Jesus teaches us to pray:

"Give us today our daily bread." – Matthew 6:11

From this clause in the Lord’s Prayer, we learn:

Praying is asking God for what we need every day.

A. Bread

Jesus lets ‘bread’ stand in as an image for our most basic needs. But, today, the word need has experienced ‘concept creep’.

Paul once said:

"For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." – 1 Timothy 6:7-8

Jesus’ words often get explained away, especially His words to the rich young ruler:

"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." – Matthew 19:21

Anthony the Great (4th C.) and Francis of Assisi (12th C.) both took these words personally and reshaped the future of the faith as a result.

¹ Michael Pollen, “Cooked: Air”

To experience the ‘whole life flourishing’ called ‘shalom’ in the Bible, we only need five things:

- Food
- Clothing
- Shelter
- Loving Community
- Meaningful Work

Which brings us to the text that is probably the source for Jesus’ prayer. Proverbs 30:7-9:

*“Two things I ask of you, LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonour the name of my God.”* – Proverbs 30:7-9

For the wealthy, praying ‘give us our daily bread’ gets us back in touch with the riskiness of riches. It gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to talk to us about our excesses. For the poor, it’s an earnest act of trust in our loving Father.

For both, however, it should also be a prayer for the thing we really need most, the thing to prioritize. As Jesus said:

“People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
– Matthew 4:4

We need most the Father, who knows our needs. And, as we will see, it is in asking for what we need that we get closest to Him.

Praying is asking God for what we *need* every day.

B. Today

Jesus teaches us that worry is an improper chronological focus. Because both times he talks about getting what we need, He gives us a timeframe to focus on:

Today.²

When speaking on worry, Jesus closes with the aphorism:

“Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” – Matthew 6:34

² The Greek of ‘Give us this day our *daily* bread’ is debated. Most agree it either means give us our bread for today or give us our bread for ‘the coming day’. Both focus on the next twenty-four hours, however.

In the prayer and the above phrase, Jesus is contrasting a focus on ‘today’ with a focus on ‘tomorrow’.

Anthony the Great, fourth century monk, once said:

“As we rise daily, let us suppose that we shall not survive till evening, and again, as we prepare for sleep, let us consider that we shall not awaken. By its very nature our life is uncertain and is meted out daily by providence. If we think this way, and in this way live—daily—we will not sin, nor will we crave anything, nor bear a grudge against anyone, nor lay up treasures on earth, but as people who anticipate dying each day, we shall be free of possessions, and we shall forgive all things to all people.”³

Jesus is pulling us back into the present.

If you have what you need for today, you have what you need.

If there’s something you really need to do, you should do something about it today.

I find Jesus’ focus on today centering. My personal prayer, in all my personal and global anxieties, has been a song by a collective called ‘The Porter’s Gate’:

*I want to be where my feet are
I want to breathe the life around me
I want to listen as my heart beats
Right on time...
I want to be where my feet are*

*I chase my worries
I flee my sorrows
But what you give me
Is now*

*So take my burdens
And my tomorrows:
I want to be where my feet are⁴*

Jesus’ genius is displayed in a final small detail regarding today as well. A little boy might hate taking baths and say, ‘I don’t need a bath today, I took a bath earlier this week!’, as if he could bank baths. ‘Give us today our *daily* bread’ is also a sneaky way of Jesus saying ‘you can’t bank prayers’. Prayer is a daily practice.

Praying is asking God for what we need *every day*.

C. Us

In the New Testament, most of the pronouns are plural. ‘Me’ and ‘mine’ and ‘you’ become ‘us’ and ‘ours’ and ‘ya’ll’. Through the Scriptures, we learn to speak in the collective.

Super Christians almost always pray the same way for dinner:

“Lord, we thank you for this food and ask that you keep us mindful of those who do not have food.”

³ Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony*, paragraph 19 (pg. 45)

⁴ Porter’s Gate ‘Centering Prayer’

Which, sometimes, can feel like a drag. It can make us feel guilty.

By praying 'give us our bread' and not 'give me my bread' we are being invited to pray like the super Christians. We are being invited to think not just of what we need, but of what everybody needs.

Because of this my old prof Darrell Johnson asks us:

"Can you imagine how different the world would be if we prayed the 'us' with greater integrity?"⁵

St. Basil the Great was a fourth century pastor once said:

"Whoever exposes a dressed person will be called a robber [as in, like takes their clothes off their back]; but whoever does not clothe the naked, though able to do so, is he worthy of any other name? To the hungry belongs the bread you withhold from them; to the naked—the clothing stored in your vaults; to the barefoot—the shoes rotting in your possession; to the needy—the silver you keep locked away. Therefore, you harm all those whom you could provide for."⁶

Every day we pray 'give us our daily bread' we are reminding ourselves of those in greater need than us and, if willing, giving an opportunity for the Spirit to ask us:

Are you willing to be the hands through which God's generosity flows? Do you want to partner with God in bring 'us our' daily bread?

Praying is asking God for what we need every day.

Excursus: Prayer is Asking

Prayer that asks God for things is often called 'supplication'. Sometimes, in long and difficult seasons, asking for what we need can feel exhausting, disappointing and disheartening. We may seek other forms of prayer from Christian tradition.

However, every time someone prays in the Bible they are asking for something. If we're not asking, we are not praying.

Why?

Probably because asking for what we need is something we have to do in relationships. Contrary to Hollywood romances where everybody knows just what to say and just what to do, real relationships require us to be able to ask for what we need. This is why Dallas Willard says:

The proper way for us to interact in any relationship is to ask for what we think we need and to let the person decide what they want to do about it.⁷

Asking is foundational to human existence; it is our mother tongue as the tongue we used with our mothers.

⁵ Darrell Johnson, *Fifty-Two Words that Changed the World*, pg. 77

⁶ St. Basil the Great, "Homily 6 on Luke 12:18". You can read it at: <https://oldbeliever.substack.com/p/basil-the-great-homily-6-on-luke>

⁷ See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, pgs. 234-236.

"Babies cry because they have hope that someone will find them and bring them back to joy."⁸

– Jim Wilder

We were born doing this, but as we grow up, we forget. We forget that we have not left the neediness we were born with. We want to be big boys and girls and do it alone. But the kingdom of heaven belongs to the little children. The ones who know how to ask for what they need.

Praying is *asking* God for what we need every day.

D. Give

When we ask God for what we need every day, it makes us grateful for what we have.

The greatest gift of praying 'give us our daily bread' is learning to see life as a gift. This is good and proper, because that is what the Scriptures teach us life is.

James once wrote:

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." – James 1:17

Our culture teaches us we have earned what we've got—good or bad. But remember, with riches come the risk:

*"...give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, 'Who is the LORD?'"* – Proverbs 30:8b-9a

When I ask God for my daily bread, I notice it is God giving me my daily bread. Then, yes, my efforts and successes in participating with Him are celebrated. I don't deny that. But I remember that, ultimately, it is from His hands that these blessings flow.

And wouldn't that be wonderful?

Wouldn't it be grand to experience life not as a constant competitive struggle but as a gift flowing from merciful hands?

Wouldn't it feel better to be grateful for what you have rather than bitter about what you want?

Wouldn't your hands open if you knew what you had was already a gift?

If you think it would be better, you're only seven words away:

"Give us this day our daily bread."

⁸ Jim Wilder, *Growing a More Human Community Vol. 1: Growing ME Becoming a Child*, Rev. Ed. (Fast Track Press, Evergreen, CO: 2024), pg. 31.

Discussion Questions:

Open Up

How comfortable are you when it comes to asking others for what you need? Stories and examples, please?

Dig In

1. How might your life change if you accepted that you only need six things—the Father, food, clothing, shelter, loving community and meaningful work?
2. How do you bring yourself back to focusing on today?
3. What benefits come to us when we remember those who don't have as we enjoy the things we do have?
4. What would it look like to live with more gratitude?

Pray

Give each person an opportunity to think of one or two things they really need, and one or two needs someone they care about has. Pray for these needs.