

# The Lord's Prayer

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The Sermon on the Mount reminds us of Moses at Mount Sinai delivering God's covenant, including the Ten Commandments, to Israel. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Mat. 6:9b-13). The prayer Jesus taught his disciples consists of seven imperatives addressed to God, reminding us of the Ten Commandments which consist of ten imperatives addressed to us. What does this change imply about our relationship with God? That it is now a partnership, relying on the initiative of both parties, rather than a master-servant, command-obedience relationship?

Shown below is the Lord's Prayer in Greek and English, arranged in nine lines containing seven imperatives, with each imperative in **bold**. The first line is a salutation that provides the identity of the one to whom the following seven imperatives are addressed. It echoes the salutation in Ex 20:2 that identifies the author of the Ten Commandments. The last line, a doxology to God that parallels the first line, is not in the Greek text of Matthew or Luke but is obtained from the Didache, which is older than all of the Gospels, has the most complete text of the Lord's Prayer, and was used to instruct new Christians.

The arrangement of the Lord's Prayer is similar to the arrangements of symmetrical parallelism often found in the Psalms and other Scriptures, which Paul used pervasively in his letters, and which were subsequently used in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Those arrangements provide emphasis, parallelism, and clarity.

Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς·  
ἀγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου·  
ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου·  
γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου, ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς·  
τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον·  
καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν·  
καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν,  
ἀλλὰ ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ·  
ὅτι σοῦ ἐστὶν ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας·

Our Father in the heavens:

**Hallowed** be your name.

Your kingdom **come**.

Your will **be done**, as in heaven, also on earth.

Our bread, the \_\_\_\_\_, **give** us today.

And **forgive** us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.

And **subject** us not to tribulation.

But **deliver** us from evil:

For yours is the power and the glory into the ages.

Note that the first imperative echoes the Third Commandment (Ex 20:7), the second echoes the First Commandment (Ex 20:3), the third summarizes all Ten Commandments, and the last four seek God's partnership in bringing the Kingdom of God.

The Ten Commandments are all active second-person imperatives, "You shall . . ." An active second-person imperative here in the first imperative of the Lord's Prayer would tell

God to make his own name holy. But here the imperative is both passive and is addressed to the name of God, not to God directly. Thus a literal translation would be, “Be hallowed, O Name of yours,” but God’s name cannot make itself holy. So who are we telling to make God’s name holy? Indirectly we seem to be telling ourselves to make God’s name holy. Is there a reason why that is stated indirectly and ambiguously?

Does the first imperative have anything in common with the last? The King James translation, “Deliver us from evil,” is literal, but ambiguous. What evil? Most modern translations clarify it to read, “from the Evil One,” putting it in the category of, “from the evil that is done to us.” Another option is, “from the evil that we do to others.” Both readings are equally possible. But the latter is the only option that would make us holy, and would thereby make the last imperative parallel with the first. With that reading the first asks ourselves to make God’s name holy, the last asks God to make us holy. In that way both would bring the Kingdom of God. Is there a reason why both are stated indirectly or ambiguously?

Do the second and sixth imperatives have anything in common? If the Kingdom of God came now, we would not be subject to the tribulation that is expected before the coming of the Kingdom of God. So the sixth imperative is a negative equivalent of asking the Kingdom of God to come. But again there is ambiguity about whom we are asking to bring the Kingdom of God.

Do the third and fifth imperatives have anything in common? Note that the third is another passive imperative, an indirect way of telling ourselves to do God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. The fifth asks God to restore our relationship with himself (in heaven) to the same degree as we restore our relationships among each other (on earth). Both would bring the Kingdom of God on earth as in heaven to the extent that we do our part on earth. Both assume God is treating us as partners.

Note that the first three refer to your, your, your, and the last three refer to us, us, us. That assumes that we and God are in this together. But what is the center about?

The center of the center is a mystery word, ἐπιούσιον, that does not appear anywhere else in all of ancient Greek literature, except in the Lord’s Prayer. Its meaning has been debated from the very beginning. The four main possibilities listed by the BDAG Greek Lexicon of the NT have been: necessary, for today, for tomorrow, for the future. The fourth possibility, derived from ἐπιέναι, “be coming,” is viewed as a reference to the coming Kingdom of God and its feast, and has been supported by a long list of scholars, including Albert Schweitzer. Other forms of ἐπιέναι appear in the NT only in Acts 7:26; 16:11; 20:15; 21:18 and 23:11, all ἐπιούση, and are usually translated as “following” or “next.”

As will be seen, the fourth and central imperative of the Lord’s Prayer is a prayer for the Coming of God’s Anointed One, “Our bread, the Coming One, **give** us today.” This echoes many prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures and the fourth prayer of the Hebrew Kaddish Prayer, “**bring nigh the Messiah ... speedily and in the near future ...**” It is also echoed by many prophecies and prayers in the New Testament, the last of which is Rev. 22:20, “**‘Surely I am coming soon.’** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (RSV)

Most modern translations translate that verse, “Give us today (or ‘this day’) our daily bread.” The Greek word for “daily” is καθ’ ἡμέραν. Where did they get “daily”? They copied “daily” from the 1611 KJV. And the King James Version copied this verse verbatim

from Tyndale's 1534 translation. Tyndale, the first to translate the New Testament from Greek to English, completed the first edition of his English New Testament in 1525 at Cologne after he had visited Luther a year earlier at Wittenberg where he had the benefit of Luther's 1522 German translation of this verse, "Unser teglich Brot gib uns heute." "Our daily Bread give us today." Both Luther and Tyndale used Erasmus's 1516 edited Greek text of the New Testament which contained Erasmus's new translation into Latin on facing pages. Erasmus's Latin translation of ἑπιούσιον was quotidianum, which means "daily." The common version of the Bible in all of Europe then was, and had been for eleven centuries, the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible by Jerome, who translated this verse from Greek to Latin, "Panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie." "Our bread supersubstantial give us today." But what does "supersubstantial" mean? Wycliffe, the first to translate the New Testament from the Latin Vulgate to English in 1378, rendered it, "yyue to vs this dai oure 'breed ouer othir substaunce." Both Luther and Tyndale evidently preferred Erasmus's translation of "daily," due perhaps to Erasmus's standing plus a concern that "supersubstantial" and "othir substaunce" were too esoteric. It is daily bread because we ask for it each day. But "daily" is more a repetition of σήμερον than a translation of ἑπιούσιον.

But if it is ordinary daily bread, this verse has nothing to do with the coming of the Kingdom of God, and nothing in the Lord's Prayer refers to Jesus Christ. Just a few verses later (Mat. 6:25,31-33) Jesus explains, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. . . . Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' for the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (RSV) So it is not ordinary daily bread that Jesus taught us to pray for. It is something, as the center of the Lord's Prayer says, that God gives us. What is it?

The bread that God gives us is Jesus, by his coming, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and by his return. If we live by that bread, we will hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The Lord's Prayer is used in the Episcopal liturgy for the Eucharist. When we finish the Lord's Prayer, the next thing we hear is the priest breaking the wafer of bread, and saying, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." And we say, "Therefore let us keep the feast." When the priest gives us each a piece of that bread, he says, "The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven." In the liturgy for the burial service, the post-communion prayer is, "Almighty God, we thank you that in your great love you have fed us with the spiritual food and drink of the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ, and have given us a foretaste of your heavenly banquet."

Scripture speaks of bread from heaven twice. Exodus 16:4: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you.'" John 6:31,49-51: "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat. . . . Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.'" (RSV)

Christ has come once, a foretaste. Christ will come again. Our Lord has taught us in the Lord's Prayer to pray God to give us our bread, the Coming One, today. But how often have we prayed for that during the past 2000 years? Could that be why it has been so long?

Not only does the Lord's Prayer contrast with the Ten Commandments by having us address God rather than God us, it is also remarkable that the center of the Lord's Prayer and each of the three pairs of imperatives that surround the center are ambiguous, vague or indirect to some degree. By reviewing the structure and the context of the Lord's Prayer we are able to resolve much of that ambiguity. Does the necessity to become partners with the author of the Lord's Prayer in order to discern its full meaning tell us in another way that Jesus invites us to become partners with God our Father and himself (and with each other) in order to hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God?

It is not easy to translate the three imperatives that are impersonal and/or passive into English in a way that makes their character and implications as evident as they are in Greek. In addition, the Prayer begins with four instances of direct address which are more explicit in Greek than in the popular translations into English. Shown below is an attempt to clarify those matters.

O Father of ours in the heavens:  
**Be hallowed**, O Name of yours.  
**Come**, O Kingdom of yours.  
**Be done**, O Will of yours, as in heaven, also on earth.  
Our bread, the Coming One, **give** us today.  
And **forgive** us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.  
And **subject** us not to tribulation.  
But **deliver** us from evil:  
For yours is the power and the glory into the ages.

The Lord's Prayer consists of a salutation to God and a doxology to God surrounding three pairs of imperatives and a center. Each pair begins with something we indirectly ask ourselves to do for God, and ends with something we ask God to do for us. At the center is Jesus, our Coming bread of heaven, the bread of the Kingdom of God, who gave himself on the cross for the Kingdom of God, and whom God raised from the dead for us. Every line portrays a partnership, the same partnership that is summarized at the beginning of each of Paul's letters and that is a summary of the "Gospel." Neither we nor Jesus nor God can form a partnership alone. All three together contribute to bringing the Kingdom of God today.

A clear reflection of Jewish culture can be seen in the fact that the first four petitions of the Lord's Prayer are remarkably parallel with the opening third of The Kaddish (in old English, The "Hallowed"), the ancient prayer used by Israel to conclude prayer services:

"Magnified and **sanctified be His great name** in the world which He created according to **His will**,  
and **may He establish His kingdom**, (Ez. 38:23)  
and **make His salvation spring forth**,  
and **bring nigh the Messiah**,  
during your life and during your days, and during the life of all the house of Israel,  
**speedily and in the near future, ...**"

Also, the opening salutation of the Lord's Prayer is parallel with the first line of the closing:  
"Let the prayers and supplications of all Israel be accepted by **their Father in heaven ...**"