

The Lord's Prayer: A Gift
Rev. Dr. Stuart Bond
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This week we finally get to our part of the prayer. Like kids at Christmas waiting while the gifts from the elderly aunt are opened first, which are always clothes you never are going to wear, we have been waiting for the good stuff. To begin with, we prayed that God's name would be honored, or hallowed. We, who are privileged to be part of the family, have a role in living up to that name. Next, we prayed for the kingdom to come. We have let the Lord know that we are rooting for and longing for and working for his kingdom to come here, on earth, as it is in heaven—beginning with you and me. So we have prayed for God's honor and God's reign here on earth.

We naturally relate to prayers that begin here (pointing to self) rather than there (pointing to heaven). Our prayer is, "Lord, do something for me right now!" There is not necessarily anything wrong with such prayers, especially when they come in the midst of tears and fears. God hears the foxhole prayers and the emergency room pleas. There are a number of psalms that begin exactly like that.

However, when we are not in an extreme situation, when we can get by ourselves and pray with a clear head, Jesus wants to remind us that we need to break that habit. We need to train ourselves to start there rather than here. Before you let yourself be worried about your own name being dishonored, worry about God's. Before you are so concerned about your own kingdom, worry about God's. The Lord's Prayer is a training camp in what we do first.

The staff and several of the ushers recently went through CPR training. We have our defibrillator ready to go in the office and we are ready to give people emergency care. It is good to be trained, but I have to say that the training was an exercise in squeezing thirty minutes of information into four hours. Our trainer did the best she could to make it fun but oh, it is dull.

There is a reason for that. They are not just imparting information. They are trying to build into our reflexes and synapses the simple steps that can get overwhelmed and forgotten by real life circumstances. You are supposed to make sure the area is safe and you tell someone to call 911 and THEN you start your work on the person. The order of things is important. You need to make sure nobody is touching the body before you give it the electric jolt. They were saying with some guys you need to have a razor to make the pads stick. I asked, "Can hold them on and shock the person?" I was just being helpful! They said, anyone who is touching the body gets their heart shocked, too. So, no. Bring the razor. Make sure the pads are on and shout "Clear!" and give the juice. The order is important.

Same with the Lord's Prayer. If we can begin with God we get things in perspective. Our prayer is set in the context of God's presence, God's power and God's priority. Then we get to our own request. NOW it is our turn. Today's request is the first of three requests, each one representing a critical element in our life.

This week, we look at the request for resources—something every one of us has laid awake at night and worried about from time to time. Many of you are doing that in these days of financial fear. Here is the request as Jesus taught it: "Give us this day our daily bread."

As a financial request, this has to qualify as an absolute minimum in terms of prayer requests. Lord, we would just like enough bread—no need for meat or anything else—just enough bread to make it for today. We don't want to be greedy, God. We are not asking for two day's supply. Just today is all we need.

In fund raising, they talk about “the ask.” If you make the ask too big, people just cannot imagine crossing that barrier. If it is too little, you will get only what you have asked for and leave a lot on the table. So it is important to craft the ask to be just right. Which makes us pause here and say, “Is this really the right ask?” I mean, couldn't we ask for a week's supply? How about a bread business, or even a bread truck?

This request has a history. The ask that Jesus makes is grounded in the Exodus. Exodus 16 tells the story of the Children of Israel, lost in the desert and, as usual, complaining. They cannot figure out why God took them out there just to die. In fact, now that they thought about it, they had some great memories of Egypt. There was fishing in the Nile, leeks by the armful and the onions were so full of flavor. OK, the brick making was a drag but otherwise, it wasn't such a bad life. At least they were being kept alive!

Now they were starving and they wanted Moses to do something about it. So he goes to God and tells him that he is taking the hit for God and he realizes these people only complain but what are you going to do about this, Lord?

4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. 5 On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

13 That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

(“Thin flakes like frost.” This is actually the first recording of the phenomenon we know today as...“frosted flakes.”)

I love how the Israelites respond to the manna. They respond pretty much like we all tend to respond to the gifts of God. We ask for them, we cry out for relief, we demand help, and then, when we get a response and we say, “What is it?” God I wanted something...else, or more, or better or different than...this.

Our kids say to us, “I wanted a cool car and you got me this Versa.” Your boss says she is so pleased with our performance that she is giving you a 2% raise. Our spouse says they are going to spare no expense on us, and it turns out they don't. We're left wondering, “What is it?” How is this stripped down solution the answer to my very specific and somewhat more grand prayer?

And if the gift is going to have to be manna, we at least want to figure out how to maximize it. We wanted to be able to use some and save some and sell some. We were going to make a manna business and invest in manna futures and trade manna on the big board. We don't want

“daily” bread. We want bread that lasts for days, weeks, months and years to come. That kind of resourcing would allow us to be independent.

We have been celebrating our nation’s independence this weekend. We believe in the spirit of independence and we would like some of that for ourselves. So we turn to God and say, “Lord, we don’t want to depend upon you every day. We want to be your trust babies, with enough so that we never have to worry and we won’t have to bother you, either. See, Lord? It is a win/win!”

That’s what we want, but that is not what God offers. Instead, he wants us to know that every day we need him and every day is a gift from his hand.

That is what plays out with the manna. It turns out that this bread has a very short shelf life. Moses tells them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning." The Bible goes on to tell us how well the people listened:

20 However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

Then God does something that officially was to underscore the Sabbath but I think, unofficially, was designed to make the greedy ones a little crazy. On Saturday they could collect twice as much so they wouldn’t have to labor on Sunday. When Sunday rolled around, no maggots. The bread was fine. Of course, the people thought if enough is good, more is better. So they went out to pick up Sunday’s delivery of manna—which God never sent but it did make him angry they were out there gleaning instead of worshipping him.

What is it? It was their daily bread. But it wasn’t enough, or it wasn’t right, or later they get so tired of the manna that they longed for the pots of meat in Egypt. It is not easy to please people.

It is not easy to please us. We want more, we want different, we want God’s immediate and constant provision. And then, when we get it, we can hardly stand to say it is a gift from God. We don’t understand it and don’t want to accept it. “What is it?” we wonder as God provides us the answers to our prayers. That’s not what I asked for.

Or we do something else. We see our own manna gathering as the real point. We have worked so hard for what we have. We figure we earned all of this. It is no gift. We did it all ourselves.

A businessman was late for an important meeting and couldn't find a parking space. As he frantically circled the block, the man got so desperate that he decided to pray.

Looking up toward heaven, he said, "Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking space, I'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life, and not only that, I'll give up drinking."

Miraculously, a parking space appeared.

The guy looked up again and said, "Never mind. I found one."

Our daily bread is a gift from God.

“Give us this day our daily bread” means: Lord, we know that we are dependent upon you. What we have is not just by the sweat of our brow or the luck of the draw. We may work hard, but we know even the capacity to work is a gift from you. All that we have is a gift from your hand. Thank you, God, for what you have given us. Now we ask for something more. We don’t ask to be relieved from being dependent upon you. No, we realize that we must depend upon you every day. We don’t ask to have an easy life, a cushy existence. We ask only that you would sustain us for today. Walk with us through these few hours and this day.

It is interesting to preach this during these times. Every day the newspaper headlines predict a shortage of manna. In fact, the newspaper itself is cutting pages while raising prices! We read about 7500 layoffs at Countrywide, prices for the basics, like bread, going through the roof. You know, it wasn’t so long ago that “give us this day our daily bread” was a pretty reasonable request. Now it has more than doubled!

And, maybe it’s just me, but does it seem to you that the price of gasoline is going up? Have you noticed that? At the Conoco by Trader Joe’s they have this wheel to illustrate how much you will save using their credit card depending on the price of gas. The higher the price, the more you save. It can’t be more than a month old, and already the price of gas on the pump right next to this wheel is way beyond any numbers that are on the wheel!

So fear is everywhere and solutions from our politicians seems as scarce as...manna on Sunday. Agreed? Now, I think it is important that we keep things in perspective. Most people in most times would trade their situation for ours in a moment. Uncertainty and challenge has always been part of life. But for most of us, these days the uncertainty is a little higher than usual. To protect against that uncertainty we naturally want to get more. We want to hedge against the future. Today, Jesus teaches us to put that fear aside and to worry a little less about the long term. For now, think about today. “Give us this day our daily bread.”

We have been speaking about the “bread” that God wants to provide for us, whether that is literal bread or a decent salary so we can buy bread. But there is another kind of bread he wants to give to us. He wants to sustain the body, but his real goal is to elevate the spirit.

Jesus brings this point home in the sixth chapter of John. He gives the crowd bread and fish. Five thousand were fed on a budget of five loaves and two fish. The crowd follows him, desperate to find where Jesus is. We pick the story up at verse 25:

25When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

26Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. 27Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

28Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

29Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

30So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? 31Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

32Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

34"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

35Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Our daily bread is more than food. It is more than resources. As Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy, "Man does not live on bread alone..." The truth is bread is just not enough. We need something more to sustain us every day. We need to gather the true manna, to receive it every day, if we are going to live.

One more thing: the people say, Lord, show us a miracle so we can believe. Didn't they just see the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand? How could they forget so soon? How could they disregard the past proof when they are facing their present crisis? Because they are just like us. We forget his provision in our immediate concern. When they ask what they need to do, Jesus says, there is one job requirement for receiving the manna from heaven: believe.

So today, maybe you come to worship and to this table with a fear of dwindling manna supplies. I understand that fear. It makes perfect sense. But this line from the Lord's Prayer is an invitation for us to open our clenched fists to God and say, "For today, I trust you. Today, I know you have made provision for me."

We face that right here at Emmanuel. Last week we took the unusual step of making a specific "ask" to support one of our missionary's efforts to aid the devastated land of Burma. You responded generously. We collected close to six thousand dollars. But it was the last Sunday of our financial year and we wanted to close our books well. We came up a little short. A friend said, "Was that really wise to ask for a special need when we are still short on our own budget?" Believe me, I thought about it. The session thought about it. There is a balance, but there is also the truth that, just as you offer your resources for this ministry, we have to be willing to offer ourselves for others. Part of being entrusted with manna is sharing it with others who are so desperately in need of it.

However, in the end, it is not about dollars. It is not about bread. When all we care about is physical manna our life becomes an exercise in missing the point. The point is to come to the one who will help us to never go hungry, to believe in the one who will help us to never be thirsty.

To illustrate all of this, to underline it, to remind us that he not only provides earthly bread but is, himself, the bread of life, he took the loaf that was lying on the table and said, "This is my body, broken for you." It represented his sacrifice for us.

Then he took the cup and he said, “This is my blood.” Here he wanted to take it a step further and point out the purpose of all this: it is like the wax seal on an important document. That document is entitled, “The New Covenant”. “This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood.”

Today, as you receive the elements, remember that he has provided your daily bread for all your years. He has been faithful in the past and he will stand with you in the future. Your job is to believe him for today.

And then lift your eyes to the bread that is from heaven. As you receive the elements, remember that God is aiming your life towards this moment, towards partaking of this bread—the bread of life. You are not on this earth to spend your life gathering frosted flakes. You are here to make a daily habit of receiving the heavenly manna. You are here to know and trust and depend upon God in Christ.

As you take the elements, thank God for providing this daily bread. He has given us, this day, our daily bread. And tomorrow, turn to him again. And the next day, and the next. Let us all take in the bread of life, so that we will never hunger or thirst again. The gifts of God for the people of God.