



Illustration: Raphael Silva/Lightstock.com

The Lord's Prayer

Seventy short words that change the world.

BY DONALD E. BURKE

With just 70 words in English and taking less than a minute to recite, the Lord's Prayer, nevertheless, is the most frequently used prayer in Christianity. Its importance was recognized early in Christian history; the late-first-century Christian manual of instruction, known as the *Didache*, required that the Lord's Prayer be recited three times each day. Since then, the

prayer has been a standard component of Christian worship and devotion. But more than this, the Lord's Prayer addresses and expresses our unique human composition as earthy creatures who are yet drawn upward toward God. In effect, the Lord's Prayer draws heaven and earth together.

Of course, the Lord's Prayer is important in the first instance because it was given to us by Jesus. As recounted in Luke

11, the disciples had observed Jesus' discipline of prayer and how it shaped his life. They wanted to share in that experience, so they requested that Jesus teach them how to pray. We, as the successors to the disciples, receive this prayer as Jesus' pattern for prayer.

But I think the resonance that the Lord's Prayer has for us goes deeper. I would argue that we were born to pray.

It's built into the core of who we are as human beings, since we were brought into existence by God and we continue to exist because of God's provision and active concern for us. Thus, human life finds its meaning and purpose—its beginning and end—in God, and our lives are most fully human when they are grounded in God.

Heaven and Earth

From another angle, the Lord's Prayer reflects our human constitution. On the one hand, we are created from the dust of the ground, fragile and fraught with the limitations of our earthiness. We hunger, we thirst, we bleed and we suffer. As a result, we search for food, we seek out water, we long for healing and we chase after peace and rest. We are creatures of the earth. Yet on the other hand, we are also given life by the very breath of God. Thus, while we are tied to the earth, we are also drawn toward heaven. While we are finite, we snatch glimpses of things that transcend our limitations. So, while limited by our earthy frame and all its constraints, we nevertheless have within us a drive to see beyond ourselves; we have a thirst for something or Someone beyond us. While we are earthy, we also know that we have been created for more.

It is for this reason, I think, that the Lord's Prayer opens with a focus on God, our heavenly Father. We pray for the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's kingdom and the doing of God's will. This focus on heaven resonates with the divine breath that gives us life. The prayer, however, goes on to focus on more earthly matters: daily bread, forgiveness for ourselves and others, deliverance from temptation and protection from evil. This is the stuff of our everyday, earthy existence. The Lord's Prayer holds us together—dust of the ground and divine breath—and places us before God. It draws together heaven and earth in 70 short words.

Finally, in the doxology with which it closes, Jesus' prayer reminds us that the glory, kingdom and power belong to God; always have and always will. Human claims of sovereignty are puny, to say nothing of idolatrous. With this conclusion, the Lord's Prayer returns us to where it started—focused on God, our heavenly Father.

A Far Country

Across the pages of Scripture, we find

that humans are both summoned to prayer and are drawn to prayer. It is part of our makeup to search for God, to pursue God. Either that, or we will try to fill the void in our hearts with all kinds of obsessions. We will be restless, seeking to achieve for ourselves what can be given to us only by God. Indeed, if there is one thing that characterizes our time and place in history, it is the restlessness and the boredom that come from our diminished lives. The Lord's Prayer helps us to hold our lives together. It points us toward God, the source and ground of our existence.

The Lord's Prayer holds us together—dust of the ground and divine breath—and places us before God.

If I push a little deeper, I also come to the conclusion that not only do we need God, but also that, in some sense, God needs us. Since God is revealed most clearly in divine love, it seems reasonable to think that such love must have someone to love. How else can we account for the persistent, unrelenting pursuit of us by God? Is God not motivated by an overwhelming, consuming love for the world? Has God not "so loved the world"? It seems to me that our alienation from God—our sin—is not so much the product of breaking rules or divine laws as it is a betrayal of God's love for the world. Like the prodigal, we have gone off to a far country.

In his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster has written beautifully about our fundamental human need to find our "home" in God and God's aching heart, which longs to welcome us home:

"Today, the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoc-

cupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsessions with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence.... For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation."

Coming Home

The Bible is united in its affirmation that God is passionate about us. God seeks us out. God loves us. And when we are estranged from God, the Lord moves toward us, going to extremes to call us back, to pave the pathway, and to lead us home.

In giving the Lord's Prayer to his disciples, as with the rest of his ministry, Jesus was inviting them—and us—to come home, to find our place, our rest, in our heavenly Father. The Lord's Prayer unites God's own love for us with our need of God in one brief prayer. By accepting Jesus' invitation to pray this prayer, we unite our voices and our hearts with the disciples of Jesus, with countless generations of Christians and ultimately with Jesus himself, as we place ourselves before our Father in heaven, acknowledging both our dependence upon God and God's deepest love for us.

But Jesus also invited us to pray this prayer because God is listening actively. God is leaning in to hear our petitions and receive our affirmations. God longs for our love and aches to shower his love upon us. The Lord's Prayer is like a bridge over which that transaction—or better, that relationship—can be completed. It's no wonder that the *Didache* exhorts Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day. We could do worse. ☺

Donald E. Burke is professor of biblical studies at Booth University College in Winnipeg. This is an excerpt from his book, The Lord's Prayer: Drawing Heaven and Earth Together, which is available at Amazon.ca.