

THE IMPERATIVE OF PRAYER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Ten days ago, I was examined by Dr. Robert Buckmire at the UNC Voice Center in Chapel Hill. After the doctor reviewed my history and talked with me about what has been going on with my voice, he scoped me and showed me my voice box at work. Then he sent me down the hall to meet with Heather Davis, the clinic's speech therapist and the graduate student who works with her. They ran different diagnostic tests on me to gauge the strength of my voice, pitch, tone, quality, etc.

The graduate student administered most of the tests, which included humming, reading sentences, speaking into a microphone, and holding a note as long as I could. Then Heather got my attention, had me flutter my lips for a minute, then said, "Repeat after me . . . Our Father . . ." That kind of threw me, but I said, "Our Father . . ." She said, "Which art in heaven . . ." I guess I was still surprised she was using the Lord's Prayer (they did know I am a minister), and I must have hesitated. Heather looked at me and said, "Now you shouldn't have to think about it as much as I do!"

Go back to what Heather said to me: "Repeat after me . . ." She was very nice and she said it in a very pleasant tone of voice but, if you parsed that sentence, you would identify the verb "repeat" as being in the imperative mood. Heather didn't say, "Please repeat after me . . ." or "Do you mind repeating after me?" or "Is it OK if you repeat after me?" In addition, even though the graduate student conducted most of the testing, Heather was definitely in charge. She was a lot younger than I, but she was the expert and I was the patient. So, her instruction to "Repeat after me . . ." was an imperative — and I complied!

Look up the word "imperative" and you'll find that it means "of vital importance, crucial, giving an authoritative command, insisting on immediate attention or obedience." In our English language, the imperative mood is used to make direct commands or requests, with the subject "you" implied — "You repeat after me."

The imperative mood in New Testament Greek is most often translated as a command or a prohibition. The imperative is usually used by a superior to an inferior, such as when Jesus commands the demons to leave the man who lived among the tombs — "Go!" What's interesting about that story is that the demons respond to Jesus with an imperative, "Send us into the herd of pigs." Now, the demons are not superior to Jesus — they're not even on the same level as Jesus. Jesus is clearly superior to the demons, and yet they speak to him with an imperative — "Send us!" But, if you read the first part of the verse (Matthew 8:31), you'll see that the demons are described as having "begged Jesus, saying, 'If you cast us out, send us into the herd of pigs.'"

Why all of this talk about the imperative mood and how to use it? Well, in the three short verses of Luke 11:2-4, there are six verbs in the imperative mood. The first one makes perfect sense. When the disciples say to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples,” Jesus answers, “When you pray, say . . .” “Say” is an imperative — Jesus is giving a command, an instruction about how to pray. The superior, the teacher, Jesus is commanding his inferiors, his disciples, his students how to pray.

Then something interesting happens . . . five of the next six verbs are imperatives — but it’s us talking to God! **Make** your name holy . . . **let** your kingdom come . . . **give** us our daily bread . . . **forgive** us our sins . . . **do not lead** us into temptation. How can we possibly give commands to God? We’re hardly in a superior position to order God around or to command him to do something for us.

Go back to the story about the demons and the pigs. Even though the demons speak to Jesus with an imperative, the command is “weakened” by the fact that they beg him to send them into the herd. On top of that, it’s already clear at this point that Jesus holds the upper hand over the demons. So, their “command” is actually a request, because they know Jesus has the authority and the power and the ability to do what they ask — to send them into the herd of pigs.

Let’s think about what that means when we pray the Lord’s Prayer (which is longer than Luke’s version in Luke 13). We say “Our Father, who art in heaven . . . **hallow** your name, **bring** your kingdom, **give** us bread, **forgive** our debts, **lead us not** into temptation, **deliver** us from evil.” When you join in the prayer that our Lord taught us to pray, do you really feel like you’re ordering God around? Do you really think you’re in a position to command God to do this or that? Probably not . . . so what gives?

Let’s hope that when we join our hearts and voices together in the Lord’s Prayer and speak that string of imperatives, whether we know it or not, we are using what is called the “weakened imperative.” The weakened imperative turns the verb into a request. Even more than that, especially when we pray to God with these “weakened imperatives,” we profess our faith that God is actually willing and able and ready to fulfill our requests. Far from being a presumptuous act on our part — bossing God around — the imperative of prayer in the Lord’s Prayer is actually a faithful request we make to God out of our deepest need.

There are six petitions or requests in this short prayer: Hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done; Give us this day our daily bread; Forgive us our debts; Lead us not into temptation.

Although all six of our requests have to do with our relationship with God, the first three focus our attention on God’s sovereignty: the holiness of his name, his coming kingdom, and his divine will. The second three requests have to do with our specific needs in this life, as we live in relationship with God and with our neighbors: daily bread; forgiveness; freedom from evil.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey served as a biblical scholar for forty years in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. As the son of missionaries in the Middle East, he was exposed

to Arab culture and customs beginning in his childhood. He contributed greatly to our understanding of the culture in which Jesus grew up and ministered.

I have a wonderful book by Dr. Bailey titled *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, in which he writes about Jesus' birth, his teachings, his actions, and especially his parables, all from a Middle Eastern, Arabic cultural perspective. Throughout the book, Dr. Bailey emphasizes the importance of community for the people of Jesus' day. While it was certainly important for individuals in Jesus' day to say "I believe . . .," just as it is today, that belief in and relationship with God was embedded in the community's faith in and relationship with God. That's why we pray "**Our** Father . . ." and not "**My** Father . . ." We ask God to "give **us our** daily bread . . . forgive **us our** debts as **we** have also forgiven **our** debtors . . . lead **us** not into temptation but deliver **us** from evil."

In a way, the imperative of the Lord's Prayer in what we ask from God carries with it an unspoken imperative of what God expects in return from us. As Dr. Bailey writes, "Each of these six petitions involves an act of God, and each specifies or implies participation on the part of the believer. . . each involves the sovereignty of God and the freedom and responsibility of the human person."

In other words, it's as if God answers each of our "weakened imperatives" with his own full imperative (to paraphrase Dr. Bailey):

We ask God to "make your name holy" — God commands us "to live a holy life."

We ask God to "bring in the kingdom" — God commands us "to work toward the goal of God's kingdom coming."

We ask God to "fulfill his will" — God commands us to "discover that will and obey it in daily life."

We ask God to "give the gift of daily bread" — God commands us to "work to earn it."

We ask God to "forgive" — God commands us to forgive.

We ask God to "guide us away from evil" — God commands us to "live a life of righteousness."

"Clearly," Dr. Bailey notes, "this was a community-forming as well as a personal-identity-forming prayer."¹

The imperatives don't end with the end of the Lord's Prayer. Jesus commands the disciples, "Ask, seek, knock." In the Greek, these are called present imperatives. That means much more than just "right now." The present imperative means "ask, and keep on asking; seek, and keep on seeking; knock, and keep on knocking." It's not as if God is like our sleepy-head neighbor who gets up at midnight to give us three loaves of bread to feed our unexpected guest. Our neighbor might drag himself out of bed and give us the bread more to get rid of us than out of the goodness of his heart. But, Jesus says, if our neighbor is willing to do that for us, imagine what God will do for us when we go to him with the imperative of prayer, not demanding that God do something for us, but trusting that God is able to make his name holy, bring in his kingdom, fulfill his will, give us bread, forgive us our sins, and guide us away from evil. On top of that, God

invites us to be a part of all of his gracious actions, to live as people who trust our Father, who art in heaven.

I found an interesting question online about the imperative of prayer. Someone asked, "I've got an issue with prayer — why do we use the imperative mood in prayer? Every prayer seems like a list of demands rather than petitions. The imperative mood seems so demanding and selfish. Who am I to demand anything from God? I feel less like an adult asking for help and more like a whiny brat making bratty demands of God. Give me this! Forgive me that! I'm asking you guys for a new way of thinking about the imperative mood in prayer so that I don't drive myself to distraction while praying."²

Well, here's a way of thinking about the imperative of prayer that might keep it from being demanding and selfish. Every once in a while, Nancy and I will ask each other, "Have you heard anything from either of our children today/this week/recently?" Sometimes the answer is "Yes," to which we reply, "What did they want? What's going on?" If the answer is "No," the response is usually something like, "I hope they're OK. I wonder what's going on." We welcome that communication with our children, because we want to hear from them what they need, what's going on, if they're doing OK.

Don't you imagine God feels the same way about hearing from his children? Since Jesus taught us to pray this way, God must want to hear from us what we need, what's going on with us, if we're doing OK. Jesus gives us an imperative — "When you pray, say . . ." And we're invited/commanded to pray in the imperative, trusting that God can and actually will hallow his name, make his kingdom come, give us daily bread, forgive our debts, lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil.

Kenneth Bailey begins his four-section chapter on The Lord's Prayer with this story:

After the fall of the Soviet Union I was privileged to lecture in Riga for the Latvian Lutheran Church. Most of the participants in the seminar were between the ages of 25-35. This meant that all of their education had been in the communist state system, which was determined to indoctrinate them in atheism. I asked one of the young women about how she came to faith.

"Was there a church in your village?" I asked.

"No, the communists closed all of them," she replied.

"Did some saintly grandmother instruct you in the ways of God?"

"No. All the members of my family were atheists."

"Did you have secret home Bible studies, or was there an underground church in your area?"

"No, none of that" came the answer.

"So, what happened?"

She told me the following story:

"At funerals we were allowed to recite the Lord's Prayer. As a young child I heard those strange words and had no idea who we were talking to, what the words meant, where they came from or why we were reciting them. When freedom came at last, I had the opportunity to search for their meaning. When you are in total darkness, the

tiniest point of light is very bright. For me the Lord's Prayer was that point of light. By the time I found its meaning I was a Christian."³

That, my friends, is the imperative of prayer!

Let us pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, make us bold in asking, thankful in receiving, tireless in seeking, and joyful in finding, that we may always proclaim your coming kingdom and do your will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

NOTES

¹Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 105.

[www.reddit.com/r/Christian/comments/4kf104/why do prayers use the imperative mood I have/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Christian/comments/4kf104/why_do_prayers_use_the_imperative_mood_I_have/)

³Bailey, p. 91.