

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Teach Us to Pray: Our Daily Bread

Matthew 6:9-13

Today we continue our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. So far, we've listened as Jesus calls us into his relationship with the Father, who is the source of our life and salvation, and whose holiness shapes us, individually and together. Then last Sunday we listened as Jesus teaches us to long for and pray for the loving sovereignty of God, the reign of Christ, to be fully and finally manifested in the world and in our lives. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

This petition for the coming of God's reign is a key transition in the Lord's Prayer. We begin to shift from focusing primarily on God in heaven to focusing on how we live on earth below. We ask for God's perfect justice to arrive and for his will to be fully enacted in this realm that we inhabit. This leads us into the prayer's next petition: "Give us today our daily bread." Or as many of us have learned it, "Give us this day our daily bread."

What could be more down to earth than the need for day-to-day nourishment? And yet, the Greek phrase in this petition is obscure and difficult to translate. It could mean our bread for today, or our bread for tomorrow, or our bread for the end-times. Since the stress is on praying for the final coming of the kingdom of God, some maintain that "bread" points toward the fullness of blessing at the Messiah's heavenly banquet, when all God's people will sit down together, with enough food for all. Or some think that "bread" refers to the church's tradition of what we call the Lord's Supper. But most interpreters think, and I would agree with them, that "bread" should be taken in its most literal sense of daily nourishment. Yet as we reflect on our day-to-day physical needs, we always do so in light of the coming of God's reign, when no one will go hungry.

That certainly wasn't the case in the context where Jesus lived and ministered. In first-century Galilee, poverty was widespread and visible. Some scholars estimate that 90 percent of people lived close to the subsistence level or below it. Most people who followed Jesus, and listened to his teaching, weren't sitting there, nudging one another and whispering questions like, "Where do you think we should go to eat when this service is over? Chinese, Italian, seafood, barbecue? Chick-fil-A is closed on Sunday. Maybe Marie's? Do you want to eat in, drive through, or pick up curbside?" No one who was keeping up with Jesus and his disciples had these kinds of issues and options.

On the contrary, the Gospels testify of a Savior who lived in daily solidarity with the poor, and who brought the reality of the kingdom of God into their lives, including provision for their physical needs. In today's Scripture reading from Matthew, we heard about our Lord's feeding of the 4,000 (15:29-39), after the feeding of the 5,000 recorded in the previous chapter (14:13-21). True, there are many places in the Bible where the language of "bread" carries meaning and significance beyond bodily nutrition. Jesus himself tells his disciples, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about" (John 4:32). He identifies himself as "the bread of life" (John 6:35). But while we acknowledge our need for spiritual nourishment, we also recognize the bodily reality of being human. We're embodied souls,

and our Father in heaven loves us and cares about us in our totality. So it comes as no surprise that the Son, who is one with the Father, spent a lot of his earthly ministry tangibly caring for the needs of hungry people.

"Give us today our daily bread." Maybe Jesus had in mind especially the day laborers, who received their pay at the end of each working day, enabling them and their families to eat on the following day. If they weren't hired, they went hungry. What a contrast to so many of us who sit here in the comfort of a church sanctuary, knowing that we can go out for lunch, or that if we go home, there's plenty of food in the pantry and refrigerator. And if there isn't, then there are several grocery stores within fairly short driving range, where we can go to restock for the week ahead.

But for so many whom Jesus encountered and spent time with, life wasn't a matter of planning the weekly menu. It was more a matter of daily survival. "Give us *today* our *daily* bread." The stress is on the dailiness of God's provision, the sustenance that will get you through to the next morning, and another day.

During World War II, thousands of children were left without homes and families following extensive bombing raids in Europe. These orphans were gathered up and taken to camps where they were cared for by Allied Forces personnel. They had plenty to eat during the day and were now safe from the trauma, death, and destruction that had surrounded them. But still, they couldn't sleep. Just the thought of once again being left homeless and without food generated uncertainty and fear.

Eventually a psychologist suggested that after the children were put to bed, each one should be given a slice of bread to hold. If they wanted more to eat, more was provided. But this particular piece was just to hold. And it worked. Just knowing that they had something in hand was enough to overcome their fears and provide the comfort and reassurance necessary for a good night's rest.¹

In that case, the children didn't have to go to bed hungry. But to this day, there are still millions that do, both children and adults. You may recall that early in the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw high unemployment producing long lines at food banks across the country. That was a high-profile example of how food insecurity has worsened during the past year and a half. But behind those stories that appeared on the evening news are countless other individuals and families whose struggles to get consistent access to enough food don't make the headlines. Earlier this year, a piece in *The Washington Post* titled, "Going to bed hungry" captured it well: "Hunger is a hidden hardship that the pandemic has made visible, a persistent crisis that the pandemic has made worse."²

"Give us today our daily bread." During COVID-19, that prayer has taken on even greater urgency. And the Father's responsiveness to that prayer has taken many forms. Last Sunday, Ronnie Strickland shared an update with us about the meals program on Wednesday evenings at Metropolitan United Methodist Church, one of the congregations here in our community. It sounds like they've served, and continue to serve, hundreds of people. Similar meal or food distributions have happened at other churches here in our area and across the country. I recently followed the story of a congregation in Alexandria that had to close its doors, but in the process blessed the community that surrounded it. When the church sold its land, it took \$500,000 of the proceeds and gave it to a local food bank. At first, the food bank CEO thought that in communicating with each other, someone had accidentally typed \$500,000 instead of \$50,000. But no, half a million dollars was the church's gift to help feed the hungry. These are just a few examples of how God works

through various kinds of organizations and institutions, including Christian communities of faith, to give daily bread.

Again, the accent is on *daily* bread. This part of the Lord's prayer is a reminder that all of us depend upon the goodness of God for our very existence. Moment by moment, we're given life, breath, and strength from the Lord. On this day, in this place, at this very moment, you exist by the will and life-giving power of God. We're all utterly dependent on divine grace.

After the Reformer Martin Luther died, some friends came to his room to remove his body. They found a note that he had scrawled, probably sometime in his final days. It read, "We are beggars, that is true." None of us are self-made or self-sustaining. We're all needy creatures, totally reliant upon the Father who has made us and redeemed us through the Son. Our status as children applies at all times, in all places, under all circumstances. "Father, give us this day our daily bread."

In today's Scripture reading from Exodus, we heard how God supplied not only meat, but especially manna, bread in the wilderness, for his people. In addition to being a story about God's provision, this is a story about rightly receiving what God gives. The people are to gather just enough bread for the day. They're not to hoard it. God intends them to live in vulnerability and equity, in reliance on him and one another. But instead of living in interdependence, God's people are driven by anxiety and greed, storing up bread that ends up rotting. This story of God's reliability and the call to live together as neighbors within God's provision gets alluded to in the New Testament. It's reflected in Jesus' feeding of the multitudes. He draws on it when describing himself as "the bread of life." Jesus himself is the sign and embodiment of God's faithfulness and generosity. And God's people are to exhibit his goodness in the ways they share and distribute his gifts.

Author Eugene Peterson tells about a couple named Fred and Cheryl who adopted a five-year-old child named Addie from Haiti. They already had two sons by birth, ages 15 and 13. After returning from Haiti to their home in Arizona, the family sat down for their first supper together. As Peterson puts it,

There was a platter of pork chops and a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. After the first serving, the two teenage boys kept refilling their plates. Soon the pork chops had disappeared and the potatoes were gone. Addie had never seen so much food on one table in her whole life. Her eyes were big as she watched her new brothers, Thatcher and Graham, satisfy their ravenous teenage appetites.

Fred and Cheryl noticed that Addie had become very quiet and realized that something was wrong—agitation ... bewilderment ... insecurity? Cheryl guessed that it was the disappearing food. She suspected that because Addie had grown up hungry, when food was gone from the table she might be thinking that it would be a day or more before there was more to eat.

Having guessed right, Cheryl took Addie's hand and led her around to various spots in the kitchen—the bread drawer, the refrigerator, the freezer, the pantry—to help reassure her that there was plenty of food in the house, and that no matter how much her teenage brothers ate it, there was more where that came from. According to Peterson, "It was enough. Food was there, whether she could see it or not. Her brothers were no longer rivals at the table. She was home. She would never go hungry again."³

"Give us this day our daily bread." Having prayed for the coming of God's kingdom, we then express our complete reliance on him, and our responsibility for practicing his kingdom when it comes to something as basic as nourishment, especially the nourishment of others.

Remember that like the other parts of the Lord's Prayer, this one is primarily about we, not simply me. "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread." There's no scarcity when it comes to God's resources. The shortage lies in our anxiety, our sense of self-sufficiency, our greed, and our excess. So praying for our daily bread helps move us away from competitiveness and toward community. It keeps us turned outward toward the Father and our fellow human beings, particularly those who hunger.

¹ Charles L. Allen, *God's Psychiatry: Healing for Your Troubled Heart* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1953) n.p.

² "Going to Bed Hungry." The Washington Post website. January 27, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/covid-hunger-crisis/> (October 27, 2021).

³ Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 159-160.