

Introduction

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one. (Matt. 6:7-13 NRSV)

Every day, Christians all over the world, taking the text of Matt. 6:7-13 as their cue, “dare” and “make bold” both privately and publicly to utter versions of the words that, according to the author of the Gospel of Matthew (and also the author of the Gospel of Luke) Jesus gave his disciples to pray.¹ But here’s a vital question: *Do*

1. In the Gospel according to Luke the occasion of Jesus’ giving his disciples what has come to be known as the “Lord’s Prayer,” or the *Pater Noster*, is not, as in Matthew, Jesus’ desire to lay out fundamental and programmatic instruction for any who would follow him in the ways of the

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Christians actually understand the words they utter? And here's another even more important one, one which lies at the center of this book: granting that Christians have *some* understanding of Jesus' words (as surely they must, especially if they have read studies of the this prayer or, as is likely, have been instructed by pastors and teachers on what the words mean), is this understanding in any way consonant with what *Jesus himself* understood the meaning and aim of his words to be? To put this another way: When we pray the prayer Jesus taught "us" to pray, are we really praying it as Jesus intended us to pray it? Is what *we* ask for when we petition God to let his name "be hallowed" and his kingdom "come," and for bread and forgiveness and for not being led into "temptation," really what Jesus thought and meant those he told to recite his words to be asking for?

Despite what many important students of this prayer think in this regard, I answer no. And in the following pages, I take up the task of showing, through an extended conversation with the bit of Scripture traditionally known as "The Lord's Prayer," that this is so.

God of Israel, but a request on the part of one of his disciples they be taught by Jesus to pray "just as John the Baptist did his disciples" (see Lk. 11:1).