

The Lord's Prayer

The teachings of St. John Cassian

ON THE LORD'S PRAYER

XVIII.1. "And so a still more sublime and exalted condition follows upon these kinds of prayer. It is fashioned by the contemplation of God alone and by fervent charity, by which the mind, having been dissolved and flung into love of Him, speaks most familiarly and with particular devotion to God as to its own father.

2. "The schema of the Lord's prayer has taught us that we must tirelessly seek this condition when it says: 'Our Father.'" When, therefore, we confess with our own voice that the God and Lord of the universe is our Father, we profess that we have in fact been admitted from our servile condition into an adopted sonship.

"Then we add: 'Who art in heaven,' so that, avoiding with utter horror the dwelling place of the present life, wherein we sojourn on this earth as on a journey and are kept at a far distance from our Father, we may instead hasten with great desire to that region in which we say that our Father dwells and do nothing that would make us unworthy of this profession of our and of the nobility of so great an adoption, or that would deprive us as degenerate of our paternal inheritance and cause us to incur the wrath of his justice and severity.

3. "Having advanced to the rank and status of sons, we shall from then on burn constantly with that devotion which is found in good sons, so that we may no longer expend all our energies for our own benefit but for the sake of our Father's glory, saying to him: 'Hallowed be thy name.' Thus we testify that our desire and our joy is the glory of our Father, since we have become imitators of him who said: 'The one who speaks of himself seeks his own glory. But the one who seeks the glory of Him who sent him is true, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

"Finally, the vessel of election, filled with this disposition, wished to become anathema from Christ if only a household many times larger would be gained for him and the salvation of the entire Israelite people would increase the glory of his Father.

4. "For he who knew that no one can die for the sake of life could safely choose to perish for the sake of Christ. And again he says: 'We rejoice when we are weak but you are strong.'

"But what is there so astonishing if the vessel of election chooses to become anathema for the sake of Christ's glory and for the sake of his brothers' conversion and the well-being of the pagans, when the prophet Micah also wished to become a liar and to be removed from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit if only the people of the Jewish nation might avoid the plagues and the ruinous captivity that he had predicted by his prophecy? As he says: 'Would that I were not a

man who had the Spirit, and I told a lie instead!' And let us pass over the sentiment of the Lawgiver, who did not refuse to die with his brothers, who were themselves going to die, when he said: 'I beseech you, O Lord; this people has committed a great sin. Either forgive them this evil or, if you do not, wipe me out from the book that you have written.'

5. "The words, 'Hallowed be thy name' can also be quite satisfactorily understood in this way -- namely, that the hallowing of God is our perfection. And so when we say to him: 'Hallowed be thy name,' we are saying in other words: Make us such, Father, that we may deserve to understand and grasp how great your hallowing is and, of course, that you may appear as hallowed in our spiritual way of life. This is effectively fulfilled in us when 'people see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven.'

XIX. "The second petition of a most pure mind eagerly desires the kingdom of its Father to come immediately. This means that in which Christ reigns daily in holy persons, which happens when the rule of the devil has been cast out of our hearts by the annihilation of the foul vices and God has begun to hold sway in us through the good fragrance of the virtues; when chastity, peace, and humility reign in our minds, and fornication has been conquered, rage overcome, and pride trampled upon. And of course it means that which was promised universally to all the perfect and to all the sons of God at the appointed time, when it will be said to them by Christ: 'Come, blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Desiring and hoping for this with intent and unwavering gaze, we tell him: 'Thy kingdom come.' For we know by the witness of our own conscience that when he appears we shall soon be his companions. No sinner dares to say this or to wish for it, since a person who knows that at his coming he will at once be paid back for his deserts not with a palm or rewards but with punishment has no desire to see the Judge's tribunal.

XX.1. "The third petition is of sons: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' There cannot be a greater prayer than to desire that earthly things should deserve to equal heavenly ones. For what does it mean to say: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' if not that human beings should be like angels and that, just as God's will is fulfilled by them in heaven, so also all those who are on earth should do not their own but his will? No one will really be able to say this but him who believes that God regulates all things that are seen, whether fortunate or unfortunate, for the sake of our well-being, and that he is more provident and careful with regard to the salvation and interests of those who are his own than we are for ourselves.

2. "And of course it is to be understood in this way -- namely, that the will of God is the salvation of all, according to the text of blessed Paul: 'Who desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.' Of this will the prophet Isaiah, speaking in the person of God the Fathers, also says: 'All my will shall be done.' When we tell him, then: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' we are praying in other words: Father, just as those who are in heaven are saved by the knowledge of you, so also are those who are on earth."

XXI.1 "Then: 'Give us this day our "supersubstantial bread," [NOTE: Cassian uses a Greek word here] which another evangelist has referred to as 'daily.' The former indicates the noble quality of this substance, which places it above all other substances and which, in the sublimity of its magnificence and power to sanctify, surpasses every creature, whereas the latter expresses the nature of its use and its goodness. For when it says 'daily' it shows that we are unable to attain the spiritual life on a day without it.

2. When it says 'this day' it shows that it must be taken daily and that yesterday's supply of it is not enough if we have not been given of it today as well. Our daily need for it warns us that we should pour out this prayer constantly, because there is no day on which it is not necessary for us to strengthen the heart of our inner man by eating and receiving this. But the expression 'this day' can also be understood with reference to the present life -- namely: Give us this bread as long as we dwell in this world. For we know that it will also be given in the world to come to those who have deserved it from you, but we beg you to give it to us this day, because unless a person deserves to receive it in this life he will be unable to partake of it in that life.

ON THE WORDS "FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES" AND SO FORTH

XXII.1. "'And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Oh, the unspeakable mercy of God! It has not merely given us a form of prayer and taught us how to act in a manner acceptable to him, uprooting both anger and sadness through the requirements of the formula that he gave, by which he ordered that we should always pray it. It has also conferred on those who pray an opportunity by disclosing to them the way that they may bring upon themselves the merciful and kind judgment of God, and it has conferred a certain power by which we can moderate the sentence of our Judge, persuading him to pardon our sins by the example of our own forgiveness, when we tell him: 'Forgive us as we forgive.'

2. "And so, securely confident in this prayer, a person who has been forgiving to his own debtors and not to his Lord's will ask pardon for his offenses. For some of us -- which is bad -- are accustomed to show ourselves mild and very merciful with respect to things that are committed to God's disadvantage, although they may be great crimes, but to be very harsh and inexorable exactors with respect to the debts of even the slightest offenses committed against ourselves.

3. Whoever, then, does not from his heart forgive the brother who has offended him will, by this entreaty, be asking not for pardon but for condemnation for himself, and by his own say-so he will be requesting a harsher judgment for himself when he says: Forgive me as I also have forgiven. And when he has been dealt with according to his own petition, what else will the consequence be that that, following his own example, he will be punished with an implacable anger and an irremissible condemnation? Therefore, if we wish to be judged mercifully, we must ourselves be merciful toward those who have offended us. For we shall be forgiven to the degree that we have forgiven those who have injured us by any wrongdoing whatsoever.

4. "Some people fear this, and when this prayer is recited together in church by the whole congregation they pass over this line in silence, lest by their own words they obligate rather than excuse themselves. They do not understand that it is in vain that they contrive to quibble in this way with the Judge of all, who wished to show beforehand how he would judge his suppliants. For since he does not wish to be harsh and inexorable toward them, he indicated the form that his judgment would take. Thus, just as we want to be judged by him, so also we should judge our brothers if they have offended us in anything, 'because there is judgment without mercy for the one who has not acted mercifully.'

ON THE WORDS "SUBJECT US NOT TO THE TRIAL"

XXIII. 1. "Next there follows: 'And subject us not to the trial. In this regard there arises a question of no small importance. For if we pray not to be allowed to be tried, how will the strength of our steadfastness be tested, according to the words: 'Whoever has not been tried has not been proven?' And again: 'Blessed is the man who undergoes trial?' Therefore, the words 'Subject us not to the trial' do not mean: Do not allow us ever to be tried, but rather: Do not allow us to be overcome when we are tried.

2. For Job was tried, but he was not subjected to the trial. For he did not ascribe folly to God, nor did he as a blasphemer, with wicked tongue, accede to the will of the one trying him, to which he was being drawn. Abraham was tried and Joseph was tried, but neither of them was subjected to the trial, for neither of them consented to the one trying them.

"Then there follows: 'But deliver us from evil.' This means: Do not allow us to be tried by the devil 'beyond our capacity, but with the trial also provide a way out, so that we may be able to endure.'

CONCERNING THE FACT THAT NOTHING ELSE
AT ALL SHOULD BE ASKED FOR EXCEPT WHAT
IS CONTAINED WITHIN THE LIMITS OF
THE LORD'S PRAYER

XXIV "You see, then, what sort of measure and form for prayer have been proposed to us by the Judge who is to be prayed to by it. In it there is contained no request for riches, no allusion to honors, no demand for power and strength, no mention of bodily health or of temporal existence. For the Creator of eternal things wishes nothing transitory, nothing base, nothing temporal to be asked for from himself. And so, whoever neglects these sempiternal petitions and chooses to ask for something transitory and passing from him does very great injury to his grandeur and largesse, and he offends rather than propitiates his Judge with the paltriness of his prayer. END

from St. John Cassian (trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P.), "The Conferences," (New York: Newman Press, 1997), pp. 340 - 345