

CHRISTIAN PIETY AND THE LORD'S PRAYER IN THE EARLY CHURCH UP TO 300CE - MATTHEW 6:1-18

Piedade cristã e a oração do Senhor na Igreja Primitiva até o ano 300
d.C. – Mateus 6:1-18

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the use of the exhortations on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting found in Matthew 6:1-18 in the church of antiquity. Additionally, a fresh analysis of the use and influence of the Matthean form of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) in the early church is presented. These goals are achieved through an examination of the early church writers' citation of the relevant texts as found in the Sermon on the Mount. Primary source citations are provided to allow the reader to follow the analyses. Emphasis is placed on the unique perspectives held by the ancient writers concerning these texts of Scripture and the ways which they impacted on their life and communal practices. The right practice of Christian piety served to shape the identity of Christian communities and to legitimize them as authentic followers of God. We will see that the Lord's Prayer was one of the most influential of texts in the early church comparable in prominence to the Decalogue. The Prayer found application in discipleship, polemics, worship, identity formation and pastoral care.

Keywords: Early Church. Christian Piety. Lord's Prayer.
Sermon on the Mount.

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RESUMO

Este artigo fornece uma análise abrangente do uso das exortações sobre esmolas, orações e jejum encontrados em Mateus 6: 1-18 na Igreja da Antiguidade. Além disso, é apresentada uma nova análise do uso e da influência da forma mateana da Oração do Senhor (Mateus 6: 9-13) na Igreja Primitiva. Esses objetivos são alcançados através de um exame da citação pelos escritores da igreja primitiva dos textos relevantes, conforme encontrados no Sermão do Monte. As citações de fontes primárias são fornecidas para permitir que o leitor siga as análises. A ênfase é colocada nas perspectivas únicas dos antigos escritores a respeito desses textos da Escritura e nas formas como eles impactaram suas vidas e práticas comunitárias. A prática correta da piedade cristã serviu para moldar a identidade das comunidades cristãs e legitimá-las como autênticas seguidoras de Deus. Veremos que a Oração do Senhor foi um dos textos mais influentes da igreja primitiva, comparável em proeminência ao Decálogo. A Oração encontrou aplicação no discipulado, na polêmica, no culto, na formação da identidade e no cuidado pastoral.

Palavras-chave: Igreja primitiva. Piedade cristã. Oração do Senhor. Sermão no Monte.

INTRODUCTION

On the backdrop of Matthew's extensive presentation of Jesus' teaching in relation to Torah, we find a well-constructed block of teaching on how the higher righteousness expected of the disciples should be manifested in one's attitude toward God. In Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 we are presented with three principle acts of piety (*dikaiousu,nh*) that the recipients in the believing community were expected to practice: almsgiving (*evlehmosu,nh*), prayer (*proseu,comai*) and fasting (*nhsteu,w*). These three cultic rites appear to be paradigmatic in character and are also evidence of the central role they played in the day-to-day religious life of the Jews in Jesus and Matthew's milieu. There is a basic admonition against the practice of *oi` u`pokritai*. and the instruction on how these religious practices should be carried out with particular emphasis on the motivation that lies behind these acts. This chapter covers the influence of the texts on the three

principle acts of piety along with the prayer, which seats at the centre of this block of teaching.

2. ON ALMSGIVING, PRAYER, AND FASTING (6:1-6, 16-18)

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’

⁵And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’ (NRSV, 6:1-6)

‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’ (NRSV, 6:16-18)

Matthew 6:1 serves as the introductory statement, which contains the main idea of the pericope. In it the disciples are cautioned against practicing their righteousness before men in order to gain the approval or esteem of others. This introductory verse links the passage with the material that precedes it and in so doing shows how the righteousness of the disciples is to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees with reference to their religious piety. The word

“righteousness” (dikaïosunē) here speaks to doing right before God, conduct which accords with doing the will of God. The devotional actions given in the illustrations that follow emphasize actions that are to be done before God with him as the divine audience who sees the action and bestows his blessing. The disciples pray to God, fast before God, and give alms as a way of demonstrating devotion to God. Another central idea communicated by this introductory verse is that those who perform their piety before others will not receive any reward from God. Origen picks up on the subject of the thoughts that lay behind one’s actions and surmises that evil intentions pollute what would otherwise be just actions. He contends:

But of such a nature are the evil thoughts that sometimes they make worthy of censure even those things which seem good, and which, so far as the judgment of the masses is concerned, are worthy of praise. Accordingly, if we do alms before men, having in our thoughts the design of appearing to men philanthropic, and of being honoured because of philanthropy, we receive the reward from men; and, universally, everything that is done with the consciousness in the doer that he will be glorified by men, has no reward from Him who beholds in secret, and renders the reward to those who are pure, in secret. So, too, therefore, is it with apparent purity if it is influenced by considerations of vain glory or love of gain... (*Comm. Matt.* 11.15)

Origen infers from the text the principle that all actions carried out with the desire to be praised by human beings will receive no further reward from God. Acts of piety must be done with a pure heart. He raises the theme of purity because of the discussion on the issue of defilement in Matthew 15:10-20. There is also a possible link back to the sixth beatitude on the pure in heart. Persons with a pure heart do not seek human approval, but rather do their acts of righteousness before God. The interpretation goes to the heart of the action in a similar way the passages on murder and adultery in the antitheses do. Human beings see publicly and reward publicly, but God sees in secret and also rewards in secret. People see that which is outward but God sees the heart. To entertain a desire for vainglory is to possess only an appearance of purity.

Theophilus sees in the texts a teaching against boasting. This serves as a safeguard against becoming a people-pleaser. He writes, “And those that do good it teaches not to boast, lest they become men-pleasers. For it says: Let not your left hand know what your right hand does” (*Autol.* 3.14). For him the prohibition concerning the left and right hand captures the essence of the exhortation on the right practice of piety. Moreover, he sees in the teaching, a countercultural ethos and a distinguishing mark of what it means to be a Christian.

Cyprian also referenced the text following a similar understanding to Theophilus that the Christian’s labour must not be with great show and boasting. He writes:

In the Gospel according to Matthew: Let not your left hand know what your right hand does, that your alms may be in secret; and your Father, which sees in secret, shall render to you. Also in the same place: When you do an alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the streets and in the synagogues, that they may be glorified of men. Verily I say unto you, They have fulfilled their reward. (*Test.* 3.40)

The fact that these sayings form part of his summary of Christian teachings gives evidence to the central role the text played in his own mind and subsequently that of the individuals and communities who read his work. He reverses the order of the sayings on charity by stating the positive part of the strophe first (6:3) and following it up with the negative part (6:2). In so doing he emphasizes what the Christian does or does not do as against the practice of those who do not follow the Christian way.

The few citations we have looked at so far have focused on the practice of charity. For a citation on the practice of prayer we turn to Clement of Alexandria. He explains:

And if you pray in the closet, as the Lord taught, to worship in spirit, your management will no longer be solely occupied about the house, but also about the soul, what must be bestowed on it, and how, and how much; and what must be laid aside and treasured up in it; and when it ought to be produced, and to whom. (*Strom.* 1.6)

The use reflects some creativity. He connects the discipline of closet prayer to worshipping in the spirit (c.f. Jn. 4.23). To pray

in the closet is to draw oneself away from the possible distraction of the mundane and temporal and to focus attention on the inner world of the soul and that which pertains to that sphere and in so doing apply oneself to learning and the pursuit of perfection in virtue. So understood, closet prayer becomes a means through which one can worship in the spirit.

The teaching on secret prayer receives almost identical treatment by Tertullian and Cyprian. Tertullian exhorts:

And so, blessed brethren, let us consider His heavenly wisdom: first, touching the precept of praying secretly, whereby He exacted man's faith, that he should be confident that the sight and hearing of Almighty God are present beneath roofs, and extend even into the secret place; and required modesty in faith, that it should offer its religious homage to Him alone, whom it believed to see and to hear everywhere. (Tertullian, *Or.* 1)

And Cyprian postulates:

Moreover, in His teaching the Lord has bidden us to pray in secret— in hidden and remote places, in our very bed-chambers— which is best suited to faith, that we may know that God is everywhere present, and hears and sees all, and in the plenitude of His majesty penetrates even into hidden and secret places, (*Dom. or.* 4, 5)

Taken together these citations show that the text was understood to affirm the omnipresence of God. Christians can confidently pray everywhere with the awareness that God is present and attends to their prayers. Such awareness served to foster a sense of immediacy in prayer. For Cyprian, this awareness should lead one to pray quietly instead of being loud in prayer. Indeed, one can pray from the heart without words. Tertullian understands that with secret prayer the one praying is able to offer worship exclusively to God.

The Didachist, like Jesus and subsequently Matthew, appears equally interested in distinguishing the religious behaviour of those within his community against that of an opposing group—the hypocrites. The writer exhorts:

And do not keep your fasts with the hypocrites. For they fast on Monday and Thursday; but you should fast on Wednesday and Friday. Nor should you pray like the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his gospel, you should pray as follows: (*Did.* 8.1-2)

What can be safely said about the reference is that it provides further evidence of concerns about the proper practice of almsgiving, prayer and fasting in the second half of the first century within *Didache's* community for which the material in the Sermon on the Mount provides primary material for guidance and instruction. The situation concerning the day of fasting, however, is not evident in the Sermon on the Mount, but they share the interest in making a distinction between rival religious communities, serving to delegitimize one and set the true way for the other.

Irenaeus, wrestling with the issue of justice relating to property that Gentile Christians acquired while living in materialism sees the fulfilment of a redemptive purpose. Through the commands to give alms, God works things out that wealth gained under ungodly circumstances can now serve a good purpose and thereby work things out in a manner consistent with justice. He posits:

For, because He knew that we would make a good use of our substance which we should possess by receiving it from another, He says, He that has two coats, let him impart to him that has none; and he that has meat, let him do likewise. And, For I was an hungered, and you gave Me meat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was naked and you clothed Me. And, When you do your alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does. And we are proved to be righteous by whatsoever else we do well, redeeming, as it were, our property from strange hands. (*Haer.* 4.30.3)

He connects the prohibition of Matthew 6:3 with other texts on giving (Luke 3:11 and Matthew 25:35-36). His usage of the text is dictated by his writing purpose to justify the actions of the Israelites in taking property from the Egyptians and his comparison with Christians who benefit from wealth obtained as heathen. As such there is no preoccupation with giving in secret. This does not mean that he does not also understand the text in that way. If anything,

we can conclude that the usage of the writer plays a key role in the process of interpretation and application.

Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting played an integral role in the religious practice of worshippers in late Judaism and all throughout the first century and early second century Christianity with almsgiving apparently holding superiority among these three main acts of Jewish piety. Concern about the right practice of these actions occupied the minds of both Jews and early Christians. Even with the Gospels in circulation early Christian literature reflects beliefs in almsgiving, prayer and fasting that can be traced back to material that predate the synoptic Gospels. The books of *Tobit*² and *Sirach*³ may have played an instrumental role in perpetuating basic doctrines on these practices, which were further supplemented by sayings of Jesus on this matter and Matthew's continued use in his context.

3. AGAINST BABBLING PRAYER (6:7-8)

'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.
⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.' (NRSV, 6:7-8)

Matthew, following the general pattern in verses 2-4, 5-6, and 16-18 of stating a prohibition of a negative behaviour followed by a command of a positive contrast highlights the Lord's Prayer as a positive contrast to wordy prayer. Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian recognized this emphasis on the Lord's Prayer being a short prayer. Tertullian observes:

Further, since wisdom succeeded in the following precept, let it in like manner appertain unto faith, and the modesty of faith, that we think not that the Lord must be approached with a train of words, who, we are certain, takes unsolicited foresight for His own. And yet that very brevity— and let this make for the third grade of wisdom— is supported on the

² Tobit 4:7,16; 12:8-9

³ The book of Sirach is replete with references to almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. See Sirach 7:10 for an example where at least two of these are mentioned together: See also Sirach 7:14.

substance of a great and blessed interpretation, and is as diffuse in meaning as it is compressed in words. (*Or. 1*)

The point of the text is simple for Tertullian. God knows what is needed beforehand without the need for notification in prayer and as such should not be approached with many words. The Lord's Prayer in his mind betrays profound brevity. Despite the shortness of the Prayer its meaning covers a wide subject matter.

Origen applied the prohibition against babbling both to the quality or content of the prayer and the length of the petitions. He exhorts:

When we pray let us not babble but use godly speech. We babble when, without scrutiny of ourselves or of the devotional words we are sending up, we speak of the corrupt in deed or word or thought, things which are mean and reprehensible and alien to the incorruptibleness of the Lord. He, then, that babbles in prayer is in a synagogic disposition worse than any yet described and in a harder way than those who are at broadway corners, preserving not as much as a vestige even of acting in goodness. (*Or. 12*)

The one who babbles according to Origen prays for that which is inconsistent with the nature of God who is incorruptible. Though he understands the text to speak negatively against the practice of the heathen, he connects babbling prayer to the prayers of the synagogue casting condemnation on prayer offered at the Jewish place of prayer. Thus the text was used as a polemic against the Jews as is the case with the three parallel strophes that form part of its literary context. Continuing on the interpretation of babbling as speaking to the content the prayer, Origen posits that to be ignorant of heavenly petitions and to focus request for material and external things is a form of babbling. He writes:

For according to the passage in the Gospel only heathen babble, being quite insensible of great or heavenly petitions and therefore sending up every prayer for the material and the external. To a babbling heathen, then, is he like who asks for things below from the Lord who dwells in heaven and above the heights of the heavens. (*Or. 12*)

This is not to say that Origen believes that request should not be made for earthly needs, rather prayer must be made with the understanding that heavenly things are of greater value and reflects our deeper internal needs. Despite understanding the warning against babbling in terms of the content of prayer, he also recognizes the more obvious exhortation against wordy prayers present in the text. He concludes:

Therefore no one shall escape Sin as the result of wordiness, and no one who thinks to be heard as the result of wordiness can be heard. For this reason we ought not to make our prayers like heathen babbling or wordiness or other practice after the likeness of the serpent, for the God of saints, being a Father, knows of what things His children have need, since such things are worthy of Fatherly knowledge. (Origen, Or. 12)

Cyprian exhorts his congregation to modesty and discipline in prayer. By this he means that one must pray with a quiet and controlled voice and with the modesty of brief prayer. His basic understanding is that God listens to the heart and does not need prayer to be loud or wordy in order to respond. He contends:

And when we meet together with the brethren in one place, and celebrate divine sacrifices with God's priest, we ought to be mindful of modesty and discipline—not to throw abroad our prayers indiscriminately, with unsubdued voices, nor to cast to God with tumultuous wordiness a petition that ought to be commended to God by modesty; for God is the hearer, not of the voice, but of the heart. (Dom. or. 4)

The general interpretation of the early ecclesial writers cited here show a general understanding that the logion against babbling prayer discouraged verbosity in prayer as a means of being heard by God. The brevity of the Lord's Prayer was also noted as part of its profound characteristic. One would expect that such an understanding of the text would encourage concise praying and brevity of ecclesial prayers. In the least, believers we encouraged to focus on the quality of prayer and the heart of prayer rather than on the verbosity of prayer. An examination of early Christian prayers⁴ shows that these

⁴ See A. HAMMAN, ed. *Early Christian Prayers*, Trans. Walter Mitchell (London: Longmans, 1961).

prayers varied in length from brief to very long.

4. THE LORD'S PRAYER (6:9-13)

'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.'(NRSV,
6:9-13)

We now turn our attention to the Lord's Prayer which seats at the centre of the section on almsgiving, prayer and fasting and also serves as the centre of the Sermon on the Mount as a whole. We will focus our attention here not so much on a detailed interpretation of the Lord's Prayer in the period of focus.⁵ The analysis includes brief interpretational comments, but places a greater emphasis on seeking to determine how the prayer was used and attempts to discern possible influences on the lives of those who used it in the primitive church. Outside of Matthew, Luke and the Didache, arguably all first century documents, we have to wait until the third century for a full citation of the Lord's Prayer in the works of Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian. We have evidence of partial citations of phrases of the Lord's Prayer in the work of Polycarp, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria.

⁵ For detail analysis see, Frederic H. CHASE, "The Lord's Prayer in the Early Church" in *Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature*, vol. 1 ed. J Armitage ROBINSON (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004) (textual analysis); Kenneth W. STEVENSON, *The Lord's Prayer: A text in Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) (history of interpretation); Jerome H. NEYREY, S. J. *Give God the Glory: Ancient Prayer and Worship in Cultural Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 63-97 (cultural perspective)

The Lord's Prayer played a central role in the prayer life of the community connected to the *Didache*. Christians were expected to pray this prayer three times a day. The *Didache* reads:

Nor should you pray like the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his gospel, you should pray as follows: "Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread [Or: the bread that we need; or: our bread for tomorrow]. And forgive us our debt, as we forgive our debtors. And do not bring us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one [Or: from evil]. For the power and the glory are yours forever." Pray like this three times a day. (*Did.* 8.2-3)

The prayer is found in its longer form here, which presupposes the Matthean form of the Lord's Prayer. Significant is the doxological ending that reflects a liturgical use of the prayer. But what is more important is that it served as a distinguishing mark between Christian prayer and Jewish prayer; Christians pray the Lord's Prayer. The exhortation to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day appears to be a replacement of the Eighteen Benedictions,⁶ the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, which observant Jews would have prayed three times a day in the morning, afternoon and evening. The practice in the community of the *Didache* continues the Jewish tradition of three daily prayer services, but instead the Lord's Prayer becomes the central prayer.

The practice of praying the prayer three times daily meant that the Lord's Prayer would gain much currency as an integral part of the community's liturgy and prayer experience, a state of affairs that has persisted throughout the history of the Church. Moreover, given its indispensable status, the Lord's Prayer formed a critical part of the community's discipleship and spiritual formation.

Tertullian's commentary on the Lord's Prayer is based on the Matthean version and does not include the doxological ending we have in the *Didache*. He sees in the Lord's Prayer the giving of a new "form of prayer," (*Or.* 1, 7) the new wineskin or new garment (cf. Mt. 9:17), which in content constitutes an "epitome of the whole Gospel" (*Or.* 1). To speak of a new form of prayer is to presuppose at least

⁶ Also known as the *Shemoneh Esreh* ('Eighteen'), the *Tephillah*, (Prayer) or the *Amidah* ('Standing') because the prayer is said standing

a basic shift in content and/or method of praying. The exhortations, which precede the Lord's Prayer in versus 6-7, reflect in his mind a "method of praying" (*Or.* 1). He evidently sees secret and concise prayer as the preferred ways of praying. Secret prayer is an affirmation of the omnipresence of God and recognition that the true audience of one's prayers is the Lord. Tertullian's defence of the brevity of the prayer may be an indication that the prayer was prayed verbatim or in a fixed form contrary to the Jewish way of praying the *Amidah*. He abridges the Lord's Prayer as follows:

In summaries of so few words, how many utterances of the prophets, the Gospels, the apostles— how many discourses, examples, parables of the Lord, are touched on! How many duties are simultaneously discharged! The honour of God in the Father; the testimony of faith in the Name; the offering of obedience in the Will; the commemoration of hope in the Kingdom; the petition for life in the Bread; the full acknowledgment of debts in the prayer for their Forgiveness; the anxious dread of temptation in the request for Protection. What wonder? God alone could teach how he wished Himself prayed to. The religious rite of prayer therefore, ordained by Himself, and animated, even at the moment when it was issuing out of the Divine mouth, by His own Spirit, ascends, by its own prerogative, into heaven, commending to the Father what the Son has taught. (*Or.* 7)

Tertullian also recognizes a divinely given order of the petition in the Lord's Prayer. Such an understanding speaks to the high place the Prayer was given in his mind and the likelihood that he along with his church community would seek to copy the order of the Prayer as a legitimate way. He observes:

But how gracefully has the Divine Wisdom arranged the order of the prayer; so that after things heavenly— that is, after the Name of God, the Will of God, and the Kingdom of God— it should give earthly necessities also room for a petition! (*Or.* 6)

The church followed the pattern of focusing petition on God first and only after would prayer be made for one's personal needs. To pray in such a way would be to follow the imperative to seek the

kingdom of God first: God's Name, will and Kingdom. The Lord's Prayer is a "Rule of Prayer" given by Jesus (Or. 8). It is the foundation upon which all other prayers must be built, the mother of all Christian prayers to which other prayers must conform or follow as a model. He proposes:

Since, however, the Lord, the Foreseer of human necessities, said separately, after delivering His Rule of Prayer, Ask, and you shall receive; and since there are petitions which are made according to the circumstances of each individual; our additional wants have the right— after beginning with the legitimate and customary prayers as a foundation, as it were— of rearing an outer superstructure of petitions, yet with remembrance of the Master's precepts. (Or. 4)

The instruction on prayer provided here by Tertullian speaks to personal requests made to God by each person and as such it is very likely that the context in which these instructions are to be applied is private prayer. But it should be noted that the discipline of prayer could also be practiced privately in public gatherings. What is envisioned here is that Christians would pray the Lord's Prayer in a fixed format such as what we have in the Sermon on the Mount following which other prayers would be offered in keeping with the order or pattern of the Lord's Prayer. The prayer would also have been prayed in a fixed format in community gathered for worship and Christian fellowship. It is not necessary for one to argue for the use of the Prayer as an outline as against it being used verbatim as Gordon Bahr⁷ has done. It is not a case of one way or the other. The very nature of the prayer would in all likelihood mean that it would have been used both ways with the use of the prayer as an outline being more suited to personal prayer.

For Tertullian's church community, the code of prayer goes beyond the practice of the religious rite of prayer and encapsulates Christian life. This understanding of the prayer reflects the view that the prayer captures the heart of the Canon of Scripture and is a canon in its own right. The Lord's Prayer constitutes Christian instruction,

⁷ Gordon J. BAHR, "The Use of the Lord's Prayer in the Primitive Church," *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 84, No. 2 (Jun., 1965): 153-159.

worship, witness, piety, and dependence upon God. It is easy to see how the Prayer would have been the most recited portion of the Sermon on the Mount and the Christian Bible as a whole.

Tertullian, like the Didachist before him, holds to an anti-Jewish interpretation of the Lord's Prayer in its reference to the Heavenly Father. The first clause, apart from its veneration of God, provides a disapproval of the Jewish rejection of the Father as revealed by Jesus. Moreover, he interprets the Lord's Prayer through a Christocentric lens. By invoking the Father "the Son is invoked," "the Son is now the Father's new name," the will of the Father is to walk in the Discipline taught and modelled by Jesus Christ, the bread that we ask for is also Christ in a spiritual sense, and Jesus himself was tempted by the devil providing instruction for followers of the Way.

Origen receives the prayer in Matthew and Luke as originating with the Lord. This is not a matter, from his perspective, requiring investigation. What he sought to do was explore the relationship between the form found in Matthew and Luke. Origen while acknowledging the similarities between the two, points out that they also betray differences. He observes the differences in background and literary context and postulates the possibility of the same prayer, but asserts, "perhaps it is better that the prayers be regarded as different, with certain portions in common" (*Or.* 12). In his commentary on the Lord's Prayer, Origen uses the form found in Matthew rather than the one found in Luke. The Lord's Prayer appears to have had a profound impact on Origen's understanding of the subject of prayer. He was concerned with the content of prayer and the manner in which we should pray. He laments, "Of these two things the one, I mean the 'what we ought' of prayer, is the language of the prayer, while the 'as we ought' is the disposition of him who prays" (*Or.* 1).

In seeking to elucidate the subject of prayer, it is to the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount that he turns for instruction and understanding. The Lord's Prayer, for Origen, is essentially "a pattern for right prayer" (*Or.* 12). He sees in the Lord's Prayer a paradigm shift in the posture that the Prayer invites one to display; "sure and unchangeable sonship is not to be seen in the ancient people" (*Or.* 13). He writes:

Our Father in Heaven. It deserves a somewhat careful observation of the so-called Old Testament to discover whether it is possible to find anywhere in it a prayer of one who addresses God as Father. For though I have made examination to the best of my ability, I have up to the present failed to find one. I do not say that God is not spoken of as Father or that accounted believers in God are not called sons of God, but that I have not yet found in prayer that confidence in calling God Father which the Savior has proclaimed. (Or. 13)

Luz posits, "There is evidence in Jewish prayers of many ways of addressing God as Father, but not as abba. Thus the choice of this address for God is unusual."⁸ Is there anything else that informs Origen's understanding beyond the absence of God as Father in the prayers found in the Hebrew Scriptures? What about the references to God as father in Jewish prayers? Kittel propounds:

As concerns the usage of Jesus, the probability is that He employed the word **ἄββα** not merely where it is expressly attested (Mk. 14:36) but in all cases, and particularly in address to God, where the Evangelists record Him as saying **ὁ πατήρ, πάτερ, ὁ πατήρ μου, πάτερ μου**, and even perhaps **πάτερ ἡμῶν**. In so doing He applies to God a term which must have sounded familiar and disrespectful to His contemporaries because used in the everyday life of the family.⁹

Origen encouraged and practiced prayer both in private and communal settings. He provides guidance for the practice of prayer both in the private setting of the home and the church. The place of personal prayer in the home should be peaceful, reverent and holy.¹⁰ The place of the believers' fellowship is particularly special for him. To gather in church for prayer is to gather in an assembly of believers, angelic being and the spirits of the saints who are absent and also those deceased. Origen suggests a fivefold order of prayer beginning and ending with ascribing glory to God. Within this inclusio is thanksgiving, confession, which includes asking for healing and

⁸ LUZ, Matthew 1-7, 314.

⁹ G. KITTEL; G. W. BROMILEY; G. FRIEDRICH (eds.). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 5-6.

¹⁰ ORIGEN, *De oratione*, 20.

forgiveness, and petitions. He proposes:

In the beginning and opening of prayer, *glory is to be ascribed* according to one's ability to God, through Christ who is to be glorified with Him, and in the Holy Spirit who is to be proclaimed with Him. Thereafter, one should put *thanksgivings*: common thanksgivings—into which he introduces benefits conferred upon men in general—and thanksgivings for things which he has personally received from God. After thanksgiving it appears to me that one ought to become a powerful accuser of one's own sins before God and ask first for healing with a view to being released from the habit which brings on sin, and secondly for forgiveness for past actions. After *confession* it appears to me that one ought to append as a fourth element the *asking* for the great and heavenly things, both personal and general, on behalf of one's nearest and dearest. And last of all, one should bring prayer to an end ascribing *glory to God* through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. As I already said, I have found these points scattered throughout the scriptures. (Or. 20, emphasis added)

The general pattern reflects a focus on God, then a focus on human condition and need, and close with doxology. Tertullian has already referred to the purpose of prayer as “veneration of God” and “petition for man” (Or.1). The order proposed by Origen reflects a long held tradition of starting and ending prayer with God as the focus. The addition of the doxology to the Lord's Prayer in the Didache is a reflection of such a practice. The order basically agrees with the Lord's Prayer but does not seek to follow it accurately. We saw earlier that Tertullian receives the order of the Lord's Prayer as divinely given but Origen, though he sees a similar order to that of Tertullian's, does not see the need to follow the order in a strict sense. Indeed, his proposed order conforms to the pattern of the Lord's Prayer.

Moreover, Origen suggests Scriptures one can use to provide content for their prayers in following the outline he has proposed. We have no evidence from his treatise of how the Lord's Prayer would have been used in private settings and in the church. But his view of the Lord's Prayer as an outline for prayer and his proposal of his own prayer outline with suggestions of Scriptures for following the

pattern speak more for openness in the content of the Prayer for Origen's church community. The verbatim use of the Lord's Prayer does not seem to be in view with Origen.

Cyprian receives the Lord's Prayer in Matthew as a "form of praying,"¹¹ and as "the prayer of Christ,"¹² the most spiritual and effectual of all prayers, "a compendium of heavenly doctrine."¹³ That he shared a very high view of the Lord's Prayer is reflected in his words:

For what can be a more spiritual prayer than that which was given to us by Christ, by whom also the Holy Spirit was given to us? What praying to the Father can be more truthful than that which was delivered to us by the Son who is the Truth, out of His own mouth? So that to pray otherwise than He taught is not ignorance alone, but also sin; since He Himself has established, and said, You reject the commandments of God, that you may keep your own traditions.

Cyprian also understood the Lord's Prayer, as a law of prayer. As a law it was binding on Christian and provides the essential content of prayer. But it is not immediately clear exactly how the Prayer would have been used by Cyprian and his church community. He exhorts his church community to pray as Jesus taught. He contends:

It is a loving and friendly prayer to beseech God with His own word, to come up to His ears in the prayer of Christ. Let the Father acknowledge the words of His Son when we make our prayer, and let Him also who dwells within in our breast Himself dwell in our voice. And since we have Him as an Advocate with the Father for our sins, let us, when as sinners we petition on behalf of our sins, put forward the words of our Advocate. For since He says, that whatsoever we shall ask of the Father in His name, He will give us, how much more effectually do we obtain what we ask in Christ's name, if we ask for it in His own prayer!

Does this mean that he along with his church community prayed the Prayer verbatim as they would have received it? His rationale for faithful obedience to praying the Lord's Prayer here

¹¹ CYPRIAN, *De dominica oratione*, 2.

¹² CYPRIAN, *De dominica oratione*, 3.

¹³ CYRPIAN, *Dom. or.*, 9.

pushes the scale of evidence in the direction of a verbatim recital of the Prayer. His community prayed the prayer of Christ using his God's "own word" or "the words of His Son," "the words of our Advocate."

On the contrary, it must be kept in mind that he views the Prayer as a form of praying. In focusing attention on what Christians should pray he provides us a full citation of the Lord's Prayer, which agrees with the Matthean version. For Cyprian the plural form of the Prayer with key phrases such as "our Father," "give us," "forgive us," and "lead us not" are significant. He expects that the Lord's Prayer will be prayed in the context of community worship. Cyprian posits:

Before all things, the Teacher of peace and the Master of unity would not have prayer to be made singly and individually, as for one who prays to pray for himself alone. For we say not My Father, which art in heaven, nor Give me this day my daily bread; nor does each one ask that only his own debt should be forgiven him; nor does he request for himself alone that he may not be led into temptation, and delivered from evil. Our prayer is public and common; and when we pray, we pray not for one, but for the whole people, because we the whole people are one. The God of peace and the Teacher of concord, who taught unity, willed that one should thus pray for all, even as He Himself bore us all in one. (Cyprian Dom. or. 8)

Cyprian understands the Lord's Prayer to advocate that prayer be offered on behalf of the entire Christian community by the congregation. The Lord's Prayer, a communal prayer, fulfils God's purpose of fostering a strong sense of unity within community. The assertion, "Our prayer is public and common" (*publica est nobis et communis oratio*), should be understood as harmonious congregational prayer. Public in the sense that it is the prayer of the gathered church, the baptized people of God and common in the sense of being in one accord, that is, in agreement and in harmony. He gives us a snapshot into a worship service when he writes:

For this reason also the priest, by way of preface before his prayer, prepares the minds of the brethren by saying, Lift up your hearts, that so upon the people's response, We lift them up unto the Lord, he may be reminded that he himself ought to think of nothing

but the Lord. Let the breast be closed against the adversary, and be open to God alone; nor let it suffer God's enemy to approach to it at the time of prayer. (*Dom. or.* 31)

From his statement, we can glean that his church followed well-scripted liturgies led by an officiating minister and which allowed for the participation of the congregation in a harmonious manner. Furthermore, prayer was an essential element of the worship service. Harmonious congregational prayer lends itself more to a fixed prayer. For prayer to be unfixed in a public setting and still common there would need for one to lead out the prayer, in this case a priest, and the rest of the congregation would listen and in some instances provide brief responses.

The liturgy reflected in his comment supports a more fixed form of worship. In such a context, it is very likely the Lord's Prayer was recited in a fixed form by the whole church during congregational worship. We also see evidence that the one leading the congregation in worship prepared other prayers, which would have become standard for congregational worship. We see further evidence of this in Cyprian's condemnation of those who seek "to make another prayer with unauthorized words" (*Unit. eccl.* 17). Bingham rightly posits, "Stated forms of prayer were then allowed in the public service of the Church of Carthage, and probably in the rest of the African Churches."¹⁴ In public gatherings the people prayed common prayers and sang hymns together as if in one voice.

Cyprian's belief that it is sinful to pray in a manner different from what is taught in the Lord's Prayer meant that the Prayer was used also as a guide in the preparation and authorization of other prayers for the church. The petitions in the Lord's Prayer served to inform what is seen as legitimate prayers of the church. It is possible that Cyprian's comment that Jesus "would not have prayer to be made singly and individually" means that the Lord's Prayer was performed mainly in a congregational setting. His churches followed the traditional Jewish prayer times, three times a day at the third, sixth and ninth hour (9am, 12pm, and 3pm), to which he adds morning and sunset prayers. Believers were also encouraged to pray at night. Phillips¹⁵ is

¹⁴ Joseph BINGHAM. *Antiquities of the Christian Church*, vol.4 (London: Oxford, 1840).

¹⁵ L. Edward PHILLIPS. "Prayer in the First Four Centuries," in: *A History of Prayer*:

on point with his observation that, “A great deal of Christian Prayer will remain discernibly Jewish in gesture and pattern throughout this period. On the level of meaning, however, Christian prayer exhibits a great deal of quite rapid evolution.”

The main settings of prayer were private prayer at home and public prayers at church gatherings. Prayer was an essential part of the worship of the church and to pray the Lord’s Prayer or any other prayer that models it, ensures that the Christian community worships is spiritual and in accordance with truth as the Prayer represents the very words of Jesus, the Son of God.

Cyprian also adds his voice to the line of interpretation that the first clause of the prayer with its reference to “our Father” represents a rebuke and condemnation of the Jews who reject Christ. He writes:

A word this, moreover, which rebukes and condemns the Jews, who not only unbelievably despised Christ, who had been announced to them by the prophets, and sent first to them, but also cruelly put Him to death; and these cannot now call God their Father, since the Lord confounds and confutes them... (*Dom. or.* 10)

We see a church still struggling with the old divisions between Jew and Gentile and the impact of that social dynamic on their interpretation of the prayer. The separation of Christianity from Judaism would have further served to inform and strengthen that understanding. The address, “Our Father,” would no doubt have been uttered in communities consisting of both Jew and Gentile and in such cases would have served to break the dividing wall between these ethnic groups and promote unity among social groups in keeping with the Pauline assertion,

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Gal. 3:28-29, NRSV)

From our foregoing analysis, it is reasonable to conclude that the Lord’s Prayer stands as the quintessential text of the New Testament in a manner similar to the Decalogue of the Hebrew

The First to the Fifteenth Century, ed. Roy Hammering (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 31.

Scriptures. The anti-Jewish interpretation of the prayer during the second and third centuries served to foster anti-Jewish rhetoric and to legitimize a largely gentile Christian community as the true people of God. A people who were viewed as being outside the commonwealth of the privileged Jewish nation found in the Lord's Prayer a strong sense of acceptance and belongingness. The prayer had served to bring them into an unprecedented sense of their adoption as children of God in the praying of the "Our Father." Hence, the Lord's Prayer was an essential tool in the identity formation of the emerging Christian community and boundary setting in its polemical use against Jewish theology and Christian heretics.¹⁶

The praying of the Lord's Prayer fulfils the imperatives to love enemy and to pray for the persecutors in the request that God's will be done. He understands that request is being made for the salvation of unbelievers. He exhorts:

And it may be thus understood, beloved brethren, that since the Lord commands and admonishes us even to love our enemies, and to pray even for those who persecute us, we should ask, moreover, for those who are still earth, and have not yet begun to be heavenly, that even in respect of these God's will should be done, which Christ accomplished in preserving and renewing humanity. (Dom. or. 17)

The Lord's Prayer may also be referred to as didactic prayer. The citation of the Lord's Prayer in works such Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians¹⁷, and Clement's *Stromata*¹⁸ shows that in addition to being used as a teaching on prayer, it served as a source of instruction on Christian doctrine and the way of the Christian life-its worship, witness, and communal self-understanding.

The prayer informed the theology of pastoral care in the primitive church. The leadership must seek to be compassionate, merciful, gracious in judgment, and forgiving mindful that as leaders they are also under a debt of sin and in need of the mercy and forgiveness God. Polycarp exhorts:

¹⁶ IRENAEUS, *Adversus haereses*, 5.17.1

¹⁷ POLYCARP, *Poly. Phil.*, 6 and 7.

¹⁸ CLEMENT, *Stromata*, 4.8.

The presbyters also should be compassionate, merciful to all, turning back those who have gone astray, caring for all who are sick, not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always taking thought for what is good before both God and others, abstaining from all anger, prejudice, and unfair judgment, avoiding all love of money, not quick to believe a rumor against anyone, not severe in judgment, knowing that we are all in debt because of sin. And so if we ask the Lord to forgive us, we ourselves also ought to forgive; for we are before the eyes of the Lord and of God, and everyone must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, each rendering an account of himself. (*Poly. Phil.* 6.1-2)

Bahr's work on the use of the Lord's Prayer in the Ancient Church seems to be grounded on the erroneous assumption that to put together evidence from the early ecclesial writers is like completing a puzzle. This assumes that what we have is one homogeneous puzzle. But one cannot assume that the Lord's Prayer was used in the same way with all Christians and church communities. We must keep in mind the heterogeneous nature of the emerging church.

The Lord's Prayer was one of the most influential of text in the early church informing the theology and practice of church communities. Its significance to the primitive church can be compared to the place of the Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures. It was used as source material for discipleship, polemics, worship, identity formation and pastoral care. The Lord's Prayer was an essential element of the worship life of Christian communities and was used both as an outline for praying and in a fixed formed of words in congregational worship. In some Jewish churches, the Lord's Prayer replaced the Amidah as the main prayer and was said three times a day. The church widely held a high view of the Prayer and used it as the standard against which other prayers were written for congregational worship and the pattern for praying in general. By and large, the Lord's Prayer was a communal prayer but it is almost certain that it would have been followed in both fixed and open forms in private settings and at times when believers were unable to congregate for prayer at set prayer times. Both Origen and Tertullian had already discerned a prescribed outline in the Lord's Prayer with Origen suggesting

Scripture passages to help fill that outline. The outline suggested by Origen lends itself to private as well as congregational prayer, hence, the Prayer provided the essential content guide of prayer for both private and congregational prayer.

5. ON FORGIVENESS OF SIN (6:14-15)

‘For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.’ (NRSV, 6:14-15)

The logion on conditional forgiveness of sin links back to the petition on forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer but is powerfully illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving servant in 18: 23-35. In Mark 11:25 we have a variant form of the saying with some ancient manuscripts adding a close parallel to Matthew 6:15, “But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your trespass” (Mk. 11:26).

The earliest evidence of a direct usage of this text we have is in the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians. Polycarp exhorts:

The presbyters also should be compassionate, merciful to all, turning back those who have gone astray, caring for all who are sick, not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always taking thought for what is good before both God and others, abstaining from all anger, prejudice, and unfair judgment, avoiding all love of money, not quick to believe a rumor against anyone, not severe in judgment, knowing that we are all in debt because of sin. And so if we ask the Lord to forgive us, we ourselves also ought to forgive; for we are before the eyes of the Lord and of God, and everyone must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, each rendering an account of himself. (*Poly. Phil.* 6.1-2)

Polycarp recognizes the connection between the logion and the fifth petition in the Lord’s Prayer. The application falls within the purview of pastoral care. The petition for forgiveness together with this logion on the forgiveness of sin should serve as an apt reminder that even the presbyter is not exempt from sin and in light of their own need for forgiveness should maintain a posture of compassion and mercy towards those who have wandered away from the flock

or fallen into the way of sin. Polycarp connects the logion to the judgment-seat of Christ. The message here is clear, all including leaders must appear before Christ to give account and will desire mercy and gentle at such a judgment. The idea that the actions one desires should also be exhibited is one that is ever present in the logia of Matthew 7:2 (on judging) and 7:12 (the Golden Rule).

Cyprian made this connection. He understood the logion to communicate the idea that human forgiveness is a prerequisite for divine forgiveness and connects the logion back to the worshipper at the altar in Matthew 5:23-24 and forward to the saying on measure for measure in Matthew 7:2 (c.f Mk. 4:24; Lk. 6:38). He posits:

He has clearly joined herewith and added the law, and has bound us by a certain condition and engagement, that we should ask that our debts be forgiven us in such a manner as we ourselves forgive our debtors, knowing that that which we seek for our sins cannot be obtained unless we ourselves have acted in a similar way in respect of our debtors. Therefore also He says in another place, With what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again. And the servant who, after having had all his debt forgiven him by his master, would not forgive his fellow-servant, is cast back into prison; because he would not forgive his fellow-servant, he lost the indulgence that had been shown to himself by his lord. And these things Christ still more urgently sets forth in His precepts with yet greater power of His rebuke. When you stand praying, says He, forgive if you have anything against any, that your Father which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive you your trespasses. There remains no ground of excuse in the day of judgment, when you will be judged according to your own sentence; and whatever you have done, that you also will suffer. (Dom. or. 23)

What is interesting though is that although he is commenting on the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, the form of the saying on forgiveness of sins that he uses is a variant of Mark 11:25-26. It is likely that Cyprian uses the Markan form of the saying because of its direct connection to activity of praying, "Whenever you stand praying,

forgive...” This represents a strong connection to Matthew who places the logion right after the Lord’s Prayer. Like Polycarp before his time, Cyprian also connects the logion to the Day of Judgment. For him believers will be judged according to their own sentence, those who have been forgiving can expect divine forgiving, but those who have been unforgiving should expect to suffer the judgment of God without mercy.

SUMMARY

The ritual instructions on the three principle act of piety in Matthew 6: almsgiving, prayer and fasting did not represent new religious practices for the ancient church, but rather emphasized the right heart attitude and way of doing righteousness as proper service to God. This right action done in the right way and for the right reasons stands in opposition to the show of piety by the Jews and those regarded as heretics. In this regard the instructions served a polemical purpose in its condemnation of rival religious groups. Additionally, we see the ritual instructions shaping the identity of the worship community and serving a legitimizing function for them as they highlight the way of life of the people and distinguish them as the true worshippers of God.

True piety is ultimately done before God, in secret, and with an expectation of reward from God-not men. There is no lasting value in doing piety publicly before people for the purpose of drawing attention. The hypocrites referred to in the text take on a much larger designation probably from an intended restrictive group of Jews to all Jews who reject the message of the Gospel (represented by the synagogue) and extended to include all heretics, Jews and Gentiles alike.¹⁹

The Lord’s Prayer, as we have seen, played a critical role in the spiritual formation of Christian communities. The Matthean form of the prayer, probably due to its longer form, featured more than the related version in Luke. The major works on Prayer by Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian all use the Matthean form of the prayer to answer questions about the content and method of praying. The Prayer was

¹⁹ LUZ, Matthew 1-7, sees a general negative type behind the pre-Matthean tradition presumably later connected to the Pharisees and Scribes by Matthew.

used both as an outline for prayer and in a fixed form. Moreover, the view that the Lord's Prayer captures the heart of the Gospel was held by the writers of the early church. The early interpreters understood the forgiveness of others as an essential condition for one to receive forgiveness from God. The saying on the forgiveness of sins was connected to the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer and the eschatological judgment is also in view when the early church thought of the forgiveness to be granted by God in the saying on forgiveness.

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