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SERIES: The Shape of Prayer
MESSAGE: How Not To Pray
PASSAGE: Matthew 6:1,5-8
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

A few years ago, a survey was conducted among committed Christians, and the question was asked for the Christians to rate their level of satisfaction in their prayer life—how satisfied are you in your prayer life?—and the vast majority of believers responded by saying they are only moderately satisfied, moderately satisfied with the state of their prayer life. Two percent said they are very satisfied, and maybe we might all question whether those people struggle with pride, saying hey, 2% very satisfied. Vast majority Christians, only moderately at best.

As believers, we know that prayer is important. We know that we are supposed to pray, but I think we can all also admit that we struggle with prayer. So I ask you this morning, if you were to rate the quality of your prayer life, how would you rate it? If I asked you to turn to your neighbor right now and said, hey, pick someone you don't know and talk about how satisfied you are in your prayer life, would that be something you would look forward to? Or would that be something that you would dread?

Surely there are some of us who would say, man, my prayer life is thriving, and that is a wonderful thing. We have something to learn from you. I think many of us, though, would probably say, I feel guilt in my prayer life. I just don't know that I do it enough. All of us probably have some mixed reaction to what would be stirred up in us if we were going to talk about our prayer life with someone else.

Prayer can be difficult. It can be incredibly challenging. And I think all too often that leads many of us as Christians to essentially abandon the effort to explore prayer and to deepen our life of prayer. But there is a better way. There is a different solution. And that's what we want to look at all summer as we study the life of prayer by looking at the Lord's Prayer in Matthew chapter 6. So open your Bibles with me to Matthew chapter 6, and we'll take a look at verses 1 through 8 today, I think is where we are, if I'm remembering off the top of my head.

Now, as you turn there, as you turn to chapter 6, let me just give you a little summary of what happens in Matthew chapter 1 through 5, but especially starting in chapter 3, where Jesus' ministry starts in earnest. Chapter 3, Jesus comes to John the Baptist to be baptized by him. Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, and then immediately when he comes out of the waters of baptism, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Matthew chapter 4, the temptation in the wilderness, this battle with the devil takes place, and Jesus comes out of that battle victorious. He passes the test that Adam and Eve failed. Comes out victorious when faced with the temptations of the devil.

And as he leaves the wilderness, then, Jesus' ministry in the middle of chapter 4 really starts to kick off. He begins to gather disciples to himself. As he's walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee in the region around Capernaum, he sees two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, two fishermen, physical laborers, but also small business owners, because fishermen had thriving businesses in this part of the world at that time. He sees them and he sees something in them, all the potential for them to be great leaders of faith, and so he calls them to himself, gives them the offer, the



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opportunity, to become disciples of his. And Peter and Andrew drop their nets, leave their boat, leave their business, and they partner, they join together, with Jesus—decide to be with him, learning from him, and essentially learning to be like him because that's what disciples do.

As Jesus continues, he sees two more brothers fishing, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. He calls them, and they too drop their nets. They leave the family business, which would have been outrageous in the first century. But they saw in Jesus an opportunity that was way better than keeping up propriety or making sure that they kept the family business running. They saw in Jesus the opportunity to disciple themselves, be under the teaching, under the leadership, of the master teacher. And so James and John dropped their nets and they joined Jesus.

And then Jesus' ministry began with these disciples by his side. He went throughout village to village, throughout the countryside, teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and demonstrating, manifesting, what God's kingdom is like. He did that by healing their sicknesses, healing their diseases, and also casting out demons—demonstrating this is what God is like.

And then because of all of this, a large crowd gathered around him. And that's where we get to in verse chapter 5. A large crowd has gathered around Jesus, and he sits down and he begins to teach them in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, the longest sermon that we have of Jesus's. And right smack dab in the middle, almost the exact center of that sermon, is the Lord's Prayer.

Now, why is all that context important? Certainly it's important because just good Bible reading looks at context when we study our Bible. We want to look at where it sits. We want to look at what came before. That's important, just an important principle in terms of reading our Bibles. But this morning, the thing that I want to encourage you to consider and keep in your mind is who the audience is in the Sermon on the Mount. Who was in that crowd?

Sometimes we're bound to think that Jesus was only talking to those who were really great, the really religious, the spiritually elite, but that's not who this crowd was made up of. It was made up of the recently-very-sick, the recently-diseased, the previously demon-possessed people that would have been on the outskirts of society. People who would have been cast out of their villages. Jesus drew them to himself, and they made up the crowd.

Oh, certainly the religious elite were there as well. There's no question about that. But Jesus drew to himself people from every segment of society bakers and homemakers and homebuilders. Everyone was drawn to Jesus and had this opportunity to become a disciple of his. People just like you and me. No matter what you do, whether you are a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor, a baker—you could have been in that crowd, hearing the call of Jesus as he taught about the kingdom of God.

So why is that important for us? It's important because we need to remember that prayer is for everyone. It's not merely for the religious professionals, it's not for the spiritually elite, it is for everyone. This teaching went out to everyone.

The other thing we need to keep in mind is that prayer is for people who aren't necessarily advanced in their spiritual life. Everyone, all of us when we come to Jesus, we start to learn about him and life with God and we start to learn about a life of prayer—all of us start as beginners. We are novices. Very green. We don't ever need to be ashamed of that. That's where we have to begin.

So that means for us as we proceed forward, all of us need to be aware that everything that is required to enter into a life of fullness of prayer has been given to us. If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, you meet all the prerequisites to grow and engage in a deepening life of prayer.



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So Jesus teaches on the kingdom in Matthew chapter 5, and then we get to Matthew chapter 6, where his focus on prayer begins. Matthew chapter 6, verse 1, Jesus says:

1 Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father, who is in heaven.

So before Jesus gets to the familiar words that we call the Lord's prayer, he begins by giving some teaching on how not to pray. How not to pray. He begins that by saying "beware." Beware is a strong word. It means something like be on guard, be on the alert, keep watch, stay focused. Beware was used in the ancient world also as a word for a captain of a ship. It was a nautical term. And the person that was steering the ship needed to beware, to make sure they were keeping that ship on alignment, headed towards the proper destination. They had to be alert, be on guard.

My oldest son just turned 16 two months ago, and every time he gets in the car, what goes through my head is, "beware." Be on alert, be on guard. Don't be distracted. Don't pick up your phone. Stay focused. So Jesus says "beware," and then specifically, he says that we are to beware or be on guard about how we practice our righteousness. How we practice our righteousness.

Now that phrase simply means how we live out our faith. The way we engage in our pursuit of God, in our pursuit of Jesus Christ. We all know there are very good things that we are to do. We talked last week about how we are to be intentional. There are very good things that we are to do, but we need to ensure that we do them in the proper way.

See, the danger that we face as believers is that sometimes we can do things, but we can do them for the wrong reason. We're doing something like living out our faith, practicing our righteousness to use this phrase, right now. We gather together. We come to church. We worship, we pray together. We encourage one another. We sit under the teaching of God's word. These are good things.

So that raises a question, why are we to be on guard? And the question comes down to motivation. Or to beware of our motivation. To beware, be on guard, that we don't engage in very good things with an improper motivation, that we'll do it to gain the notice or the attention of others. That's the temptation. Our motivation isn't to be to make sure other people see us. What should it be? It should be on the reward that comes from God.

Now, we'll talk more about that as this teaching goes on, but essentially what Jesus is saying is that there are people who pray and they're praying with a motivation simply to be seen. But disciples of Jesus, kingdom prayer is focused on being seen by God and God alone. God is the primary motivator. If my motivation is to have others look at me, then it's going to be very difficult to keep God as my primary focus. And that's what Jesus is calling his disciples to. As we continue, he's going to unpack that more.

So in verses 2 to 4, Jesus turns to one practice of righteousness, which is giving to the poor. Then when we get to verse 5, he turns back to the subject of prayer. He says:

5 When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites;

So a couple things to notice. First, notice that Jesus says when you pray—not if you pray—but when you pray. His assumption is just that his disciples will pray. But when they pray, do not pray—do not be like—the hypocrites. So the question is, who does he have in mind when he mentions hypocrites? All of us, I think, would say that in our life of faith, one of the last things we ever want to hear anyone say to us is that we are hypocrites, we're hypocritical.



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Now, Jesus used this term often, and he used it in order to call, to rebuke, the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes, the people who were the religious elite, the professional religious people. He called them hypocrites often. But I think also, as we look at this teaching, we need to think of this word hypocrite in a more general sense, because it's something that we are to beware of. Not all of us are going to become professional religious people, but this temptation towards hypocrisy still is something that is very real for each of us.

So in a general sense, here's what a hypocrite is: a hypocrite is a pretender. A faker. A counterfeit. Someone who acts. A hypocrite is someone that knows all the things to do, all the outward signs to put forth, so that everyone looking will think that person is really righteous. They pray a certain way. Maybe they take on a certain posture when they worship. Now, those things aren't bad in and of themselves, but the question is, what is the motivation behind those things? Hypocrites fake it and they do so for the praise of others. They do so for the praise of others.

So Jesus continues in verse 5, we'll read that part again, he says:

5 When you pray, you're not to be like the hypocrites [the fakes, the actors]; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that [here's their motivation, so that] they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

So the motivation of the hypocrite is to let everyone see them. The motivation is to be seen, to be viewed as impressive to others. And so they do things that would be very common in the first century world. They would go out on the street corner, they'd pray, and often in the first century, they prayed out loud with their hands uplifted. Everyone would see, it'd be a public display. And what Jesus is saying is because that is their motivation, they actually get what they are looking for. They get their reward in full. What they are looking for, what they are ultimately seeking, is the praise of people. Let's call them in our social media world "religious likes." They're getting a lot of likes. And that's the point. That's what they want. That's their reward. They get what they're seeking.

But Jesus wants his followers, his disciples, to be mindful—there is a better way, and there is a better reward that far outpaces the likes of the general public. That's where he turns in verse 6. He says:

6 But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

To go into secret and to pray to the Father who is in secret is the core opposite of what the hypocrite does. The hypocrite—the pretender, the fake, the actor—ensures, aims to make sure, that all of his religious efforts, her religious efforts, are seen by people so that they get praise from people. But that's not how disciples of Jesus, that's not how kingdom prayer, works.

Now, what's interesting about this passage, about verse 6, is that we live in a time where we could take Jesus's words quite literally. When he says go into your inner room, close your door, do these things in secret, we do live in a world where that is very possible. We can take that literally. I know people that say "this is my prayer closet, this is where I pray." We live in a world with houses and apartments that are big enough, that are private enough, that are so well built, that even if we go into one room and we pray out loud, the chances are people in the next room may not even hear us. Certainly the people in the next house or the next apartment aren't going to hear us.

So we can take this quite literally, but we need to keep in mind that when Jesus spoke these words, privacy was at a premium. These people in this world did not live a very private life. They lived a



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very public life. They lived on top of each other, essentially. Houses were very open. The city was very condensed. And in fact, the inner room that Jesus is talking about, the one that would have a door that could close, was probably just a storeroom where they might store crops. Pretty tight. What that tells us is that Jesus was less concerned about the location, the architecture, than he was about the heart. A heart that is willing to go into secret, to pray before God and God alone—whether that be in the middle of a coffee shop in a crowded city or out in the middle of nowhere or in a closet—the point is the posture of the heart.

Jesus says, don't pray, don't pray to impress others. Pray knowing, motivated by, the fact that in Christ, you have God's attention. God sees. God hears you. You've been brought into relationship with him. That in and of itself is a reward. The richness of life with God is the reward that far outpaces the praise of the public.

We live in a world that faces—we face certain temptations as disciples. There are certain aspects of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in the 21st century that create challenges for us. One of them is that we live in a world that, I already mentioned, we live in a world where it's possible to live very privately. And when we are called to be disciples, we're called to be a part of a community. So that poses a particular significant challenge for us.

When I drive home after work, I can drive immediately into my garage. I can lower the garage door, and I essentially, until the next morning, cannot see anyone except my family. And that is a challenge, because that means that there are very significant parts of my life that are absolutely unseen by the whole Christian community. Even those who are in my Life Group, they are unaware of the dynamics in my household, and that presents a challenge, because that means it's very difficult for them to know—how do I treat my wife? How do I treat my kids? It's hard for them to come into my life and challenge me, encourage me, sometimes call me to repent. That is a challenge for us that we need to be mindful of in our world. We actually live in a way where we can live very isolated from other believers, and the Christian life is not meant to be an isolated experience.

But ironically, we also live in a world where it is possible to be very private, but also to bring our very private life into the public domain. I can use my phone to make sure that what I do in secret—in a very curated way is seen by everyone. And that is a challenge. It's a challenge for me. If I go have a wonderful time of solitude over at Holmes Lake, I can make sure that hundreds of people know I had a wonderful time of solitude with the Lord. I can do that all on Instagram or Facebook or whatever social media you might prefer. And that poses a significant challenge. Our private pursuit of God can be put, displayed, displayed and put forth, very publicly so that the eyes of the world can look on. And if we are doing that, the question we have to ask ourselves is not that it's bad in and of itself, but we have to ask ourselves, what is our motivation as we do that?

You probably heard the phrase, this philosophical question, if a tree falls in the woods and there's no one there to hear it, did it really make a sound? My friends and I, in order to challenge ourselves to think about whether or not we were putting some of our private devotional life on display for others, would sometimes joke with one another and say, “if you have a quiet time, but you don't post it on Facebook, did it really happen?” Did it really count? Of course it counted. That's a challenge that we face. It's a challenge of our world to chase religious likes, so to speak—to have significant time with the Lord in secret, but to bring those things into public so that everyone else will be impressed. This is a very real challenge for us.

Now, one thing that I think is so interesting about this idea of doing things in secret is, often, if we do something in secret, it often reveals the posture and the motivation of our hearts. There have been times where I've thought, you know, I can tell so-and-so is really struggling, and so I'm not going to tell them it's me—I'm just gonna bless them. Write them a note. I'm gonna make sure it's



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anonymous. I just want them to be blessed. And then I can tell it, really, it was a home run. It really encouraged them. And you know what happens inside of me? Everything in me wants to let them know, hey, it was me! Everything in me wants to tell all the people around me, you'll never believe what I did for so and so. Aren't I great?

Sometimes doing something in secret and then paying attention to whether or not we're content to let it remain in secret—I just did that, it was me and God—can reveal the motivation of our heart. And if I find that my motivation actually is a little inclined towards public praise, I don't intend to say I should feel horrible about that, but that's just something that I can bring before the Lord and say, "Lord, help me. Help me do these things that are good for you and you alone. Help me live before an audience of one, knowing that you see you here. Me and you."

Principle number one. How not to pray? Don't pray with the eye, the motivation, to draw the attention of others in order to impress them. As we move on to verses 7 and 8, Jesus gives us this second principle. He says:

7 And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose they will be heard for their many words.

Don't pray with meaningless repetition like the Gentiles. Meaningless repetition is essentially the piling up of lots and lots of words, but lots of words that don't have much thought behind them. It can also mean just rambling, maybe, even just repeating something over and over like a mantra and thinking that maybe God will listen if we just keep repeating it.

Now, we know that this was the way that the pious among the pagan people, among the Gentiles, the Greeks, this is often the way they prayed. They'd come before their god or gods, and they would mount up a pile of glorious words, heaping praise on the god or gods, and maybe even loading up significant and praiseworthy title after title after title. And their intent in doing all of this was essentially to obligate the god or gods to answer them. They've done the god a favor. They've heaped up praise upon this god. Now, in response, what the god now owes them is—the god needs to respond to this great blessing of praise that was offered.

At the heart of this motivation, is this idea that maybe we can manipulate God. If I say all the right things, if I really praise him, if I butter him up just right, he's got to bless me. He's gotta give me what I want. Look, after all, how much I—look how much I complimented him. Jesus is warning about that motivation. Disciples of his, kingdom prayers praying to the living God, are not to pray in that way. And here is why. Verse 8, he says:

8 So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

We aren't to pray to impress people. We aren't to pray to coerce God, manipulate God. Why? God already knows. He knows what we need before we ask him. Prayer is not about information giving. It's not as if God is up there saying, "well, I just don't know, don't know what Ryan needs." God knows. I'm not giving him information.

And what this brings to the forefront is that at the very heart of prayer is this concept of relationship. Relationship is the focus. Relationship is the leading edge and Jesus implies that by saying, "do not be like them." Your father already knows. Your father. Our God is a relational God. Father, of course, first and foremost means he is the Father of the Son. And Jesus and the Father live in an ongoing, interdynamic, interpersonal relationship. They have forever, they will forever. But what that also means is that we, through faith in the Son, are brought into that very relationship. We are adopted into the household of God. He is now our Father, and we get to live in relationship with him.



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We're not bringing things to him in order to inform him. He already knows. Therefore, we don't need to worry that God's gonna somehow miss something. He knows what we need better than we even know ourselves. He knows our hearts. He knows our deepest needs.

So how not to pray? Principle number two, we don't pray seeking to manipulate God, coerce God. We don't pray to inform God. We pray to enter into relationship with him. Now this last idea, that God already knows what you need before you ask, I am betting has caused some trouble for some of you, because it has for me. Leads me to this question all the time about, "Lord, if you know what I already need, then why do I need to ask?" Have you ever have you ever wondered that? Maybe I'm alone. I'm annoyingly analytical. I wrestle with this. And I don't know that I can sufficiently satisfactorily answer that question for you, but I can tell you what's been very helpful for me in my life of prayer.

And it's been this. It's been to keep this concept of relationship at the very forefront of my prayer life. There's no analogy, there's no illustration, that's perfect, but maybe this can help. About 20 years ago—my wife and I were talking last night, it may have been 20 years ago this week—I took a step. I went to my father-in-law's house. I knew that I wanted to marry Jenee, been dating her for over a year, gotten to know her family. I liked their family. I loved her, and I think they liked me. I was very confident they were excited about the prospect of Jenee and I coming together in marriage.

So I went over to my father in law's house, and we sat down together, and I wanted to ask a question that he saw coming from a million miles away. I already knew the answer. He already knew exactly what I wanted and needed to hear. But I am so grateful he let me ask. Because I wanted to, out of respect for that relationship and the cultivation of a relationship that would continue now for 20 years, I wanted to come to him and ask him for his daughter's hand in marriage—even though he already knew I was going to do it. So thankful he didn't preempt my question and just say, "hey, I already know, don't worry about it, of course." It's important that I ask. It's important for where my wife and I began our marriage, but it was also important for the relationship I had with him. Out of respect and love for that relationship, it was important that I come to him and I bring that question to him, that I offer the vulnerability of that moment to him.

Two weeks later, I asked another question. And the person I asked it to already knew the answer, and they knew the question was coming. After doing my best to throw my wife off the scent and failing miserably—she saw it coming from a million miles away—I got down on my knee and I asked her the question that she already knew the answer to. She saw it coming. She knew what I desperately wanted to hear. You know what's interesting? I was nervous in that moment. I already knew what she was going to say. We had a strong relationship, but that moment is what relationships are built upon. I wasn't informing her of anything. I was opening myself to her, and that's the way relationships work. We open ourselves. We're vulnerable with someone. We seek a response. We ask a question and we listen for an answer. And we live in this dynamic of relationship, of conversation, of give and take. And that's precisely the life that we are called to enter into with our Father—who already knows, but finds absolute joy in the fact that we come to him, open ourselves to him, and that we ask. Prayer is about relationship.

Now, as Jesus continues in verse 9, he begins this offering of the prayer that we're all so familiar with. And he starts it with these words, he says, "pray then in this way..." And he gives them the words of the Lord's Prayer that we are all familiar with and that we're going to walk through slowly over the course of the summer.

Here on this first week, this week where we're introducing this series, I did want to conclude with maybe just some words of encouragement. Maybe answer a few questions. The first one is this. I am well aware that there are many people in this room who probably have memorized this very



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prayer. I'm well aware that there are probably a number of you who grew up in a church tradition where you would recite this prayer every week, and because of that, it's very possible these words have been stripped of life to you. They just start to feel like words because they've been so drilled into you for so long, they just seem lifeless. Maybe even they start to feel a little bit like what Jesus talks about with the Gentiles—maybe they start to feel like meaningless repetition. I think that's a very real possibility. So we want to say at the outset, we don't believe these words are magical. We don't believe there's some kind of incantation that if we say them just right, it obligates God to answer. If we believe that, we would be believing the very thing Jesus just taught against. It's not what we believe.

But I do believe that memorization can be helpful. Memorization gets something into my head first and then it has the opportunity to kind of sink into my heart. But all the while, whenever we memorize anything, we need to beware, we need to be on guard, that our motivation is appropriate. It's about relationship. It's about fostering a life with God. Not about performance. Not about earning points.

The truth is, in our Christian life, just generally speaking that's something we always need to keep in mind. We need to always live in a state of vigilance, of being mindful—beware of whether or not we're doing things just kind of on cruise control, mindlessly. Because there's no part of our life with God or our pursuit of Jesus that works on cruise control. We pursue, we're intentional, we seek to follow him. So if that's you, if these words have become fairly meaningless to you, my prayer for you, my hope, is that as we slowly, reflectively, go through these words of this prayer this summer—my prayer is that God, by his Spirit, will infuse these words with fresh meaning. They'll come alive for you. And I ask that you pray the same. If this is a struggle for you, that you would ask, that you'd pray that God would make these words come alive in a brand new way.

Second thing that I just want to offer an encouragement about is that I don't believe that Jesus gave us this prayer in order to limit us in our prayer life, as if these are the words that have to be prayed all the time. I do believe he gave these words as a good framework, a good model. That's why we're calling this series “the Shape of Prayer.” These words can give shape to my life of prayer. I find that to be very helpful, and here's why: most of the time, my prayer looks like the left side of the screen. Just a little bit like Pigpen—you know, Pigpen? Got that cloud of dust around him. I pray and my mind gets distracted. I go on these rabbit trails. I have a hard time staying focused, staying on target. And what I have found, because of that, is that the words of scripture help supply me with language and focus to help my prayer take shape.

And our hope is that that's what this study of the Lord's prayer can do—just help give shape to our prayer and give us confidence, even as we pray these words. And as we pray them and, then, maybe go on a rabbit trail that is in alignment with these words, we can do that confidently that we're praying in alignment with God's will because we're praying his very words after him. After all, this is Jesus' prayer. So that's our aim as we walk through this series this summer.

Finally, I just would encourage you to pray, to consider, this week: what is an active step that you could take in your life of prayer? Don't want to impose that on anyone. Everyone's gonna be different in terms of where they're at. But I just ask that you would walk with intentionality through the month of June, through the month of July. If you've never memorized this prayer, maybe it'd be good to memorize it. If you have memorized it, maybe you just say, “hey, before I get out of bed in the morning, I'm going to pray these words and I'm going to pray them and seek to believe them as I pray them.” Maybe if you've never journaled your prayer, you could run and buy a cheap little spiral notebook and you could start journaling your prayer—just taking an active step as we all together seek to grow in our life of prayer.



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Now, this morning, rather than praying to close the service, I'm going to have you join me, and we're going to pray the Lord's Prayer together. So will you stand with me as we close our time together? So I'm going to read what's in the green, and then we all together will read the words of the prayer that Jesus gave us.

Jesus said, "Pray then in this way: Our Father who is 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 lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

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