

The Lord's Prayer for your city

How to use this material

These prayer studies began as a workshop on *Praying for Canberra* in 2021. They have been adapted for you to contextualise for your city. If you don't live in a metropolitan area, I hope that this will still be useful for you – you could pray it for your town, region, local government area, or whatever seems to you a suitable group of people to pray for.

There are two 'introductory' sessions that take you through how the New Testament talks about praying for our wider social settings, and how and why the Lord's Prayer gives us a framework for praying for and with those around us (especially holding in prayer those who don't know God yet). These are followed by six reflections and prayer points on the Lord's Prayer.

Each of the introductory sessions has been structured to take around an hour (but feel free to take longer!). Leaders notes for these sessions are found *in italics*.

For each petition of the Lord's Prayer, you might spend 10 to 15 minutes reflecting on the material as a group, and then (at least) 10 to 15 minutes praying together using the bullet points provided as a guide. As you work through the petitions, please take at least as much time to pray as you do in discussion. The whole point of this material is to draw us into prayer together with God!

You might use the material over five meetings together:

1. background session 1
2. background session 2
3. petitions 1 and 2
4. petitions 3 and 4
5. petitions 5 and 6.

Or you might like to skip the background sessions and just get on with prayer. Or you might spend an evening praying through each of the petitions. In other words, use this material however you like!

If your group are struggling to think of things to pray for, you might find these resources helpful:

- Helen Thorne and Pete Nicholas, [5 Things to Pray for Your City](#)
- Global Faith and Work Initiative, [Prayers for Work](#)

Finally, the Bible Study 'Mission-shaped prayer' (*The Lutheran*, August 2023) has some concepts that this study series builds upon. You might find it helpful to read and reflect on that study as part of this series. It can be accessed at www.lca.org.au/dwelling-in-gods-word-mission-shaped-prayer

I pray that these resources will be a blessing to you and your city!

Jacob Traeger
August 2023

Background Session 1: Prayer in the New Testament

Gathering (15 mins)

As you gather, share a little of your main callings in life. What do you do during the week?

Even if your group has met together for months or years, it will be valuable to share a little about what you do during the week – sometimes in groups which know each other well we can forget to share specifics about our day to day lives and be surprised at what others don't know about us. Sharing about what they do during the week will help prompt people for the later question of how often we pray for these place and people.

If you're comfortable share how frequently you spend time praying (monthly, weekly, daily)?

How frequently do you spend time praying for the places and groups where you spend time, such as your workplace, sports club, volunteer organisation, etc?

How frequently do you spend time praying for your city?

Dwelling in Scripture (30 minutes)

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:18–22:

See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people. Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. Do not scoff at prophecies, but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil.

Read 1 Timothy 2:1–4:

I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Saviour, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

Discuss

- What do we learn about prayer from these passages?
You'll want to make sure that the discussion includes how prayer is marked by thankfulness and joy, that it is continuous and that we are told to pray for all people. Of course, I'm sure that your group will discover much more than this in these passages.
- What things in life make you more likely to pray? What makes you less likely to pray (or distracts you from prayer)?
- What (or who) do you generally find yourself praying about and for? Why?

Thinking and Praying (15 mins)

Even though the passages in 1 Thessalonians 5 and 1 Timothy 2 don't mention the words *faith* or *hope*, these themes resonate in prayer. Praying always and being thankful in all circumstances is an act of our faithfulness, trusting that God in turn will be faithful. Prayer expresses a hopeful confidence that the Holy Spirit is active in prayers and that God will respond.

What we pray expresses what we are hoping and trusting in God for. Strangely, this means that prayer is also an expression of *hopelessness*. It's unlikely that the first recipients of 1 Timothy were in positions to influence the policy of the rulers or the governors of the Roman Empire. They couldn't even vote! So they had to pray.

Two things that can get in the way

If prayer is an expression of hopelessness, one of the things that can get in the way of our praying is when we think we know what needs to be done. When this happens, our prayers might be less about bringing situations before God and more about telling God that he needs to bring his ideas into line with ours. Or we might just go and do something without talking to God about it!

On the other hand, many in our society increasingly seem to feel that offering 'thoughts and prayers' is an excuse for not acting. We might feel embarrassed about praying for particular situations or censor our prayers.

In the New Testament, prayer is presented as both something that we do when we are hopeless and helpless *and* something that is part of an active life of faith. In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul connects prayer with doing good to others, rejoicing, being thankful in all circumstances and following the Holy Spirit.

Discuss

- In 1 Timothy, we read, 'pray for rulers and all who are in authority'. Who are the rulers and authorities in your workplace, community, and city? List as many as you can.
- What are the things you feel hopeless or hopeful about in your city?
- Spend some time together as a group bringing these people, institutions and situations before God in prayer.

Leader – encourage those in your group to take these prayers with them during the week (and try to remember to pray them yourself, too!). The purpose of these studies is not simply to have interesting discussion and learn more about the Bible, but my hope and prayer is that they will add a new dimension to the prayer life of those in your group – and that through these prayers, you will discover more about how God sees your city and community. Taking your prayers with you beyond the time set for Bible study will help!

Background Session 2: The Context of the Lord's Prayer

Gathering (10 minutes)

As you gather, share the things which have shaped your prayer for your city since you last met. Is there anything you've noticed about your prayers?

If your group needs some prompts, you can ask about the categories for prayer we finished the last session with. Who are the rulers/authorities in your workplace, community and city and what are the things you feel hopeless or hopeful about in your city?

Dwelling in Scripture (30 minutes)

Leader's note: this section continues the last part of the discussion in session one, showing how the context of the Lord's prayer helps us avoid the two things that can get in the way of our praying (that we think we know what to do, or we feel too hopeless and helpless to pray).

Read Matthew 6:5–7:

When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. "When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

This is the context in which Matthew gives us the Lord's prayer. Praying in private is Jesus' way of avoiding the trap of 'thoughts and prayers' as a substitute for action. By encouraging us to pray in private, Jesus isn't saying that our faith should be private and cut off from the rest of our lives. He's not suggesting we don't offer to pray for others. But he is saying that prayer is not a performance – and it isn't a substitute for action.

The wider context of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew is a little like what we saw in 1 Thessalonians 5 in the session one. The Lord's Prayer is exactly in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) – which is all about the shape of life with God. At the beginning and end of the Sermon on the Mount are statements about who the Kingdom of Heaven is for – the upside-down kingdom where the poor and meek are blessed (see Matthew 5:3–12). Immediately before the Lord's Prayer are the 'you have heard it said' verses – about loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you so that *you may be children of your father in heaven* (Matthew 5:45) – and after it, comes Jesus' sayings about not storing up treasures on earth or worrying about tomorrow (see Matthew 6:19–34). This is all ethical or moral teaching, concerned not so much with the outward action of a person, but the shape of our hearts, teaching us what it means to be people of the kingdom – not simply doers of the law.

Discuss

- What do you think it means that the Lord's Prayer is right in the centre of a section of ethical teaching? Why/why not?

- Has prayer ever changed the way you've related to God or to others?
- One of the first things we see in the Lord's Prayer is that it's not a prayer for individuals. The prayer begins, 'Our Father', and is all in the first-person *plural*. It's a prayer we pray *together*.
 - Does this change the way you see the Lord's Prayer?
 - What does it mean for this prayer to not only be shaping *me* but also shaping *us*?

Thinking and Praying (20 minutes)

Read 1 Peter 2:9–12:

But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

'Once you had no identity as a people;
now you are God's people.
Once you received no mercy;
now you have received God's mercy.'

Dear friends, I warn you as 'temporary residents and foreigners' to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls. Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbours. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honourable behaviour, and they will give honour to God when he judges the world.

Commenting on this passage, missional theologian Stefan Paas encourages us to think of ourselves as God's priests or ambassadors:

As a holy kingdom of priests, the church represents God before humanity, and humanity before God. ... The Church praises God on behalf of a world that does not know God. ... The Church is not an exclusive community of untouchable saints who travel through the wilderness of this world. Their priesthood gets concrete form first and foremost in response to questions, accusations, slander, curiosity; and it is rooted in the example of Christ. The Christian community is committed to its environment by blessing, service, and prayer. ... Its existence is characterised by hope for God's salvation, but also by the hope that the people around [it] will glorify God.¹

The priestly instruction to pray for the people around us is echoed in 1 Timothy 2:4: 'I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them.'

One pastor pictured the Lord's Prayer as a hexagon and described it as 'a framework in which to pour all of the thoughts and concerns of your life'.² If we're called to pray on behalf of our friends, neighbours, community and city, and if Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer as a prayer to pray together, we can use this hexagon as a framework not simply for the thoughts

¹ Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 178–81.

² Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 2nd ed (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2011), 135.

and concerns of our lives but as a way to bring others before God. We can pray this prayer as an intercession for our city!

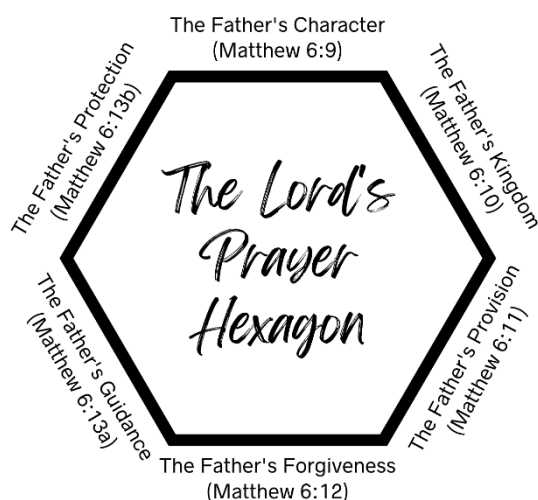
In our next sessions, you'll be walking through each of these petitions and using it to guide your prayers for your city. Before you do, a word of caution.

When we pray for others, it can be easy to pray judgementally. We can even do this accidentally, when we pray in a way that suggests if others were more like us the world would be a better place (even if this were true, it's still judgement!). When we pray as priests for our city, we pray in hope, blessing, and solidarity. With the prophet Isaiah, we acknowledge that we are men and women of unclean lips, living among people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).

If we're aware as we pray of the dangers of the Pharisee, who said, 'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people' (Luke 18:11), then we no longer pray, 'Lord, help *them* with *their* sinfulness', but we acknowledge that we are caught up in the same things. We are citizens of the same city. We need the same Saviour. If it's through Jesus we can come before the Father with prayers for ourselves, it's also through him we pray for our city. We can do so in confidence that as we stand in solidarity with the brilliance and brokenness of our cities, we are standing with, in, and through Christ.

Discuss

- The technical term for praying for others is 'intercession'. What do you think it means to intercede for your city? How comfortable do you feel about this?
If some in your group feel uncomfortable or uncertain about interceding for your city – point them to Christ! He is the one who intercedes for us before the Father – he is the great high priest. Our prayer and intercession are simply our participation in Christ's work. It's one of the ways we live out our baptism.
- How might God want to bless your city? What would that look like?
- Spend time together praying about what you've discussed.



As with last week, encourage those in your group to take these prayers with them during the week (and try to remember to pray them yourself, too!).

Graphic adapted from chapter 11 of Mike Breen's *Building a Discipling Culture*, 2nd ed (Pawleys Island, SC: 3DM, 2011).

1. The Father's Character

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Discuss

- What does it mean that God is holy?

If your group isn't sure how to answer this question, you might read Leviticus 19:1-4 and/or Matthew 5:43-48. It turns out that for God, holiness is a relational term, not a term of separation. Jesus led a holy and blameless life – yet he was also Immanuel, God with us.

In the same way that the first commandment (you shall have no other gods before me) summarises the whole of the Ten Commandments, the first petition of the Lord's Prayer summarises the whole prayer. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says when as we pray this prayer, the whole of our life says, 'Our Father'.³

The beginning of the Lord's Prayer is an invitation to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength. It's also an invitation to recognise where we have not trusted God. As Martin Luther says, 'A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need ... That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God'.⁴

As you pray, you might consider what are the 'gods' of your city. What would it look like in your city if everyone were to 'fear, love, and trust God above all things?'⁵

Pray

Use the bullet points below as starting ideas for your time praying together. What things do you notice as you pray? What does the Holy Spirit prompt in you? In what way are you a part of the things you're praying for?

- What does it mean for God's name to be holy in your city?
- How might you pray that the church of the city reflects God's character?
- How might you pray for the behaviours that are common in your city? In what ways are they holy or unholy?
- How do the institutions (politics, clubs, businesses, societies, etc) in your city honour God's name?
- In what ways can you pray that the institutions in your city will more fully reflect God's character?

³ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian* (London: SPCK, 2014), chapter 4.

⁴ *Large Catechism*, 1:2

⁵ *Small Catechism*, 1:2

2. The Father's Kingdom

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

Discuss

Read Hosea 6:6:

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Read Proverbs 21:3:

To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

Read Isaiah 1:17:

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

- How is the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims and brings near reflected in these Old Testament passages?

One theologian describes Jesus' life and ministry as being lived out in opposition to the 'anti-Kingdom' – everything that opposes God's will, be the demonic forces of the evil one, or the oppressive and exploitative forces of the world which create poverty and alienation.⁶

Luther said that 'Just as God's name is holy in itself and yet we pray that it may be holy among us, so also his kingdom comes of itself without our prayer and yet we pray that it may come to us. That is, we ask that it may prevail among us and with us, so that we may be a part of those among whom his name is hallowed and his kingdom flourishes'.⁷

What would it look like for the Kingdom of God to prevail in your city and all the forces of the anti-Kingdom to pass away?

Pray

Use the bullet points below as starting ideas for your time praying together. What things do you notice as you pray? What does the Holy Spirit prompt in you? In what way are you a part of the things you're praying for?

- How does the work that happens in your city match God's will?
 - What would it mean in your city for the first to be last and the last to be first (Matthew 20:16)? Where do you see this happening?
 - Where is God calling you and the church in the city to humility? Pray for discernment about what God's answers might be to the challenges you see around you.
 - What does the coming of the kingdom look like in your city specifically?
 - Where does God's reign challenge you and the city? What parts of your communal life in the city are called into question?

⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1994), 94–95.

⁷ *Large Catechism*, II:50

3. The Father's Provision

Give us today our daily bread

Discuss

- Are there people you know who lack the daily essentials for life? What would it look like for this prayer to be answered in their lives?

Jesus connects the Lord's Prayer with the promise that we don't need to worry about tomorrow in both Matthew (6:25–34) and Luke (12:22–34). In this petition of the prayer, he wants to free us from anxiety about tomorrow – the phrase could be translated 'keep giving us our bread each day' (Luke) or even 'give us tomorrow's bread today' (Matthew)!⁸

Read Luke 12:15–21:

Then [Jesus] said, 'Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.' Then he told them a story: 'A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, "What should I do? I don't have room for all my crops." Then he said, "I know! I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods." And I'll sit back and say to myself, "My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!"'

'But God said to him, "You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?" Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.'

As we pray for daily bread, we're praying to be brought more deeply into reliance on God and awareness of the abundance of his kingdom that is already breaking through. But we're also called to notice how we might hoard God's gifts, rather than sharing them. As you pray this prayer for your city, you might notice not only where there is need but also where there is plenty – and pray that it would be shared generously with many and not just a few.

Pray

Use the bullet points below as starting ideas for your time praying together. What things do you notice as you pray? What does the Holy Spirit prompt in you? In what way are you a part of the things you're praying for?

- Pray that God would meet the needs of your city.
- Who in your city does not have daily bread? How might you live out of God's kingdom in *bringing* daily provision to those who don't have it?

⁸ James D G Dunn, 'Prayer', in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed Joel B Green, Scot McKnight, and I Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 622.

4. The Father's Forgiveness

And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Discuss

- What would it look like for your city to be known as a place of forgiveness?

Luther reminds us that God forgives sin 'even without and before our prayer; and he gave us the Gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness, before we prayed or even thought of it. But the point here is for us to recognise and accept this forgiveness'.⁹

As we pray for God's forgiveness to be experienced in our city, we're really praying evangelistically – that is, that people in our city will come to know the good news of God's grace and mercy given to us in Jesus Christ.

We can also pray for repentance and forgiveness to mark the lives of politicians, businesspeople, and other leaders in our cities. We might feel the need to pray that we would forgive their sins against us!

As we pray for forgiveness, we are freed from needing to stand on our rights – we give up what we could (reasonably demand). Forgiveness also means freedom for those of us who make decisions about the lives of others. When our decisions have unintended consequences, we are free to confess this rather than trying to hide the problem – in the confidence that in Christ we are forgiven.

Pray

Use the bullet points below as starting ideas for your time praying together. What things do you notice as you pray? What does the Holy Spirit prompt in you? In what way are you a part of the things you're praying for?

- What does it mean for you to forgive those who make decisions that hurt you or others? What might that look like in practice?
- What does it mean to forgive those in our workplaces? In what ways does God want to free you from anger, frustration or malice?
- What does forgiveness look like in relation to the First Nations people of your city?
- How does God's forgiveness free you for good work? What would it mean to not be afraid of making a mistake (or not blame someone who does)?

⁹ *Large Catechism*, II:88

5. The Father's Guidance

And lead us not into temptation

Discuss

- What are the main temptations people face in your city? List as many as you can.

Temptations are essentially everything that might take us away from God. Especially, we often find ourselves tempted to take the good things that God has made and misuse them or give them a status higher than they deserve. We seek to satisfy ourselves rather than to be satisfied in God and his gifts. Temptations take us away from the intent of God – who he's made us to be and how life with him ought to look (think about the story of Adam and Eve in the garden).

Reflecting on temptation, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that:

the temptation of which the entire Holy Scripture speaks does not have to do with the testing of my own strength, for the nature of biblical temptation is such that here – to my own alarm and without being able to do anything about it – all my strengths are turned against me ... before I can even test my strength, I have already been robbed of my strength ... The Christian knows that his strength will desert him each time in the hour of temptation ... For this reason, a Christian does not seek the perseverance of his own strength, but prays: *do not lead us into temptation*.¹⁰

Temptation, Bonhoeffer says, is not an occasion for the proving of our own strength but something that drives us to faith in Christ. It is as we are weak that we hear 'my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As we pray for an end to temptation in our city, we are called to recognise all of those things that draw people away from God, and pray that we all will be encountered by God in our weakness.

Pray

Use the bullet points below as starting ideas for your time praying together. What things do you notice as you pray? What does the Holy Spirit prompt in you? In what way are you a part of the things you're praying for?

- What are the particular temptations that you see affecting your city?
- What are the temptations that the church in your city falls into?
- Pray that people will not fall into temptation.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (DBWE) 15:387–88.

6. The Father's Deliverance

But deliver us from the evil one

Discuss

Read Matthew 6:24:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Read Matthew 4:8–11:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"'. Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Read John 10:10:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

- What does it mean that the Lord's Prayer ends with a prayer for deliverance? What does your city need to be delivered from?

Luther tells us:

the petition seems to be speaking of the devil as the sum of all even in order that the entire substance of our prayer may be directed against our arch-enemy. It is he who obstructs everything we pray for: God's name or glory, God's kingdom and will; our daily bread, a good and cheerful conscience, etc. Therefore we sum it all up by saying, 'Dear Father, help us to get rid of this misfortune'.¹¹

As we conclude the prayer, we are reminded that the ultimate cause of human pain and suffering and all that is wrong with the world does not lie with those people we disagree with, those who frustrate us, or even those who persecute us, but with the father of lies. As we pray that Satan would no longer have hold over our city and the people in it and that we would be free from temptation, we are also declaring hope in Jesus Christ, whose death, resurrection and ascension have ended Satan's ultimate power.

Throughout this prayer, we have been bringing our neighbours before God – here, might we even dare to trust God on their behalf, praying into that future where we see Christ's triumph fully realised and all those who live in darkness will experience a great light (Isaiah 9:2)?

Pray

Use the bullet points below as starting ideas for your time praying together. What things do you notice as you pray? What does the Holy Spirit prompt in you? In what way are you a part of the things you're praying for?

- Pray against the bondage to evil that you are aware of in this city.

¹¹ *Large Catechism*, II:113–14

- Pray against everything that might draw us and our wider city away from God (see the first petition).
- Pray for those who believe Satan's promise of money/power/influence.
- Pray that the enemy's power would be finally broken.