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### **God's Holy Name, False Prophets, and the Politics of The Kingdom of God**

One day, Jesus was praying. And when he finished, his disciples came up to him and one of them said, "Hey Jesus, teach us to pray."

We generally think of the disciples as spiritual all-stars. I mean, Jesus hand picked these guys to follow him. Jesus picked them because they had their spiritual life together, right?

Apparently not! By this time, the disciples had followed Jesus for about a year, and they still didn't know how to pray. So they caught Jesus in the act and asked him to teach them how to pray.

Now, if you are anything like me, you totally identify with the disciples. As your pastor, maybe I should not admit this to you, but I find prayer really difficult.

For example, whenever my pastor friends and I get together for an event, we often get in a circle, hold hands, and then I get nervous little ball in the pit of my stomach because I know someone is about to give the dreaded instructions, "Let's pray. We will go around the circle and just pray as the Spirit moves you."

Well, I've noticed that the Spirit moves other people really well during this prayer time. The Spirit does not move me really well. So as we go around the circle, my pastor friends give really deep, poetic, extemporaneous prayers. As we go around the circle, my prayer is that the Holy Spirit moves someone to say "Amen" and end this thing before it's my turn!

But soon enough it's my turn. My voice quivers as I get increasingly nervous and I say something that sounds ridiculous as I'm saying it. Something like, "Hi God. How's it going? Well, the world is pretty awesome. Thanks! But there are some pretty messed up things happening here, too. Could you please do something about that? Because we are trying. And we need your help. Okay. Thanks for listening." And then because I'm so nervous I forget that you aren't supposed to say "Amen" until you are the last person, I say "Amen" and make the whole thing even more awkward.

So, I totally identify with the disciples. And maybe the disciples had similar questions about prayer that many of us have. Like: Hey Jesus, before you even teach us how to pray, could you teach us why we should pray in the first place? Do we pray in order to change God's mind? Do we pray so that we can defeat our political enemies? Because they are really messing things up! Do we pray for financial gain, worldly success, and popularity? Because we tend to think that would be awesome. By the way, does prayer make us more selfish and narcissistic? Should we simply offer thoughts and prayers to people suffering tragedy because "thoughts and prayers" is a convenient way of letting ourselves off the hook from making changes that would make the world a better place?

You will be glad to know that I'm going to answer all of these questions in the next ten minutes.

Ready?

Here's one of the many things that I love about Jesus. Whenever he teaches about prayer, his instructions are basically "KISS." You know, Keep It Simple ...

Jesus instructs the disciples by modeling for them what to say. Jesus' prayer is five short sentences and less than 40 words. When Jesus teaches about prayer in other passages, he states that we shouldn't [heap up](#) all kinds of words in order to make ourselves look smart or holier than others. Some people have a gift for offering up beautiful prayers. I thank God for those people. But if you are like me and prayer just feels awkward, that's okay. It's okay to just say what's on your mind. And it's okay to say nothing at all and just listen. Some of the best prayers are silent.

If you do use words, Jesus advises that, "When you pray," start by saying, 'Father'"

And we need to stop with this very first word. Because we already have a problem. I mean, what's with this "Father" language? Jesus is always calling God "Father." Isn't that just patriarchal language and shouldn't we move beyond calling God "Father"?

It sounds a bit counterintuitive, but when Jesus called God "Father" he was subverting the patriarchal norms of his day. In ancient the Roman Empire where Jesus lived, the head of the household was called the paterfamilias. "Pater" means "father" and "familias" means "family." The paterfamilias was the oldest living male in the house. He called all the shots. The paterfamilias had the [power of life and death](#) over family members. The Roman patriarchal system was often and easily abused with violence and without any repercussions.

But is that what Jesus meant when he called God Father? Some say yes. They claim that God is all powerful and God can violently coerce if God wants to.

But in his prayer, Jesus reveals that God is nothing like the pater of the Roman Empire. In fact, New Testament scholar Joel Green states, Jesus "reveals the fatherhood of God to his disciples and, in doing so, defines in what sense it is appropriate to think of God as 'father.' ... In an environment in which fathers wielded such far-reaching, coercive power, it was important that the fatherhood of God be qualified in terms of generosity, compassion, care, and faithful activity on behalf of God's children." (See the note on this section in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*.)

The next part of the prayer is typically translated as, "Father, hallowed by your name."

Okay, in your everyday lives, do you ever use the word "hallowed"? Like, when you are at the grocery store and you see something that looks so good and your mouth starts to water, do you say, "Wow, that is some hallowed food right there. Thank you Jesus!"

Nobody uses that word. What does "hallowed" even mean? Our translation says "hallowed be your name." But I like other translations better. In the original Greek language of Luke, the

phrase is dynamic and active. Jesus is not merely describing God's name as holy. He is imploring God to make God's name holy. One translation puts it like this: "Father, uphold the holiness of your name" (Common English Bible).

Why would Jesus want to pray that God would uphold the holiness of God's name?

Before and during the time of Jesus, there were religious leaders who gave God a bad name. They did not uphold the holiness of God's name. In fact, they gave God a bad name by justifying violent and corrupt political policies. I know. Can you imagine that? Religious leaders giving God a bad name. Who knew?

For example, there was once a prophet named Jeremiah. Jeremiah is described as a true prophet and he lived during a time when there were many false prophets. Jeremiah was a true prophet because he upheld the holiness of God's name by caring about the things that God cared about. For example, God told Jeremiah to go to the King and tell him to, "Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place." (22:1-3)

As opposed to Jeremiah, there were false prophets who merely told the king what he wanted to hear: That he didn't need to care about the poor or anyone who was robbed. In fact, the economic system at the time greatly benefited the king and his rich friends, who constantly exploited the poor because the poor had no one to defend them. During Jeremiah's time foreigners were often scapegoated, wronged, and attacked. False prophets justified treating foreigners with hatred and contempt. The orphans and widows were the most vulnerable and poor members of society. False prophets told the king that he had no responsibility toward them. And in doing so, the false prophets did not care about what God cares about. In this way, false prophets did not uphold the holiness of God's name.

There was a similar situation in Jesus' day. There was a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Many of the religious elite justified that gap because they benefited from it, so they didn't challenge the king to help the poor.

But as Jesus continues his prayer, he prays that the Father's Kingdom would come to earth. Do you see how politically subversive this prayer is? The King at the time was a man named Herod. It was Herod's kingdom. The Kingdom of God is radically different from the Kingdom of Herod. It's a place where despite economic status, everyone has their daily bread - or their daily needs met because we share with one another. It's a place where we refuse to live by cycles of violence and vengeance, but instead live by a cycle of forgiveness.

And here I want to be careful about this word "forgiveness." Quite often people get the impression that "You must forgive whatever that person did to you!" This demand to forgive can become a horrible burden for many of us.

But the Greek word in this passage for forgive is "aphiemi." It actually means, "to let go" or "to disregard" or "to keep no longer." Sometimes forgiveness, or "aphiemi," might lead us to

reconcile with someone who has hurt us. But sometimes “aphiemi” means that we let go of the person who has hurt us. We no longer keep that person in our life and we let them go.

There is so much more to say about this passage, but I’d like to end on this bit of hope from Jesus. He explains our relationship with the Father like this, “So I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find: knock and the door will be opened for you.”

Jesus is not saying, “Just ask God for a million dollars and it will be given to you.” Jesus is not saying, “Just believe in God and you will never suffer in this world.”

What Jesus is saying is that God wants us to knock on the door. God wants us to search for it. God wants us to ask for it.

But what is “it” that we should search for. What is “it” that we should ask for. Because what we search for matters. What we ask for matters. Not all doors are good, so which doors we knock on matters.

The “it” that Jesus wants us to search for and to ask for is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love. Jesus wants us to knock on the door that will lead us to the Holy Spirit.

This is why prayer matters. Prayer is not meant to change God’s mind. It’s to change our mind. Prayer is meant to make us more like the Spirit of God. But remember that God is nothing like a violent and coercive father. Rather, God is like a father who wants to feed us with good bread so that we can share our food with those in need. God forgives us so that we might change cycles of violence into cycles of forgiveness. God opens the door for us so that we can open the door for one another and to those who often have doors shut in their faces.

We cannot simply offer empty phrases like “thoughts and prayers.” That attitude is the attitude of the false prophets who give God a bad name. Jesus implored that the Father uphold the holiness of the divine name, but God isn’t going to do it alone. You and I have a mission. It’s a holy mission. God knows there are a lot of people giving God a bad name by not caring for the poor and the homeless, by scapegoating immigrants, by stoking the flames of racism and Islamophobia, by treating our LGBTQ siblings with contempt, and by threatening to take away women’s rights.

But we are called to live a different way. We are called to live into God’s kingdom. Jesus was the embodiment of the Kingdom. And he invites us to knock on the door and walk through it together as we boldly follow Jesus in working and praying for a more just and loving world.

May we continue to do so today and forever more. Amen.