

ANALYZING AND PERFORMING THE LORD'S PRAYER

Step One: Select a Text

The passage we have selected to demonstrate the methodology for performing Scripture is Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9–13). The text is cited below in transliterated Greek and English. Jesus likely recited the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. Therefore, a performance based on clues in the Greek text will be inspired more directly by how an early audience would have heard the Gospel "performed" than by how Jesus himself was heard.

*Houtōs oun proseuchesthe hymeis;
Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois;
hagiasthētō to onoma sou;
elthetō hē basileia sou;
genēthētō to thelēma sou,
hōs en ouranō kai epi gēs;
Ton arton hēmōn ton epiousion dos hēmin sēmeron;
kai aphes hēmin ta opheilēmata hēmōn,
hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois opheiletais hēmōn;
kai mē eisenenkēs hēmas eis peirasmon,
alla rhysai hēmas apo tou ponērou.*

Pray then in this way:

Father of us, the one in the heavens,¹
hallowed be the name of you,
come be the reign of you,
done be the aim of you,
As in heaven also on earth.²
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive the debts of us,
as also we have forgiven the debtors of us.
And do not expose [and then abandon] us
to temptation, ('or to the testing time')
but preserve us from evil.³

Step Two: Probe Your Text. Our initial step is to search the Lord's Prayer for any sound and voice features that dictate how the prayer might have been spoken.

- Calling on God as "Father" (*Pater*) is an emotionally loaded term, having various connotations, which original audience members would have recalled. Emotional language should be conveyed in the tone and/or volume of the delivery. One inference of the term "father" communicates God's comprehensive authority and the obedience and honor that he is due (e.g., Mal 1:6; Matt 5:48; 6:14; 18:35). Another connotation of the term emphasizes God's parental love (e.g., Ps 103:13; *Did.* 1:7), care, and protection (e.g., Jer 31:9; Matt 6:26, 10:29, 18:10, 14). Closely associated with the

paternal meaning of “father” is that the term can also designate God as creator or as the head of a family or clan (e.g., Deut 32:4–6; Isa 64:8; Jer 31:9).

- The rendition “Father of us, the one in the heavens” captures the Greek word order, placing the divine recipient of the prayer first in the sentence. When a word is emphasized, it should be noticeable and arrest the attention of those listening. In the Lord’s prayer, the address “father” affirms both respect in addressing a superior and the presence of a profound personal relationship between the one praying and the one prayed to. The phrase “Father of us” is an emotional invocation, conveying one who is to be respected and one who cares—it sets the mood and tone of the requests that follow.
- The repeated word “you” at the end of each phrase in the first half of the prayer is an example of antistrophe. The repetition in the successive phrases produces an aesthetically pleasing end-rhyme and places an emphasis on God. Further, the repeated word in each clause creates a rhythm when spoken. Rhythm in speech implies something unusual—it is not language used in everyday life. It implies that both the content and recipient are different, involving a different type of communication. Thus, the overall tone of the first half of the prayer is sacred, measured, and solemn. The rhyme and rhythm of the petitions in the first half of the prayer adorn the spoken words with extreme reverence.
- Another significant vocal feature in the first three petitions is the suppression of conjunctions (asyndeton). The exclusion of conjunctions gives the impression of haste when spoken, an aural intensity, a sense of immediacy. The tempo expresses the longing for the final advent of God’s kingdom rule on earth. The first stanza of the prayer provides the church awaiting Christ’s return a way to express their longing for better circumstances.
- Two of the most important vocal dynamics in the second half of the prayer include the repetition of the numerous expressions of the first-person plural pronoun “us and “we,” and the multiple connecting particles (and, as, and, but). Combined, the numerous pronouns and the multiple particles (polysyndeton) stress humanity’s extreme dependence on God.
- The final clause, “And do not expose [and then abandon] us to temptation, (‘or to the testing time’) but preserve us from evil,” is not two requests, but a single petition set in antithetical parallelism.⁴ The request to be preserved from evil is parallel to the request to not be exposed to temptation. It takes the initial request further by emphasizing the reality of the evil that lies behind the temptation and by asking to be delivered from it. The repetition should be emphasized in some manner when recited.
- Following an examination of the prayer for sound and voice features, our second task is to probe the text for any clues that the reader used gestures or other body language. Except for Jesus’ remark about the hypocrites standing when they pray (Matt 6:5), there are no explicit hints in the text concerning gestures, movements or positions that the

speaker may have utilized in the recitation of the prayer. We should note that in Scripture, the act of communicating with God is often accompanied by raising the arms and/or the spreading of one's palms (e.g., 1 Kings 8:22, 54; 2 Chron 6:13; Ps 28:2; 44:20; 63:4; Isa 1:15). The gesture may have had the purpose of attracting God's attention, expressing desire for contact with God, or acknowledging one's reliance on God. Like the posture of an infant reaching towards his or her mother for care, the prayer posture of an individual with outstretched arms and palms open toward the heavens, similarly acknowledges dependence on God. The open palms may symbolize a request for one's empty hands to be filled. It is also noteworthy that excavated figurines of praying humans in the ancient world are depicted with large wide-open eyes and faces directed heavenward (cf. Tobit 3:12; Matt 14:19; Luke 9:16; John 17:1).

- Our final analysis involves probing the prayer for likely audience participation features. An initial opportunity to involve your audience is when speaking Jesus' instruction to his disciples: "Pray then in this way..." Articulating Jesus' words while looking at the audience provides a moment of intimacy between you and your listeners. The presence of rhythm in the first half of the prayer also prompts audience participation and holds their emotions captive.

Step Three: Prepare the Script.

The following translation and annotations attempt to capture the oral features we have just noted. When we take our results of the analysis of sound, voice, gesture, and audience participation, the script for the Lord's Prayer might look like what follows. Depending on your style, you may require either more or less annotations and stage directions.

(Step forward, lean in, look directly at your audience, including them in the learning moment.)

Pray then in this way:

(Spoken reverently, humbly, and with life. Looking heavenward. To convey respect, the congregation can be asked to stand while the prayer is recited.)

Father of us, the one in the heavens,

(Spoken reverently, measured, and solemnly and with a sense of urgency.)

hallowed be the name of you,
come be the reign of you,
done be the aim of you,
As in heaven also on earth.

(Spoken slower than the first stanza and very deliberately and with a tone of neediness or desperation. The request for God's preservation from evil should have a verbal intensification when it is spoken. Arms outstretched with palms open.)

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive the debts of us,
as also we have forgiven the debtors of us.
And do not expose [and then abandon] us
to temptation, ('or to the testing time')
but preserve us from evil.

Step Four: Other Important Issues for a Successful Performance

- A brief introduction to the performance should be simple, such as: “This is Matthew’s account of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. He taught them the proper way to petition God in contrast to the improper manner displayed by either the hypocrites who pray pretentiously or the pagans who babble mindlessly (Matt 6:5, 7).”
- The invocation *Pater hēmōn* (Father of us), with the pronoun, expresses the aspirations of a group (cf. Luke 11:2; *Did.* 1:7, 7:1, 10:2). It signifies a liturgical text to be recited communally in worship. Perhaps provide your audience with a copy of the script and recite the prayer together after you have performed it.
- You will need to determine if the use of the hand gestures and focus of the eye heavenward detracts from the words of the prayer or enhances them. You will want to refrain from being overly dramatic with the hands to the extent that it becomes a distraction. The script is short enough to memorize, thereby freeing your hands for gestures.

¹ The phrase “Father of us, the one in the heavens” was suggested by David Wenham, “The Sevenfold Form of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Expository Times* 121 (2010): 379. Rendering it this way emphasizes the divine title.

² This translation of the first three aspirations was adapted from Michael Wade Martin (“The Poetry of the Lord’s Prayer: A Study in Poetic Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 [2015]: 347–372, here 372) and David Wenham (“The Sevenfold Form of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Expository Times* 121 [2010]: 377–382, here 379). While these lines are rendered in a way that we typically do not speak, they are a translation based on the actual Greek word order. Interpreting it this way gives it rhythm.

³ The translation of the second stanza of the prayer was adapted from Martin (“The Poetry,” 372) and Wenham (“The Sevenfold,” 379).

⁴ H. Benedict Green, *Matthew, Poet of the Beatitudes*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 203 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 81.