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PREFACE

This little book grew out of a sermon series I first preached a few years ago when I served as the interim pastor for Hemet Church of the Nazarene in southern California. During my extended time there, I incorporated the Lord's Prayer as a regular part of the congregation's Sunday morning worship service. Of course, for many Christian congregations this is a given; for many others, however, praying the Lord's Prayer together is rare.

None of the congregants at my interim church complained—at least as far as I knew! But I did fear that some might wonder why we regularly engaged this formulaic and formalized prayer—something we normally leave to Catholics and Episcopalians and such. So it seemed a good idea to devote some sermonic attention to this prayer that Jesus himself taught to his disciples. It was a prayer I learned as a boy, probably in Sunday school, possibly Vacation Bible School, but it was also a prayer we simply did not pray in typical Sunday worship services as I grew up in evangelical congregations in eastern Washington. If I was so intent on chang-

ing that practice among these good-hearted folk in California, shouldn't I have a reason? And so a sermon series was born.

Along with occasional stints as an interim pastor, I have been blessed in the past few years with the opportunity to preach often as part-time teaching pastor at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in San Diego. This church has been a warm and tremendously supportive congregation to my wife, Janice, and me, and it has also been a great friend to Point Loma Nazarene University, where I teach theology. These lovely Lutherans pray the Lord's Prayer together every Sunday, so it seemed like a good idea to walk with them as well, sermon by sermon, phrase by phrase, through the prayer. With them, the question would be less about why we were praying the prayer but more like: What is it, exactly, that we've been praying all these years?

I am deeply grateful to the warmhearted, saintly folks in both congregations whose active listening and encouraging responses have made preaching the gospel in their midst a real joy. Thank you, friends. These meditations are dedicated to all of you.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

*Our Father, who art 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 trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom and
the power and the glory forever.
Amen*

WHY WE SHOULD PRAY THIS PRAYER

Many Christians pray the Lord's Prayer every Sunday in church. Among those for whom this prayer is a regular, corporate practice we'd find Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, United Methodists, and many others. Most churches that are more likely to be described as evangelical tend to pray this prayer together less often, perhaps especially if they are non-denominational, charismatic, or Pentecostal. So it was in the churches where I grew up.

Things are definitely changing, but many Christians from Holiness traditions have historically looked skeptically at anything in church that seems too ritualistic. Memorized prayers that we recite together? Shouldn't prayer be spontaneous? Shouldn't we just pray from the heart? Doesn't a memorized prayer recited together seem a little too, well, 'Catholic'? That's the way many have viewed the matter.

Granted, even churches that tend to emphasize and celebrate the spontaneity of worship in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit—believers such as Pentecostals, charismatics, and Holiness folk—usually (perhaps inevitably) have their own rituals in worship. Often, there ends up being a fairly predictable order of worship from Sunday to Sunday, even if there is no bulletin that would make this order or pattern obvious. The rituals and patterns may go relatively unnoticed and generally unannounced. Nonetheless, it turns out that even spontaneity can become scripted. Humans are creatures of habit. Christians are humans. The key, of course, is to develop the right habits.

Certainly it is debatable whether Jesus intended this prayer to be a ritual performed in the exact same way every time; it is possible he offered it as a model or general example of what and how to pray. Further, Scripture assures us that empty rituals are not what God desires. God longs to hear the cries of our hearts in prayer. But there is no need for a prayer like the Lord's Prayer to *be* an empty ritual; it all depends on how we pray it. Ritual can help shape and guide our hearts, our emotions, our longings for God. It can give us words—tested and tried over centuries of use—when our own words seem to fail us.

But that probably wasn't the deepest concern with the Lord's Prayer. The fact is, a lot of Holiness Christians used to get nervous about a specific part of this prayer. We'll have more to say on this later in the book, but let me drop this hint that some Christians haven't always been confident that Jesus was doing the right thing to encourage us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That seems a little defeatist, you know? Holiness Christians historically have been about living

sanctified (holy) lives, and how are you going to encourage holy lives if people expect that they're always going to have some sin, or even a batch of sins, to confess? Holiness is about being freed from sin, not acting like you're always going to have something that needs to be forgiven. Granted, there are considerable problems with this mentality, but I'll save it for later.

There is one other preliminary matter. To be honest, I was pleasantly surprised when Bonnie Perry, the editorial director at The Foundry Publishing, went along with my proposed title, apparently without the slightest hesitation. *Praying with Jesus?* I thought there might be some question about that; after all, when we pray, are we praying *with* Jesus? Does Jesus pray? The Gospels inform us that he *prayed*, but would it be correct to say he still does? And is it presumptuous for us to say we pray along with him?

Perhaps such questions do not particularly bother you, but just in case, I want to address them a little. First of all, it is clear that Jesus certainly *was* a person of deep prayer life. That comes to the fore especially in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus is described as praying quite a lot more than in the other Gospels. It is also the Gospel in which Jesus teaches us about praying a lot more than the other Gospels. So I think it's safe to assume that Luke was interested in the act and discipline of prayer, and desired his readers to appreciate that Jesus was a person of prayer. In fact, in Luke 11 we read that Jesus's disciples appear to witness him praying right before they ask him to teach them how to do it too: "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples" (v. 1). Among the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), the Gospel of Mark doesn't have a Lord's Prayer narrative, and Matthew's version doesn't say that Jesus is praying right before it happens;

instead, Jesus includes the Lord's Prayer as part of his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). There are several other instances like this in Luke, where a common story shared among the three Synoptic Gospels includes only in Luke the rather significant detail that Jesus is praying (Jesus's baptism in Luke 3:21 and his transfiguration in 9:29 are two such examples).

Although the global church and our general approach in this book works with Matthew's version most often, we should at least mention that Luke's version of the prayer is noticeably briefer. Even so, Luke's Gospel as a whole definitely has far more to say about praying! Some of our most fascinating observations about the Gospels arise from the process of comparing them with one another. By virtue of such comparison, we may come to appreciate the heightened emphasis that Luke places on Jesus's own prayer life.

Beyond the Gospels, however, the New Testament teaches us not only that Jesus *was* a man of prayer but that, in fact, he still is. Two passages in particular suggest this fact to us. In Romans 8, Paul becomes blessedly overwhelmed by the reality of God's love and proclaims to his readers, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. [After all,] Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (vv. 31b–34). Jesus is interceding for us! Like, right now! When you intercede for someone, you pray for them, speaking to God on their behalf. Paul proclaims that Jesus, the one who "lives to God"

(Romans 6:10) is, in this present moment, speaking to God on our behalf. Surely that qualifies as prayer.

The book of Hebrews makes the same point in perhaps even more dramatic fashion. Jesus is called “a priest forever” (7:21). Consequently, “because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (vv. 24–25). Always and forever, Jesus intercedes. If we were to wonder what Jesus might say in those unending prayers of intercession, a worthy suggestion that I learned from my Sunday school teacher Reuben Welch is that he has not veered terribly far from the kinds of things we read in John 17:

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. (v. 11b)

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (v. 17)

That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (v. 21)

This prayer from John 17 is traditionally called Jesus’s “high priestly prayer,” and the Gospel of John strongly implies that Jesus is still praying it today. For that matter, it does not seem a stretch at all to imagine that Jesus still prays the prayer he taught his own disciples to pray. So when *we* pray, yes, I think there is a profound sense in which we can be assured that we are praying with Jesus.

But I'm still thinking about those Christians from my childhood who got nervous about ritual. I think perhaps they overlooked how often our lives are governed by ritualized language:

Good morning!

Please.

Thank you.

Excuse me.

I'm sorry.

With this ring I thee wed.

Bless you! (after a sneeze, naturally).

Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.

I'm not interested.

And my favorite: *Yes, I'll hold.*

None of us invents the language(s) we speak; further, our culture in a great many instances teaches us how to use the language it has given us. Cultural rituals teach us to speak meaningfully to one another. It's certainly also true that ritual language can become formal and stilted, but it need not. Really, we try to teach our children to employ ritual language, but we also insist that it be genuine. How many times have parents insisted to children that they must apologize to their siblings or their friends "like you *mean* it"? Surely we can say it like we mean it when it comes to praying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

What I hope to do in the following meditations is to help us know what we mean when we pray this prayer, precisely so that we *can* pray it like we mean it.

And so, let us pray.