

[Practicing Faith, Part Three]

[Speakers in the audio file: Tim Mackie]

[EMSB Theme Intro]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 20 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB Theme fades out]

All right, well, this is the third of a three-part series, and it represents a number of teachings that I did back when I was a pastor at Door of Hope church. And we did a short series on key spiritual practices—habits of life that have marked followers of Jesus throughout many different church traditions—Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic—throughout the history of the church. We got together—here's what all Christians, of all different traditions, have agreed on as the habits that foster and cultivate a healthy devotion to Jesus.

This episode is on praying and acting. And actually, it's a long exploration of the meaning and significance of the classic "Lord's Prayer." And if you wait for it, at the end of the teaching, I actually play the "Lord's Prayer" sung by a nun in Jerusalem, singing the Lord's Prayer in an ancient form of Aramaic, which is awesome. So that's at the end of the teaching—I play that.

But anyway, the Lord's Prayer: it'll change your life forever if you learn both what it means *and* begin praying it every single day, like Jesus expected his followers would do. So with all that said, let's just dive in.

[Musical Break (2:14—2:20)]

All right, we're continuing in this series. We're almost near the end, actually, of the series we did for the second half of the summer, called "Spiritual Symmetry." And if you've been following, you already know what I'm going to say in the next thirty seconds. This has been a series where we're exploring the biblical patterns of the daily life habits, practices, rhythms, and routines of the spiritual life of Jesus, but also of the earliest Christians—and then throughout history.

What are the kinds of life habits that mark Jesus and Christians throughout history who are growing, who are changing or transforming, and so on? It's a very practical series. And we've been taking each week to take two of these biblical, historic practices that seem like there's maybe tension or they're at odds with each other and figure out how they work together.

Today, we're talking about prayer—talking about praying and acting. Praying and acting. So we're talking about talking to God. And then we're talking about going and doing something about what you just talked to God about. In my way, that's how I would frame it. We're talking to God, but then, of course, how are you actually living, and what are you supposed to go do about these things that you just prayed and talked to God about? How do those two go together?

As we're going to see today, I think in Christian prayer—part of what makes Christian prayer unique is the way that Jesus saw praying and acting as completely bound together—the same coin.

So when I say the word “prayer,” here's my hunch. My hunch is that when I said “praying and acting,” and we're talking about “prayer”—to say that anytime you talk about prayer in a church setting or a Christian setting, there's this invisible wave of guilt—right?—that pervades the room, right?

Because half of us, we know that prayer is important—that's this thing that should be important to me. And somehow, it's like that doesn't actually translate into action, right? And so maybe, you know, you feel like it is important or it should be important, but you find different struggles with it. But that's not everybody.

So you think of it like a spectrum. And my guess is that the whole spectrum is sitting in the room here. So some people—I call them the “direct line” people—are just in tune with Jesus throughout the day. And when they pray—they're the people you call or email when you really have a real urgent need, or something like that. Because somehow, they're “those people.” And they pray a lot. And it's effective in their lives and [in the lives of] the people around them. So there's those people.

And then there's some of us: I say “prayer,” and you think of a practice that brings a lot of solace in your life, or comfort. It's kind of like a bedrock for you. It's positive. It's positive.

There is, kind of, the middle of the spectrum, which would be like, “Yes, I know it's important. And it is powerful. Sometimes it's really dry. And I just do it because I know I'm supposed to, but I don't always get a lot out of it.” And then there's just the downright confused and frustrated bunch. Right? And I'm kind of in this middle-side area, over here, most of the time.

That's not unexpected. There are many of us for whom just the idea of prayer gets our minds spinning on a million questions. We're like, “How does it work? Does it actually work if God knows what I'm going to say before I even say it? Why should I need to do it, you know? Does God respond to my prayers? How does that whole thing work out?”

And then you find yourself thinking about *that* when you're supposed to be praying. And then you're like, “Dang, I've got to move on with my day,” or whatever. And then you go. And then that's your experience of prayer.

And so whatever—we've got the whole spectrum in the room right now. And here's what's interesting, I think, is that: since I've become a Christian, I've paid attention to the language that

I use—or that I hear people use to talk about prayer—and you hear all these words of, like, “profound” and “solace” and “comfort” and “important” and “confusion,” and so on. Paul the Apostle used the word, like, “wrestling”—like, actual, “physical grappling,” when he talked about prayer. He says he has a friend, at the end of Colossians, who’s “grappling in prayer on your behalf.” And you’re like, “Yes, that’s how I feel”—I mean, “grappling” comes to your mind.

So we have all these words and things that come to our minds when we think about the practice of prayer. And one of the things that I almost never hear people talk about when they talk about their experiences of prayer is *Jesus*. Jesus. Now you might think, “What are you talking about? Like, of course, Jesus is involved in my prayer. I end my prayers with the name of Jesus,” right? [Laughing] But let’s just be honest: that’s the equivalent of hitting the “send” button for most of us, you know? And it’s just kind of like, it’s that thing that you do to make sure it has “extra effect,” or something like that. I don’t know.

But for many of us, that’s about what Jesus has to do with our prayers. And this is—it’s not good. It’s not good because, I mean, just think about it. And so here we are again, right? Jesus actually cared *deeply* about the prayer habits of his followers. He cared deeply about it. He cared that they prayed. He both modeled that in his own life—and we explored that earlier in the series: Jesus’s own habits of solitude and prayer and Scripture. But he also taught a lot about prayer. And he seemed to care deeply about how his followers prayed and what they prayed.

And he seemed to think that Christian prayer, and what he was teaching his disciples to do, was unique. It was different. Jesus acknowledged, as we’re going to see, that lots of people pray—across all kinds of spectrum and religious traditions. What makes Jesus’s followers’ prayer different and unique and distinct? And he seemed to care about that, because he taught a lot about it.

In fact, he gave us a prayer. And for many of us, that prayer has become so familiar to us [that] we’ve just forgotten about it—and forgotten its brilliance and its power. What am I talking about—the prayer that he gave us—what do we call it? We call it “the Lord’s Prayer.”

And there is—I’m convinced of it—a universe inside of the Lord’s Prayer. And because of familiarity, we’ve become accustomed to it. Bored with it. Probably not the “familiarity breeds contempt” with the Lord’s Prayer, but at least boredom or lack of inspiration. So it seems to me we need to come back here again because what mattered most closely to Jesus, he shared with us as he taught us how to pray.

So I invite you to get out your Bibles with me, and we’re going to focus on the Lord’s Prayer today. It’s in Matthew, chapter 6. So the first book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 6. Matthew chapter 6. So, look at verse 5. It’s a little introduction Jesus has to his prayer. And what he’s going to do: he’s going to identify two forms of praying that existed for his disciples out there in their culture already.

And that is true for us too. Every time *Time* magazine, or something like that, does—or the Pew Research Forum or something—does surveys on “the religious activities of Americans,” or something, prayer is always *way higher* than anybody’s religious affiliation with a church or a religion or a mosque or synagogue—anything. The prayer always outnumbers how many people are actually involved in an official religious organization. So whatever that means, prayer pervades the life of lots and lots of people who are all over the map spiritually. Jesus recognizes

that too. And so what makes a disciple of Jesus's prayer unique and different? What marks it as Christian? And that's what he's going to explore here.

So in verse 5, he just assumes that his disciples will pray. [Laughing] He just assumes it. He just says, "And when you all pray"—he's talking to a big group of disciples on a hillside. He says—"don't be like the hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full."

So he's talking about the very pious and religious in their Jewish community here. And as we're going to see in a little bit, biblical traditions of prayer—Jewish traditions of prayer—[were] modeled around the structure of prayer three times a day: morning, when you get up; before you go to bed; but then after, like, a midday prayer, an afternoon prayer. And what the midday prayer creates is an opportunity where you're, like, in the marketplace, or something, and, like, "Oh, it's time for prayer."

And there was a tendency forming, especially among some religious leaders, who [would] find themselves conveniently stepping up a stair or two to be quite visible to others as they, like, say their prayers, or something like that. And it's just ego, and it's just humans being stupid, right? But he says, "That's one extreme. Don't be like that."

So here's the first mark of Jesus-centered prayer is that *it's personal*. And you do it in a way that doesn't let on to anybody else that you're actually doing it. Look at what he says here. So he says, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door. Pray to your father who's unseen. And your father, who sees what's done in secret, will reward you."

For Jesus, prayer is a deeply personal and relational experience. And to even risk being in a setting where you will exploit to look good, in some way, is just to sabotage the whole thing. And so Jesus-centered prayer is meant to be done in a very discreet, almost, like, covert-type of way. Nobody else needs to know that you're doing it when you do your midday prayer.

But then there's another extreme. He says—look at verse 7—he says, "And when you pray, don't be, like . . . you know . . . what's going wrong with Jewish prayer, but also don't keep babbling on like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." Now, let's just stop, real quick, here. You hear the word "pagan" and do you think positive- or negative-association? The word "pagan"? It's mostly negative in English, isn't it? It's like a pejorative-type of word. And that's not the case in the Bible. This is kind of hard for us to get.

So the word has come to have all these connections to it that it doesn't actually have in the Bible. In the Bible, it's an ethnic term. It's always used in the mouth of somebody who's Jewish talking about somebody who's not Jewish. So he's talking about the Greeks—the Greeks or the Romans. "Here's the way to go wrong—and the way Jewish contemporaries are going wrong. Here's the non-Jewish world and how it prays." And the prayers are long. They're just really long prayers. That's the problem. Just the thought: praying needlessly long is an issue and, like, a real problem that shouldn't mark the prayers of his followers—"go think about these things."

So I don't know if you've ever had the experience of reading some of the great Greek or Roman classics, like Homer's *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, or something like that. You should. Just as, like, an inhabitant of the Western culture, you should know about these things. Go read Homer. And what you'll find is that lots of stories—and they're often filled with people making prayers to the

Greek and the Roman gods—to Zeus or to Apollo or something—and you will notice, it'll just jump right off the page: they're just, like, unbearably long. [Laughing] They're just really long.

And they're long for a reason because the whole point is that the Greek and Roman gods, like, you don't know if they like you. They could wake up with a chip on their shoulder that day, and they don't care about what you're saying to them. And so half of it is just rhetoric, trying to get the gods' attention and convincing them why they should . . .

Jesus's whole point is like: you don't—"to go on and on, trying to convince God about how important it is, shows that you don't actually understand who you're praying to." And so he says this, he says—verse 8, he says, "Don't be like them. Your father knows what you need before you ask him."

Now here's what's funny. I think many of us, we read that statement: "Okay, you don't need to go on and on . . . he already knows what you need." And our response to that is, "He already knows what I need? Well, why should I pray? If he already knows what I need, why should I pray?" And do you see that Jesus is drawing the *exact opposite* conclusion: "He already knows what you need, so *pray* for goodness sakes." Do you see? His logic here is completely upside down from [ours].

He sees the fact that the Father already knows and is already paying attention to you and knows what you need—he sees that as precisely the reason why you would pray. And then what he goes on to say—having avoided the two extremes—is to give us this beautiful little poetic prayer that is quite short: "This then is how you should pray . . ."

And I feel, I just feel compelled: we should say it aloud together, because it's the Lord's Prayer, for goodness sakes. So would you join me? "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

Now, some of you have more to the prayer. And some of your translations, especially if it's from [the] King James tradition—most of you don't—but you'll see a footnote, and you know that I love those footnotes. They're full of endlessly curious things.

So what's going on is: some of you might know the form of the prayer that has an ending. And that's what you'll see in the footnote: "For yours"—speaking to God—"yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." That's not original to the prayer. Jesus did not say that. And all of the earliest manuscripts that we have to this prayer are the form that we just read it in, in the shorter version. But when that addition was made, and how and why it was made, actually gives us a clue into how the Lord's Prayer began to play a role in the life of Christians and in the worship gatherings.

So, as we're going to come full circle, as we end today's exploration about the Lord's Prayer, we're going to see that this prayer very quickly—like almost immediately—became adopted as *the* daily prayer of followers of Jesus who prayed morning, afternoon, and evening—and prayed in the Sunday gatherings.

And within the first . . . somewhere . . . fifty, seventy-five years—especially, I think, in light of the Lord's Prayer being read, like, in Sunday gatherings, which are for worship—there was felt a need to conclude the prayer with something that sounds a little bit more like a praise song. So

“Yours is the kingdom, power, and glory . . .” That’s almost certainly where this addition came from. And it’s beautiful—and I actually think you should say it because it’s about how the Lord’s Prayer became the prayer of the church . . . but it’s not what Jesus said. Now, how’s that for dodging a whole complex conversation right there?

So here’s the prayer that he gave us right here. What on earth do you say about the Lord’s Prayer? You know, like, try and say something new? Of course not. But there is something about it that’s become so familiar to many of us that we actually stop seeing how profound and brilliant it is, and what Jesus is trying to get us to be and do as he gives this prayer to us.

And as I said, there’s a universe inside this prayer. This prayer is meant to actually not close you down by becoming too familiar. It’s supposed to crack open something that’s huge and expansive—invite you into all kinds of new experiences. What do you say? I’m not going to work our way through every line of the prayer. I just want to draw attention to a couple things.

Look at the prayer and just pay attention. It’s structured into two halves. There’s two halves to the poem, to the prayer here. And the two halves depend on the focus. If you look at the first half—it’s about five lines—you’ll see it’s all focused on God’s will and God’s agenda and his kingdom. It’s dominated by the words “you” and “yours.” Do you see that? So, “Hallowed be *your* name. May *your* kingdom come, may *your* will be done.” Do you see that right there? You, you, you.

So think about this: that Jesus wants his followers, before they do anything else, before we focus on what’s happening in *my* story and what’s not happening according to *my* will in my life—I first recognize that my story is just one little, tiny piece of the bigger story of what God is doing in the world. And so what I value, what I prioritize first, is God’s reputation—his name. What I value and prioritize first is the story of how his Kingdom is coming and how God’s rejoining Heaven and Earth according to his will, right? And—“on earth as it is in heaven,” and I do that first. It’s sort of like that’s the set of glasses that I see everything through. Even my own needs and prayer requests, I see through this first line. So that’s the first half.

Then look at the second half. It shifts to “us” and “our”—“Give *us* our daily bread, forgive *us* as we forgive. Lead *us* not into temptation . . . deliver *us*.” Do you see that right there? Do you see the two halves? *You, you, you. We, us; we, us; we, us.* There’s something right there. Pretty much, I just want us to think about that, right there—because again, there’s a universe inside of what’s happening here.

I think how most of us pray—especially the second half of the prayer—if you pray the prayer, you say “us—forgive us.” But I think most of us, in our mind, actually say “me—me and mine . . . God, do your thing. Now onto me. All right, so my bread, my physical well-being, my forgiveness, relationship with you.” So that’s how—I think—how most of us read it. And that’s clear—Jesus could have said that. He clearly envisioned that this is a personal prayer, said in close personal settings, right? “Go be by yourself”? But he doesn’t say, “Give me.”

In other words, that plural is *crucial*. And I mean, it makes all the difference in the world, because once I orient myself to the story of God’s kingdom coming into the world through Jesus, when I’m turning my attention—even when I turn my attention to my own story—it’s always in the context of “me, in the place of my broader community.” And so I’m not just praying about my needs. I’m also mindful of other people’s needs because there’s a whole lot of other people that need bread, and there’s a lot of other people that need forgiveness. And there’s lots

of other people who are in different trials. And so it gets your mind off of yourself in both halves of the prayer, onto God's story, and then onto the story of "me as a part of a broader community." We'll come back to that.

So there's two halves. Now, I've already been talking about as much time as you could say the Lord's Prayer, like, fifty times. [Laughs] So is this a short prayer? Does it fit Jesus's requirements of "not long"? It's not even—if you were to go up on steps in public, by the time everybody is looking at you to think that you're really religious, it's over. You won't actually even really look very religious, saying a prayer that's this short. And that's Jesus's point.

Now, this isn't the only form of the short prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples. He taught it to his disciples, we know on one other occasion, and almost certainly on many, many occasions. In fact, almost all of the teachings of Jesus—he's a traveling teacher. And so he's going around from town to town, village to village. And he does what all traveling teachers do. He has a fixed body of stuff that he's saying. It's not like he came up with new parables [in] every single village. That would be, like, two million parables or something, you know? So he developed a body of work—of proverbs, of sayings, of teachings. And so he certainly taught this prayer to lots of different people, on lots of different occasions.

And we have one of them, and the comparison is interesting. It's in Luke, chapter 11. So here—he's on a hill with a whole bunch of disciples here—he's somewhere else, "And one day, he had been praying in a certain place. When he was finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.' And so he said to them, 'When you pray, say this, "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we also forgive everyone who sins against us, and lead us not into temptation.'"

Now, is that the Lord's Prayer? [Laughing] So say, "yes." Say, "Yes." Because is it the Lord saying it? And is it a prayer? [Laughing] All right, done. I've convinced you. So is it the Lord's Prayer, as you know it from the occasion he mentioned it—Matthew? No. And that shouldn't bother you one ounce. He's a traveling teacher, for goodness sake. Does he have to say it the exact same way every time he said—? No, of course he doesn't. This is what traveling teachers do.

Now for all of this—this is actually, even, a shorter version. Jesus cared about brevity in prayer, by the way. It's just clear. "Look," he's like, "let's boil it down even more." So even though some of the phrases are a little different and it's even a shorter form, are the two halves still there in the same order? So you can even see the wording is important, but look—all the key words are there. "Father, kingdom, your name, bread, forgiveness, deliverance from testing," and so on. It's all right there.

So we have two wordings of the very same prayer that communicate the same exact message. Where did Jesus come up with this? What's at the heart of this prayer and what's at the heart of these two halves? And if there's two different forms of it, it's clearly . . . We should not get so much hung up on the precise wording but on the heartbeat of the prayer—which is bound up with the key themes—and then connect these two halves. Where did Jesus come up with this prayer? Why did he give it to us in this way? And what did he mean to invite us into by inviting us to pray this prayer?

To explore that—put your thumb here and go forward with me about fifteen chapters in Matthew—to Matthew 22. Matthew 22. We're going to go down a rabbit hole, but curiously, the rabbit hole is going to land us precisely at the Lord's Prayer by the end of it. You guys ready? Rabbit hole: Matthew 22, verse 34. And this story is in the last week that Jesus spent in Jerusalem—the Passover and leading up to his execution. So this is really an intense week in the life of Jesus.

Chapter 22, verse 34, “Now, hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees”—which was one Jewish religious group—“the Pharisees”—another Jewish religious group—“got together. And one of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question, ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?’”

Now, it's a perfectly good question. Is it being asked from a right motive? No, no. What's the purpose? It's “get Jesus.” That's the purpose. This is a loaded question. Think of a politically or religiously charged hot topic in our setting, and this person is coming to Jesus asking him that question—they don't want to learn anything. They're trying to peg him in a pigeonhole so that they can get him to line up and see where he is and where he fits on their map, politically and religiously.

It would be like in our setting, someone coming up and [asking], “Jesus, legalization of marijuana?” And it's like, “Well, oh . . .” So you're trying to peg someone because you assume if you know what they think about *that*, you will also know what they think about *this, this, this, and this*. And Jesus always resists people trying to categorize him. He breaks everybody's categories.

And so the question is a very Jewish one, and it's a hot topic in first-century Judaism. So this guy's an expert in the Scriptures. The law is—don't think American, English law, or lawyers, or anything. It's a Jewish term referring to the first five books of the Scriptures, which in Jewish tradition are called *the Torah*, which is translated as “law” right here.

And in the Torah, there's a whole bunch of commands. You have the story of Abraham, and then it becomes Israel—Israel comes out of slavery in Egypt to the foot of Mount Sinai. They're given the 10 Commandments, and then they're given 603 more commandments after that, making a grand total of 613. I mean . . . that's just a lot of commands already.

But here's what's interesting. Those are what's in Exodus, Numbers—excuse me, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. But if you look at those 613—there's all kinds of different commands about, like, you know, how to deal with your neighbor's cow as it eats grass on your farm, or something. And, like, what kind of clothing you should—food you should or shouldn't eat, how to do the sacrifices, and so on. And you think, “Holy cow, 613. Surely that's plenty.” Well, actually, it's not. It's not plenty because there are all these gapped “holes” in the commands and how they relate to each other. And there's a million other scenarios that the 613 don't envision.

And so one of the tasks of Jewish scholars after that was to come up with a whole other body of, like, sub-commands that clarify the original 613 commands. And so you have Jewish students, like, they're coming to learn the Scriptures, and then this whole thing—and there's, like, thousands of commands.

And so a raging debate and discussion in Jesus's day is, "Well, which one's the most important"? Like, which is the one that you make sure that you do so that you will end up doing all of the others at the same time? Or which one is the "common denominator" underneath all of them? Right? That's the discussion. And different groups of Jewish people landed in different areas.

And so here we go. We're trying to peg Jesus: "Which kind of Jewish teacher are you, Jesus?" And, ever brilliant, this is how he replies. "Jesus replied, he says, 'Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your mind.'" Now, did he come up with that? No. What's he doing? Just—he's quoting the Scriptures, right? And he's quoting from the Torah—specifically from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6.

Now, even *more* than he's just quoting Torah—"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, with all your mind"—this comes from a prayer. This comes from a prayer called the Shema prayer, and I often close our gatherings with it. It's the Shema prayer that was said three times a day in Jewish tradition. It was the heartbeat, so to speak. It was, like, the Jewish creed—the closest thing that Judaism has to a creed of belief is saying the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul . . ." and so on.

So Jesus quotes that—and then he says this: "This is the first and greatest commandment," but then he keeps going. Now, what was the guy's question—"What is *the* greatest commandment?" And he says, "Well, here's the first," and then he says, "and *the second* is like it." Now, I think most of us read that as "Here's the first and most important. And here's the second most important." That's not what he's saying. He's saying something much more clever than that, right?

So the guy asked him, "What's the most important commandment?" And he said, "Well, here is the *first* greatest commandment: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart—and here is the *other* greatest commandment.'" In other words, how many greatest commandments are there? No—there's one. There's one greatest commandment. And what is it? Well, first is: *love God*. And the second is: *love your neighbor as yourself*. So which one is the greatest? *Exactly*. Yes. *Right*. That's exactly—it's Jesus. Come on. He's so awesome.

So "the second is like it." It's *like* it. Well, what command is like loving—"love the Lord your God"? Well, "love your neighbor as yourself." And did he come up with that line? [Laughing] No, he didn't come up with that. What's he doing? He's quoting your favorite book of the Torah. What's he quoting right here? From Leviticus, chapter 19. Leviticus—he was a huge fan of Leviticus, apparently. So—and then look how he sums it up. He says, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. All the Scriptures: the Torah, the Prophets—everything in the Scriptures hangs right here." Absolutely brilliant.

So, "What's the greatest command, Jesus?" Well, "Here's the first greatest command, and then here's the second greatest command." But don't think "second" in terms of "height, importance." You know what I'm saying? Do you understand what he's saying? It's just awesome. I'm trying to say it right, but it's so great.

So, in other words, Jesus sees your personal relation to God as completely interwoven and inextricable from your relationships to other divine, image-bearing human beings. And all religious traditions, no matter where they come from, they tend towards this. They tend towards:

“Well, as long as I can maintain this kind of personal, relational connection with the deity of some kind, then as long as, like, we do that and the practices that make that healthy, then I must be doing great.”

And Jesus is like, “You’re kidding me, right? That actually could be the worst deception of the human heart—is the religious deception. Because, like, your actual relationships in your lives can be in ruin, and you think you’re just—you think you’re doing just fine, because you’re doing, like, this thing that’s this kind of personal, intangible connection here. And so Jesus is just like, “No, they’re utterly interwoven. They, together, are the greatest commandment: to love God and to love your neighbor.”

If my personal relationships are in ruins, and if part of why they’re being in ruin—or maybe even the whole reason why they’re in ruin—is because of, like, stupid, sinful stuff that I’m doing, or that’s inside of me, Jesus would say, “You think you love God, but you actually don’t. You need to love—you need to love God by, first of all, loving those people, and humbling yourself, and making that right. And it’s two sides of the same coin—two sides of the same coin.”

So, for Jesus, this is what one of my favorite New Testament scholars, a guy named Scot McKnight—he wrote a whole, wonderful little book right here on this story—summarizes what Jesus is saying here. He calls it the “Jesus Creed” because—what is unique about what Jesus is doing? It’s not the story—he’s just quoting the Scriptures. But he’s combined them in a new and profound way. *You love God, you love people*. And the two of those are so closely connected that they are, together, the greatest commandment. This is unique to Jesus. And he—it summarizes, like, the ethic of Jesus and what he called his followers to. It’s the Jesus Creed.

So, here we are. What does it have to do with the Lord’s Prayer? It has everything to do with the Lord’s Prayer because I think it actually—it forms the background. It’s giving us a window into the very heartbeat of what Jesus was about. It gives us a window into what he believed human existence was about: to live in right covenant relationship and loyalty to the one true creator God. And to express that through right, healthy relationships and seeking the well-being of the other humans who bear God’s image around me. And who Jesus is—and this is, I believe, what’s at work in the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer, I would put it to you, is the Jesus Creed turned into a prayer: “Love God. Love your neighbor.”

Go back to Matthew, chapter 6, with me. How you guys doing? Jesus takes the Scriptures—he takes the Jewish tradition in his day—he reorders it and adapts it to become something unique to him and what he’s doing. And this is exactly what he’s doing in the Lord’s Prayer.

There was a Jewish prayer that existed in Jesus’s day. It was mostly said at synagogue gatherings, but also on other occasions as well—some of the great feasts, and so on. And this prayer—it was a very biblical prayer—most of the language is borrowed from the book of Psalms and so on—but it was a popular prayer in Jesus’s day. It’s called the *Kaddish*. Let me read it to you, and you’ll perceive what’s going on here.

So this prayer pre-existed Jesus. It was being said in synagogues and so on, and it reads, “May God’s great name be exalted and hallowed in the world which he created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the house of Israel, speedily and soon. Amen? Amen.”

You just see it right there. Can you just see all the keywords right there? The overlap with the Lord's Prayer—God's name being hallowed, God's will, God's kingdom coming, and so on. So Jesus—even the first half of the Lord's Prayer. And both of these are looking at different biblical passages, right—but notice: which half of the Lord's Prayer does this match up with? Isn't that interesting?

So in other words, Jesus—along with the Scriptures and Jewish contemporaries—he's happy to emphasize, and to put first and foremost, this “orienting myself to God's will and God's mission and God's story.” First of all, that's just what you do.

But then what he's done is: he's done a Jesus Creed on this thing, right? He's made it uniquely his own to mark what he thinks is the greatest commandment, which is a form of loving God. You're valuing what God values by placing it first and foremost. It's like what Jesus said: “Seek first the kingdom. Everything else will sort itself out.” Pray about the kingdom, pray for the kingdom to come, but that—don't think that you're done yet, because the whole question is: “Well, how is loving God expressed? How is it that God's kingdom actually starts coming?” And it seems to me that's precisely what the second half of the Lord's Prayer is about. If the first half is about loving *God*, the second half is about loving your neighbor.

Now come back to the prayer. Matthew 6—look at the second half—and I highlighted this. Notice Jesus did not teach us to pray, “Give *me* the bread that I need today.” What if you're praying this prayer—praying [the] Lord's Prayer, like you do, right?—and you have enough bread? In fact, you have no question where your next three meals are coming from? Your next, like, twenty-one meals, or whatever—like, you just, you have enough food. But you're not just praying about *your* bread, are you? Are you? No, you're praying about *our* bread.

In other words, this prayer is meant to also direct your mind to “us” and to “our.” “I have enough bread. Can I think of anybody I know who doesn't have enough bread?” Unless you, like, walk around the city of Portland going like this [deliberately looking downward], you're likely to notice, like, that people don't have bread. What are you going to do about that?

What does it mean for “God's kingdom to come” and for “his will to be done”? I'm somebody who says, “I love God,” but Jesus says, “That's great, so how are you loving your neighbor?” Are you with me here? So, you know, “Forgive us, forgive me, God. I'm really screwed up. Forgive me.” And at the same time, Jesus says, “Yeah, and also look outward. Who is it that you haven't forgiven?” He immediately pushes you out, towards “us.”

“Lead *us* not into temptation, deliver *us* from the evil one.” You may be in a season where you're going through an incredibly difficult trial, and your faithfulness to Jesus is being tested. You may not. My guess is you know *somebody* who is undergoing this time of testing. And what the prayer is meant to do is get your mind off of yourself and out onto how God's kingdom can come in and through you—loving God and loving your neighbor by actually, like, doing something. In other words, the second half of the prayer is both a prayer [and] assumes that God's people will begin to become the answers to that prayer in their very actions. You guys with me here?

So it seems to me what Jesus has given us is something like this. So I have—just—here's sheet music, right here: “From this Valley.” Wasn't that a great song? What are you supposed to do with this? Here's the text of a song. What are you supposed to do with it? Well—and if you look, it's not just the lyrics. It has the title. And then it has all these letters, like “B” and “F sharp” and “E,” and so on—like, in between the lines. And then “chorus,” and then—“ooh, O, O,” times two.

And then “chorus with tag”—some of you know what that means. That’s code or something like that.

So if I were to give this to you, what you should *not* do with it is, like, go, like, put it in your pocket, and then go out for a cup of coffee tomorrow and just be, like—read it, and be like, “Hmm. Hmm, that’s really interesting,” or something. Now, the point of these words on this page is to perform them, right? And it actually has all of these . . . little things in there that tell you how to do it, and how to carry it out.

It seems to me that that’s exactly what the Lord’s Prayer is. It both tells you what God is up to, and then it immediately—and so you align yourself with that—but then you immediately force yourself to start praying for how you are going to be a part of what God is doing to bring his kingdom. Jesus is brilliant. Let’s just give it to him right now. I mean, it’s amazing. This is, really, an amazing prayer.

And so now, all of a sudden, saying this prayer isn’t about, just like, saying the words. These words become a window for how you’re living your life. This is a prayer that’s meant to become, like, scaffolding, as it were, that we build our lives on. And every day you’re out there wondering like, “Holy cow, who do I need to forgive?” What—you guys with me here on that part? I could riff on that for a long time, but I think I’ve made my point. We’ll come back to it.

So how often—like, when did Jesus envision that we say this prayer? Because I think he actually had something in mind when he said, “*When you pray, pray this . . .*” I think he meant it. I don’t know, you guys—I think he actually meant it. Like we’re actually—not that this should be the only thing we pray. Surely there’s spontaneous prayer, there’s group prayer, thanksgiving, and so on.

But Jesus seems to actually think that this prayer—again, the wording, short, long, but the core is the heart of it . . . and the two halves—Jesus seemed to think that this prayer plays some sort of regular role in the lives of his disciples. How and what does that look like?

Well, let’s go back to the sources, right? I mean, he just says it right there, “When you pray, say . . .” I think he means that. Where did Jesus learn to pray? And what were the patterns of prayer that Jesus adopted? Well, let’s go to the prayer that he quoted from in the story that we just read—in the greatest commandment—he quoted the greatest prayer of Judaism, called the Shema.

And look how the Shema begins, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord—[sings] the Lord is our God—the Lord alone,” or—there’s some translation issues there—or “the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. Keep these words that I’m commanding you today *in your heart*.”

How do you keep words *in your heart* so that these words form the center of how you see everything and live? Oh, I have an idea—how about like saying them often? That’s one way. So “recite them to your children, and talk about them when you’re at home and when you’re away, when you lie down and when you rise.” So, you know, as, like, Western Protestant Christians, of course, we want to dodge all of this, and we’re just like, “It’s just truly a ‘recommendation’ that we might ‘think about’ praying two times a day.”

It’s like—actually, it doesn’t seem like that, does it? If you, like, want to associate yourself with this tradition, this is how you roll. “When you lie down and when you rise.” So we’re at least

talking—what? At least twice. But then there's all this, you know, "when you're at home, when you're away, throughout the day." So what's that?

And so you got Moses here. Five hundred years later, we hear a reference by David to not just prayer at the beginning, but also a midday prayer. So Psalm 55, David says, "As for me, I call to God and the Lord saves me: evening, morning, noon, I cry out in distress, he hears my voice."

Five hundred years after David, we find Daniel, and he's in Babylon, and this is developed into a full-blown—"this is just what you do." So "when Daniel learned that the decree of his execution had been published, he went upstairs to his room, and the windows opened to Jerusalem. Three times a day, he got down on his knees, and he prayed." And then in the five hundred years from Daniel to Jesus, all the Jewish writing and tradition that we have just assumes this. This is just what you do: you pray morning, afternoon, evening. And what do you pray? You pray the Shema. You pray the Shema prayer. This is just what you do.

So when Jesus, here, begins and says, "When you all pray, don't be like the hypocrites," I think many of us—we've kind of said to ourselves, "Yeah, exactly. The hypocrites. Because they, like, have turned prayer into an old, dead ritual and they do it at 'set times' and they don't even mean it." But that's not actually what he says, is it?

He doesn't say, like, "Don't have habits and rhythms of prayer." The problem with prayer becoming [a] "dead ritual" is us, not the practice. You guys with me? The problem is us. Jesus seems to think the practice is really important, so he just assumes it: "When you all pray, pray like this."

And so notice what he's doing. He's asking his followers to transform the Shema into something even bigger: "Love the Lord your God, but love your neighbor as yourself." Because the Lord's Prayer is a way of saying "love God and love people." And the first clues we have about the prayer lives of the earliest Christians show exactly this pattern right here. I'm just inundating you on purpose right now, just to show you that I'm not making this up.

So in the book of Acts, chapter 2, all the disciples are there. They're following what? They're following "the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and they're devoting themselves to the *prayers*." Some of your English translations don't include that plural. I don't know why, because it's right there in the original language: "They're devoting themselves to prayers." Some of your English translations do have plural right there, and that's right. Because it's a reference to morning, afternoon, evening prayer. It's just assumed.

Chapter 3, "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer, about three in the afternoon . . ." This is introducing a story about Peter and John—it's not about prayer at all. It's just something else [that] happens, but it's just assumed, like, you know, like Christians do—you pray at 3 p.m., right? We're all, like, American Protestants. We're all like, "Huh? What?" It's, like, "Oh, that's just what you do."

Chapter 10—this one's really interesting. This is a non-Jewish person who's become a Christian. "At Caesarea, there's a man named Cornelius. He was a centurion. He served in the Roman army, for goodness sake, in what was known as the Italian cohort. He was a devout man. Feared God with his household. He gave alms generously to the people. He prayed continually to God"—what does that mean? What does a life marked by continual prayer look like?

Well, he says it later on in the chapter. He says, “About four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour”—which, by their clock, is what we would call 3 p.m.—it’s just what you do. And you go out of the New Testament and the earliest traditions we have—to, like, the 100s of the early Christianity—it’s clear teachings about Christians praying the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.

So as I’ve done a number of times in this series—so there you go, I’m just going to lob that at you. And you know, my whole point of, like, showing you all of this is just to say, like: this is you and Jesus, and you and the Scriptures. And whether you think this practice is not biblical, I just leave you to use your brain and think about that one, right?

So—but just think about what’s happening. Are we talking about three times a day, you go spend an hour in prayer? Is that what Jesus is talking about? It takes you forty-five seconds to say the prayer. So the point is this habit: you intentionally interrupt your life to remind yourself about the Jesus Creed, and of who Jesus is, and what’s most important to him, and what’s most important to one of his followers.

And as I’ve kind of rediscovered or adopted this practice in my life in the last few years, it’s actually the midday prayer that has become the most awesome experience. Because the whole point is: don’t let people know you’re doing it. Like, just pause and do it. Nobody should know. And here’s what you’ll find yourself doing. You’ll find yourself at the oddest, random places, saying the Lord’s Prayer.

And all of a sudden, these words that you are so familiar with, they are connecting—and there’s new things happening because of *where* you were saying it. You’ll see somebody who clearly does not have bread when you’re saying the Lord’s Prayer and, like, just, let Jesus mess with you on that one, right?

You’ll be in your workplace, and there’s all these crabby people who hate each other—and then, praying for forgiveness in that kind of setting? Whoa—and it gets your mind spinning. And then, of course, if you just prayed, “May your kingdom come,” and if I’m one of your followers and I’m a part of your kingdom coming, then what on earth do I need to do about that? There you go. It’ll mess with you—especially the midday prayer, I have found.

So there you go. I trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us, as a church, to become the kinds of praying people the Spirit wants us to be. But this is very powerful and the Lord’s Prayer—there’s a universe in it, and there’s a whole life to be discovered by weaving, weaving this prayer into our hearts, into our minds. That’s enough. I just want to let you sit with that.

But as we close and as we transition into worship—which is our time to reflect and to pray and to think about what it means to respond to this—I want to play you something. It’s a Syrian nun singing the Lord’s Prayer in Aramaic. Aramaic was the language that Jesus spoke this prayer in. And there’s a church in the old city of Jerusalem, called St. Mark’s Syrian Orthodox Church—it’s one of the oldest churches in the world. All of the liturgy—their prayers and people praying prayers, monks and nuns there—and they’re praying the liturgy mostly in Aramaic, which was the language that the first Christians mostly prayed in.

And there’s a precious nun there. I was there about seven years ago. I just had a friend who was there recently, and the same nun is there, in the same little church, in that old little alleyway

in Jerusalem. And three times a day, she leads whoever is there in saying the Lord's Prayer. She sings it in Aramaic.

And so I'd like to play it for you—and it's long. She goes through it very slowly—[adds sarcastically] *three minutes*—three minutes long. But three minutes would be like, “Is she really still saying the Lord's Prayer? Like, could it take that long?” But she's talking really slowly. But I just encourage you to—just—let's be open-minded to this and let the Lord really guide you as to what it would look like for you to somehow respond to Jesus's teachings about prayer.

But the time is ours just to respond to Jesus now.

[Syrian nun sings (49:21—51:19)]

All right, you guys, that wraps up this three-part series. In the next episode, we'll open a new series [and] explore all kinds of new things from my strange Bible—and yours. You guys, thanks for listening to the podcast, and I hope these are helpful for you. They're so helpful for me personally.

[EMSB Theme Outro fades in]

It's such a privilege to be able to both learn and prepare for all these teachings, and then to release them out into the body of Jesus's followers. So if they're helpful for you, feel free to spread the word about this podcast. Share it with your friends. You can share a review on iTunes—and cheers. We'll see you next time.

[EMSB Theme Outro fades out]