

Whose Father in heaven?

In Matthew, the Lord's Prayer is a prayer for enemies.

by [Charles Manto](#) in the [January 26, 2022](#) issue



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When Jesus begins the prayer that has come to be called the Lord's Prayer with the words "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9), who is included in his "our"?

In the history of the prayer's interpretation, "our" has sometimes been understood expansively: the crowd, all people, all of creation. It has also been understood narrowly: the children of Abraham, the Jewish people, anyone who has accepted that Jesus is the Christ, the disciples.

One possibility that has been missing from the debate is that the "our" is at once far more universal and far more specific than the tradition has allowed. I'm convinced that the "our" in the Our Father includes both the person praying and that person's enemies. The prayer is teaching us how to pray for our enemies.

Consider the prayer's context within the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gives the crowd extensive instructions on how to deal with those whom they consider their enemies and those who are persecuting them. This culminates in his admonition to "love your enemies and pray for your persecutors" (Matt. 5:44). This context is essential in understanding what it means that Jesus tells the people to be the "salt of the earth" or what to do if someone takes you to court. That same focus remains when Jesus teaches the crowds how to pray: the "our" is both us and those with whom we are fighting.

If this sounds unusual to us, it might have sounded even more so to Jesus' first listeners. These weren't just any people. Jesus' crowd was the poor, the underclass, the socially despised. They would have been persecuted by many people, and many people would have had a great deal of power over them. The question of how to be in relation to these people was not an abstract one; this is one reason Jesus focuses so extensively on it.

Reading and preaching the Sermon on the Mount for decades, I missed this context until I decided to memorize the text in biblical Greek and set it to music. Recognizing how awful my rote memory skills were, I decided to look for patterns in the text that would make my task easier. The patterns I found suggest that the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 is not in a separate section at all but is directly connected to Jesus' insistence on praying for persecutors in Matthew 5:44.

After telling the crowd to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors, Jesus then tells them why they should do this. They have a connection to those people: the Father (our Father) who gives sunshine and rain on both the "good" and the "bad" (Matt. 5:45). This also clarifies the instruction to pray for their persecutors. Initially this would likely sound as outrageous as asking them to love instead of hate their enemies. But Jesus then reminds them that "even the most despised tax collectors can love their friends," and he asks them to do better than that: to be perfect like the Father who gives sun and rain to the good and the evil, the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45-48).

Does he then change the subject at the beginning of what we call chapter 6? I would argue he does not. The connection is clearer in Greek. In the same way that "pay" sounds like "pray" in English, the first word of chapter 6 is *prosecheteh*, which means, "Pay attention!" We might expect him to instead say *prosuchestheh* ("pray"), because this would continue the previous thought. The soundalike words

add rhetorical force. Jesus is saying, in effect, *Before I tell you how to pray for those who persecute you, pay attention! Let me tell you how not to pray for them: don't make big public gestures of righteousness.*

This is the centerpiece of three actions that Jesus says should not be done in front of people (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting), in contrast with three things he just said should be: gentleness, mercy, and peacemaking. “Let your light shine so that people see your good works and glorify the Father” (Matt. 5:16). This contrast creates further rhetorical tension (and makes the passage easier to remember).

Jesus then turns to the matter at hand: how to pray for those who persecute you. First you acknowledge the connection that you share: *Our Father*. Then you acknowledge that over which you are in conflict: *our daily bread*. The Lord's Prayer becomes a prayer about conflict and ultimately one that teaches peace and empathy. And each of the phrases begins to connect more powerfully to the others.

Although it is impossible to know how the first listeners heard this prayer, I can imagine it must have grabbed their attention. It must have seemed outrageous compared to what they would normally do—pray *against* their enemies. And in each phrase of the prayer for persecutors, the outrage and rhetorical force only grows.

Imagine how it might have felt to hear “Our Father”—that is, the Father of both me and the one who is taking my food, livelihood, health, shelter, safety, family. Jesus focuses attention on the conflict by asking the crowd to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Because if it is God's will being done, my persecutors would not be hurting me like this. God's will is to fix this, right?

The “our” in “Our Father” is at once far more universal and far more specific than the tradition has allowed.

Then Jesus adds to this demanding prayer. *Give my persecutors and me the very necessity they are denying me.* Why should I ask that the bad guys who stole my bread, housing, or family be given the very things they are taking from me? They don't deserve those things. They are the bad guys. I deserve them. I am the one who worked for them. If they came by here now, I would attack them and take my bread back. The rhetorical force of the prayer is growing, as is my attention and likely my outrage as I consider this odd-sounding request to ask that the Father give what is needed to survive to the very ones who have taken it from me.

In this reading of the prayer, “Forgive us” is not a generic nicety. It is a request that I be forgiven along with the person who has taken from me. Wait! The thieves stole it; I didn’t. They need forgiveness, not me. At this point wouldn’t I be far more inclined to ask God to make those people rot in hell for what they have done?

But perhaps I start to remember the words Jesus spoke just moments before: “Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty” (Matt. 5:22), guilty as if they had committed murder. Getting angry like this lands me in the company of the persecutors. Not only have I perhaps done something comparable at some time in my life, but at this very moment, I am doing a greater evil.

Jesus has just flipped things around on me. I was the pure, innocent victim in solidarity only with other victims; now I am also in solidarity with my own victimizers, with the persecutors. At this moment, I have the opportunity to gain peace by both receiving forgiveness and giving it to the ones who robbed me of mine.

Finally, the grand bargain appears. At the height of my rage I’m told to ask for forgiveness based on how forgiving I am toward this person I want to murder a million times over. The implicit question: If the Father, the judge of all judges, gives me a pop quiz to examine how forgiving I am, would I pass or fail? The obvious answer is that I would fail. No wonder then that the very next phrase in the prayer is “and lead us not into testing”—because if we were to be tested we would fail, and the consequences to us would be most disastrous since we would become the ones not forgiven. And then the inevitable conclusion: “deliver us from evil,” from the consequences of our failure to forgive. This sequence drives us to humility and to a frame of mind that allows us to receive the gift of forgiveness, which in turn motivates us to give that gift to others.

If there were any doubt about the rhetorical force of his instructions, Jesus concludes the prayer in Matthew with a challenge: “So if you forgive them, then the Father will forgive you; but if you don’t forgive them, then He will not forgive you” (Matt. 6:14–15). This is the closing bracket to the difficult question of how to pray for those who persecute you.

Jesus has offered a step-by-step way to peace for those whose peace has been broken, a way to become peacemakers even to those who were responsible for their loss. The way to peace and freedom is to find solidarity with the persecutors, to

recognize them as members of your own family, and then to ask and to offer forgiveness. By adopting a way to pray for those responsible for our worst-case conflict, it makes it possible for us to pray for all the lesser cases. The alternative to not forgiving in this way would be to miss out on experiencing peace, on becoming a new peacemaker—and to risk becoming the next peacebreaker.

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