

*A Six-week Study Guide for*

# **THE GREATEST PRAYER**

**Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the  
Lord's Prayer**

**by**

**John Dominic Crossan**

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This Study Guide can be used to lead a discussion of *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* by John Dominic Crossan, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2010.

*God is still speaking,*  
**UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST**



# Session 1

## *Prologue and Chapter 1*

### **Opening Prayer** *(for the start of each session)*

Gracious, loving, and justice-seeking God, we thank you for this time to be together. Warm our hearts, inspire our minds, and guide our speaking so that each one of us may receive insights and contribute to this conversation in accordance with your will. We seek your help in gaining a deeper understanding of Jesus' teachings and of your intentions for us and your world. Amen.

### **Brief background on the author, John Dominic Crossan**

John Dominic Crossan was born in Ireland and educated in Ireland, the United States, Jerusalem, and Rome. He was a member of a thirteenth-century Roman Catholic religious order, the Servites (*Ordo Servorum Mariae*), from 1950 to 1969 and an ordained priest from 1957 to 1969. He taught at DePaul University, Chicago, from 1969 to 1995. He co-chaired the Jesus Seminar from 1985 to 1996 as it met in twice-annual meetings to debate the historicity of the life of Jesus in the gospels. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and twenty-seven books on the historical Jesus, the apostle Paul, and earliest Christianity.

**Prologue: The Strangest Prayer.** *Crossan introduces the concept of distributive justice – that everyone deserves a fair share of the bounty of God's world.*

1. What is your experience with praying the Lord's Prayer? Is it a meaningful prayer for you or has it become very rote, spoken but not really thought about?
2. Crossan calls the Lord's Prayer the greatest prayer but also the strangest prayer. Why?
3. Crossan writes that the Lord's Prayer is both a revolutionary manifesto and a hymn of hope? What makes it a hymn? What makes it revolutionary?
4. Crossan mentions two types of justice (p. 2). What is retributive justice? distributive justice? Do you agree that the primary meaning of biblical justice is not retributive but distributive? What is your view of justice?

**Chapter 1: Pray Then in this Way.** *Crossan introduces the idea of joining prayer to justice; that there is no prayer without justice and no justice without prayer.*

1. Discuss the tension between the Biblical patterns of prayers of request and gratitude, and the prophetic call for justice.
2. The prophets, speaking for God, demand distributive justice (a fair share of God's world for all God's people), especially for the socially, structurally and systemically vulnerable—widows and orphans, who lack husbands and fathers in a patriarchal society, and resident aliens, who lack familial protection in a tribal society. Who are the vulnerable in our communities, our country and the world?
3. Crossan writes (page 14) that the phrase “justice and righteousness,” which is the Bible’s summary of the character and spirit of God, “points to distributive justice as the Bible’s radical vision of God.” Do you agree?
4. Crossan claims the prophets saw prayer and distributive justice as two sides of the same coin (page 20) — two things that can be distinguished from each other but not separated. Do you agree? Is this how we live our lives, how our church conducts its ministries?
5. Why does Jesus tell his disciples to “pray in this way”?
6. What do you make of Crossan's conclusion that Jesus asked his disciples to pray this way because he wanted them (and us) to join prayer to justice, that Jesus wants us to pray for what God wants? (See Crossan's coin metaphor on page 20.)

**Closing Prayer.** *Crossan writes that it is the Spirit praying within us that allows us to pray. Moreover, we pray to the God of justice to be empowered by that God for justice (page 24). At its best, prayer is collaboration between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit (page 25). We will close this session and the next five sessions by praying together the Lord's Prayer. When we conclude the prayer, we will continue in silence as we listen to the Spirit praying in and through us. During this time, we may briefly mention any issues of distributive injustice that are brought to weigh on our hearts.*

# Session 2

*Chapters 2 and 3*

## **Opening Prayer**

Gracious, loving, and justice-seeking God, we thank you for this time to be together. Warm our hearts, inspire our minds, and guide our speaking so that each one of us may receive insights and contribute to this conversation in accordance with your will. We seek your help in gaining a deeper understanding of Jesus' teachings and of your intentions for us and your world. Amen.

**Chapter 2: Our Father in Heaven.** *Crossan identifies the world as a household and God as the householder.*

1. Why does the greatest prayer open with a male-oriented title and patriarchal mode of address? Why father and not mother, or why not another male image such as warrior king, just judge, feudal lord? What metaphorical meaning did Jesus and Paul have in mind when referring to God as Father?
2. What is the Biblical basis for Crossan's conclusions that 1) to call God our father really is to call God the Householder of the World and 2) householders can be male or female?
3. Does the U.S. economy function like a well-run household? Does everyone have an equitable share of the bounty of that economy? How would you describe an equitable share? [For more information on inequality, see the UCC webpage <http://tinyurl.com/uccinequality> ]
4. usly identified the most vulnerable in our society, this would be a good time to do so. (See Crossan's list on page 44) Either way, what can be done so that the most vulnerable have "enough," enough food, shelter, clothing and health care? What can and should the church be doing to make the world a well-run household?

**Chapter 3: Hallowed Be Your Name.** *Crossan explains the relationship between holiness and distributive justice, and writes that the Sabbath-day and Sabbath-year rules of Leviticus were designed as a safety net.*

1. Discuss the imperative mood used in the Greek for the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer (Be Hallowed the name of you; become the kingdom of you; be done the will of you). Who is commanding whom? Are we ordering God the Father/Householder, or is God the Father/Householder ordering us? Or is this the collaborative ordering of God and us?
2. To hallow means to make holy or to sanctify. We believe that God is holy but what do we mean by holy? Would have Jesus' disciples have understood when he said that God is holy? Are we to be holy also? If so, what is our model of holiness? What is the connection between holiness and distributive justice?
3. Why does Leviticus 19 repeatedly use the refrain, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt"? How does (or does not) the Lord's Prayer remind Christians today that, like Israel, we are called to deliver the oppressed of our society?
4. What is the connection between God's holiness, Sabbath holiness, and our holiness? What is the purpose and meaning of God creating the world?
5. Trace the Sabbath day through Sabbath year to Sabbath Jubilee. What are their purposes? How do these Sabbaths connect to distributive justice? Is the U.S. social safety net an example of distributive justice? If Jesus were designing it, how might he change it? What role "charity" play in distributive justice?
6. Discuss the distinction between the Sabbath Day as 1) rest from work as worship and 2) rest from work for worship.
7. What do you think of starting the Lord's Prayer with the words, "Householder of the World, you are the deliverer of the oppressed and the defenseless"?

**Closing Prayer.** *Crossan writes that it is the Spirit praying within us that allows us to pray. Moreover, we pray to the God of justice to be empowered by that God for justice (page 24). At its best, prayer is collaboration between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit (page 25). We will close this session and the next five sessions by praying together the Lord's Prayer. When we conclude the prayer, we will continue in silence as we listen to the Spirit praying in and through us. During this time, we may briefly mention any issues of distributive injustice that are brought to weigh on our hearts.*

# Session 3

Chapters 4 and 5

## Opening Prayer

Gracious, loving, and justice-seeking God, we thank you for this time to be together. Warm our hearts, inspire our minds, and guide our speaking so that each one of us may receive insights and contribute to this conversation in accordance with your will. We seek your help in gaining a deeper understanding of Jesus' teachings and of your intentions for us and your world. Amen.

**Chapter 4: Your Kingdom Come.** *Crossan distinguishes the kingdom of God from imperial kingdoms. He imagines God's kingdom as what earth would be like if God's rule and God's distributive justice determined our social structures. Also, Crossan defines eschaton as the end of the age but not the end of the world. The end of the age is the transformation of the unjust world into a place of justice through our collaboration with God.*

1. Compare using the terms kingdom of God, kindom of God, reign of God and the ruling style of God. Which do you prefer and why does Crossan oppose the use of the kindom of God?
2. Before reading *The Greatest Prayer*, what did you think Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God? What did biblical references to the end of the age signify? What do you think of Crossan's definition of eschaton (the end of the age – page 79)? Might the way we define these concepts also change the way we live our lives?
3. According to Crossan, how is the Great Divine Cleanup of the World (page 79) going to happen? Who is going to do the work? God by himself, or does he need some help here? And who is going to provide that help? How is the church going to help?
4. Discuss the difference in John the Baptist's vision of Gods' kingdom and Jesus'.
5. Discuss the difference between Rome's kingdom and God's.

**Chapter 5: Your Will Be Done on Earth.** *This chapter describes Jesus' hope for earth to be more like heaven.*

1. Before reading this book, what was your concept of God's will? After reading the book?
2. Crossan claims that “on earth as it is in heaven” is better translated from the Greek as “as in heaven so on earth.” What difference does that change in translation mean for the meaning of the Lord's Prayer? How can we, the church, strive to make earth more like heaven? In particular, how would things change for the most vulnerable? (Would this be good news for them?)
3. Crossan discusses the relationship between God's kingdom already present on earth and Christ's future return, the second coming (page 92). In Crossan's view, did Jesus expect the world to end suddenly and soon? In what way would this happen?
4. So now the beginning of the Lord's Prayer might be prayed this way, “Householder of the World, deliverer of the oppressed, the impoverished and the defenseless, we pray that we join you in doing your will to bring your kingdom to earth, making it more like heaven.” How would this change in language also change the impact this prayer has on you?

**Closing Prayer.** *Crossan writes that it is the Spirit praying within us that allows us to pray. Moreover, we pray to the God of justice to be empowered by that God for justice (page 24). At its best, prayer is collaboration between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit (page 25). We will close this session and the next five sessions by praying together the Lord's Prayer. When we conclude the prayer, we will continue in silence as we listen to the Spirit praying in and through us. During this time, we may briefly mention any issues of distributive injustice that are brought to weigh on our hearts.*

# Session 4

## Chapter 6

### Opening Prayer

Gracious, loving, and justice-seeking God, we thank you for this time to be together. Warm our hearts, inspire our minds, and guide our speaking so that each one of us may receive insights and contribute to this conversation in accordance with your will. We seek your help in gaining a deeper understanding of Jesus' teachings and of your intentions for us and your world. Amen.

**Chapter 6: Give Us Our Daily Bread.** *Crossan raises the questions: who owns the earth, the land and the lake? Consequently, who owns the food produced by the earth, land and lake?*

1. Compare the people who benefited from increased labor productivity in first century Palestine to those who benefit from it today. What are the similarities and differences?
2. How are we like the disciples in the story of the multiplication of loaves and fish? Compare the disciples' solution to the problem of where the hungry are to get food with Jesus' solution. Does Jesus do all the work in the story, or does he have the disciples help him? What does the story mean for Jesus' modern disciples?
3. What does it mean today for everyone to have an equitable share of God's food from God's earth? What determines access to food today? What allows some people to have lots of nutritious food and others to have little? (Think about workers being paid fairly for their labor, the adequacy of the social safety net, support for the unemployed, and retirement security.) If Jesus were present today, what would he ask his disciples to do to make sure that everyone shared equitably in the abundance of the earth?
4. Discuss the connection Crossan makes between the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Supper, between the crucifixion and the just distribution of food, and between the post resurrection sharing of meals (the Emmaus story and John's story of sharing broiled fish on shore of Galilee) and sharing the bounty of the earth? How could we change our communion practices to make these connections more apparent? How would you go about adopting them in your church?

**Closing Prayer.** *Crossan writes that it is the Spirit praying within us that allows us to pray. Moreover, we pray to the God of justice to be empowered by that God for justice (page 24). At its best, prayer is collaboration between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit (page 25). We will close this session and the next five sessions by praying together the Lord's Prayer. When we conclude the prayer, we will continue in silence as we listen to the Spirit praying in and through us. During this time, we may briefly mention any issues of distributive injustice that are brought to weigh on our hearts.*

# Session 5

## Chapter 7

### Opening Prayer

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### Chapter 7: Forgive Us Our Debts. *The chapter asks what do we owe God?*

1. Debt was an important concern in Jesus' day and it is in ours also. Discuss how debt entrapped people in the first century and how it entraps us now. Jesus appeared to view debt as oppression. Today the leading cause of bankruptcy is medical debt. Predatory lenders target people with little money and few choices when they face a financial crisis. Poor nations are forced to pay off debts that often were incurred by despots who squandered and pocketed much of the loan. (See [www.jubileeusa.org](http://www.jubileeusa.org)) Do we today view indebtedness as oppression or as the result of a person's bad choices? How should we view it?
2. When praying the Lord's Prayer, many churches say "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Both the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and the New International Version translate this petition as "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Why does Crossan prefer this latter translation? How should we understand the call to forgive debts: as a metaphoric, figurative statement or one to be taken literally?
3. Asking God to forgive our debts implies that we owe God something. Assuming that is the case, what do we owe God?
4. If debts were forgiven after six years, and if people were released from debt slavery after six years (as they were under the Sabbath laws of Jesus' day, page 150) would this encourage irresponsible borrowing? Did Jesus seem concerned about this? Why or why not? Should we be concerned?
5. Crossan writes (page 161) that "the positive ideal of enough bread for today and the negative one of no debt for tomorrow are standard hopes of the 'have-nots' of history (page 161). Is this true today? How does our society try to fulfill this hope for everyone?"

**Closing Prayer.** *Crossan writes that it is the Spirit praying within us that allows us to pray. Moreover, we pray to the God of justice to be empowered by that God for justice (page 24). At its best, prayer is collaboration between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit (page 25). We will close this session and the next five sessions by praying together the Lord's Prayer. When we conclude the prayer, we will continue in silence as we listen to the Spirit praying in and through us. During this time, we may briefly mention any issues of distributive injustice that are brought to weigh on our hearts.*

# Session 6

## Chapter 8 and Epilogue

### Opening Prayer

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**Chapter 8: Lead Us Not Into Temptation.** *According to Crossan, the temptation in Jesus' day was violent resistance to Rome. Is the temptation today complacency about the suffering of the poor in the United States?*

1. What comes to mind when you recite "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." What temptation? What evil? Do those words have a specific or general meaning?
2. Why does Crossan think that the location of Nazareth is important to Jesus' views on violent and non-violent resistance to oppression?
3. Discuss Crossan's use of the story of the three temptations of Jesus to argue that the temptation to be avoided is specifically to resist the temptation to violently establish the reign of God.
4. Do you agree with Crossan's statement (page 173), "[t]o obtain and possess the kingdoms of the world, with their power and glory, by violent injustice is to worship Satan. To obtain and possess the kingdom, the power, and the glory by nonviolent justice is to worship God"? If you believe this, how does it apply to our reality today? What would we need to do differently? Is it really possible to live this out – as individuals, as a society, as a nation?
5. What temptations do we need to avoid in order to collaborate with God to bring God's reign to earth? What evil stands in our way of that collaboration?

### Epilogue: The Strangest Book.

1. The Bible depicts both a violent and a nonviolent God, and a violent and nonviolent Jesus. How do we choose between them? Is Jesus the incarnation and revelation of a nonviolent God?
2. Is God the God of love or the God of justice? How does Crossan resolve this?

### Final Discussion

1. Has reading and discussing the Greatest Prayer changed the way you pray the Lord's Prayer?
2. As a final exercise, rewrite the Lord's Prayer in your own words.

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