Augustine of Hippo regularly commented on the Lord’s Prayer (LP) in order to educate mature members of the faith and to train pastors theologically with regard to matters of doctrine and Christian living. Sometime after the sack of Rome by King Alaric of the Ostrogoths in 410, Augustine wrote a letter¹ (perhaps in 412) to a Roman noble widow named Proba, who during her life watched three of her own sons sit as consul in Rome. She fled to Africa in the wake of the Ostrogoth turmoil and established a community of religious women in Carthage. Proba on one occasion wrote to Augustine seeking advice on prayer. He responded by sending her a lengthy epistle, a part of which included a full explanation of the LP. The Bishop of Hippo instructed Proba not to put her trust in her considerable riches (some believe her husband was one of the wealthiest men in the Roman Empire), but encouraged her to pray instead for true happiness with unceasing and fervent ardor.² After cautioning her not to pray with an abundance of words, Augustine noted that words were nevertheless necessary. While Jesus was on earth, he, unlike other people, had no need of words in his prayers, either to be informed or influenced by them; still he used them, like the words of the LP, and so they must also be beneficial for believers.

Augustine told Proba that the words of the LP have a twofold function. First, they have the power to make the petitioners aware of what they need to pray for. Second, they actually create a desire for what is prayed and encourage those who pray them to lead godly lives. For example, when Christians pray the first three petitions, they long for God’s name to be holy, God’s kingdom to come, and God’s will to be done in all people. The fourth petition (“Give us today our daily bread”)

¹ CSEL 44, pp. 40–77; translation in FC 18, pp. 376–401.
is actually a longing for Christ, the bread of heaven, or eternal happiness. The last three petitions move petitioners to desire forgiveness and to forgive earnestly, to escape from temptation, and to seek deliverance from evil. Finally the words of the LP reveal and encourage what God hopes to impress upon the hearts, minds, and lives of all.\(^3\)

Augustine then offers a brief petition-by-petition analysis after which he states that "all" properly offered prayers seek those truths which are embodied in the LP. Augustine like Cyprian\(^4\) went so far as to say that false prayer is any request which pursues something outside of the parameters of the seven petitions of the LP. Augustine warned, “But, whoever says anything in his prayer which does not accord with this Gospel prayer [i.e., the LP], even if his prayer is not of the forbidden sort, it is carnal, and I am not sure it ought not to be called forbidden, since those who are born again of the spirit ought to pray only in a spiritual manner.”\(^5\)

At this point in the discussion Augustine makes his only allusion to baptism in his letter to Proba. To pray in a way that is contrary to the spirit of the LP is sinful, in other words the way Christians would have prayed before they were baptized. But after being baptized, those who are born again in the spirit need to pray spiritually or in a way consistent with the LP. Thus, the LP was Augustine’s model and a rule by which all righteous prayer was to be judged.

Augustine embellished this point rather forcefully by presenting seven brief prayers which reflect the concerns of each of the seven petitions of the LP. However, Augustine readily acknowledged that it is not always easy to tell how some prayers conform to the LP. For example, Hannah’s prayer for God to end her barrenness\(^6\) does not appear to be related to any of the seven petitions. Augustine did conclude that Hannah’s words are to be understood in light of the seventh petition, “Deliver us from evil,” because Hannah’s barrenness is an evil that she wishes to be delivered of. Therefore, all true prayers always conform to the LP even if they do not necessarily appear to be so at first glance. Augustine concluded his comments by boldly declaring, “And if you were to run over all the words of holy prayers, you would find nothing, according to my way of thinking, which is not contained and included

\(^3\) CSEL 44, pp. 65ff; FC 18, pp. 392f.

\(^4\) Cyprian, De Dominica Oratione 9; CCSL 3 A, p. 94.

\(^5\) Augustine’s Letter 130; CSEL 44, p. 65; translation in FC 18, p. 393.

\(^6\) 1 Kings 2 in Latin or Vulgate translation bibles; 1 Samuel 2 in modern bibles.