

The Lord's Prayer
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island, WA
20 October 2024
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Today I am going to do something different and focus on one part of our Eucharistic liturgy, the Lord's Prayer, instead of the Gospel lesson. I do this occasionally when I preach, and it is often because I'm puzzled or bothered by something, or I know of parishioners who are. The Lord's Prayer presents several issues for me and, last week after the 8:00 AM service, I was asked why Anglicans use the word "trespasses" in the prayer while Presbyterians use "debts." This question was referring to Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer and I was reminded of the alternative version in the prayer book from Luke's Gospel that uses "sins." Some of you might have questions, as well.

Most of us probably grew up reciting what we call the Lord's Prayer or, as others call it, the Our Father, but I did not. I was raised in Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches where almost all the preaching was focused on the Epistles and the death and resurrection of Jesus but, strangely, almost none of it on his life and teachings. I was not introduced to the Lord's Prayer until, near the end of my college years, I visited a Presbyterian church that I later joined when I applied to seminary. And, indeed, they used "debts" and not "trespasses," which I'll discuss below. That being said, over the years I have come to love the Lord's Prayer and now I pray it almost daily, but perhaps more importantly, actually *studying* it has given me a deeper appreciation of Jesus and a much better understanding his mission.

So, let's begin with some historical background. All the versions of the Lord's Prayer that we have were originally written in Greek, but we know that

Jesus spoke and taught in Aramaic, which is actually still spoken and well-known by scholars. So, today we're using an English translation from Greek that is itself a translation from Aramaic and, to make it more difficult, that Aramaic was originally transmitted orally *and* the traditional version we use every Sunday is also filtered through older English and Anglo-Saxon terms. Fortunately, scholars have been able to infer from the Greek what Jesus might have actually taught, though we do *not* know if the differences between Matthew and Luke's versions were introduced by the authors themselves or whether, as is quite possible, Jesus used different forms at different times. Finally, if you read Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Lord's Prayer you'll note that there is no doxology or words of praise at the end, and so I'll ignore these lines today since we're sure they didn't come from Jesus. They were added and brought into the liturgy quite early, though, and come from a document called the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. This morning I'll focus primarily on the version from Matthew that we use every Sunday and, to a lesser extent, on Luke's version, going line by line. Along the way, I'll try *not* to go too deeply into the weeds, but I *will* try to help us to understand better what Jesus was teaching his followers with this prayer, because that's what really matters.

"Our Father, who art in heaven:" We could focus the whole sermon Jesus' addressing God as Father. You may have been taught, as I was, that Jesus was unique in calling God Father and that he used the intimate Aramaic term, Abba, that means Daddy. Both of these claims are false. Other Jews did and still address God as Father and Abba is indeed the Aramaic word for Father, not Daddy. This being said, Jesus may have felt a personal connection to God that was indeed unique, such as when he was praying in Gethsemane before his death and uses

the term *Abba*, saying *My Father*. But note that in the Lord's Prayer he uses a collective form, saying *Our Father*. Again, this is not unique and, yes, it sounds patriarchal to our ears and, though I won't take time this morning to discuss the patriarchal language in the Bible, I will say that all Jews know that calling God Father is a metaphor and that God is also portrayed metaphorically in many other ways in scripture and tradition. *But* calling God Father it is also political. Ceasar was called Father, and to call God in heaven Father was to imply that Ceasar was not the true Father.¹ And since the prayer talks about God "in heaven," I would like to suggest in passing that we should not think of heaven as another place, somewhere out there, where God "lives," but rather as another dimension. Said differently, there is no place where God is not. If your puzzled, I am as well, but it's the best way I think of to explain what is discussed by theologians as the omnipresence of God. God is closer to us than the air we breathe.

"Hallowed be thy Name:" Hallowed is from the Saxon language and it means to make holy, to consecrate, or to honor. Thus, perhaps a better translation would be "Holy is thy Name." This is one the more perplexing lines of the prayer for me, for try as I might I don't quite understand the Jewish view that God's name is so holy that it should not be spoken or written. Moreover, I'm not sure I really understand the word holy. But here's what we do know: For Jews, *not* speaking or writing the name of God is a sign of profound respect and a way of reminding themselves that God cannot be contained or defined by human language or concepts. Holiness is the biblical way of speaking about God's transcendence, that is, as a wholly other and absolutely different reality. God's holiness is not and cannot be described, but like Moses at the burning bush, we know that to be in the presence of genuine holiness is to experience a profound

fear that both attracts and repels us at the same time.² In the presence of such holiness we experience our true vulnerability; the prophets said they felt utterly unclean. Again, I don't completely understand this, and I'm not sure it *can* be understood, though it may be experienced. And if you do experience it, you'll know it.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven:" For me, this is perhaps the most helpful line of the prayer. It is the one line in all the Gospels that I believe best captures what Jesus' mission was all about. He was inaugurating the long-awaited kingdom of God on earth, and he is telling us how we would know when God's kingdom has fully arrived: God would reign as king on earth as in heaven, all peoples and nations of the earth would acknowledge God's sovereignty over them, and peace and justice on the earth would be established. Also, when I don't know how to pray, or when I don't know what to ask for, or when I acknowledge to God and myself I don't have the wisdom to understand the world and what would be best for it, this is the line I go to. I pray simply, your will be done. In passing, note that while Luke's version asks for God's kingdom to come it does not include the phrase "thy will be done, on earth as in heaven." As I mentioned, we don't know if the difference is due to Luke or to Jesus, though that Matthew and Luke do place the prayer in different places in their narratives and that may account for the differences. In any case, the next line picks up the kingdom theme as well, though it's not obvious in the current translation.

"Give us today our daily bread:" Surprisingly, this line is not all about food. Based on the Aramaic language behind the Greek, a better translation is probably "our bread of tomorrow give us today."³ This may sound mysterious to us. The bread of tomorrow is a reference to the messianic banquet that is expected to

take place when the kingdom of God is fully realized on earth and so, in effect, Jesus is praying, “Don’t wait, God! Give us our share of your salvation and do it now!” Here, we get a sense of the longing and the urgency behind Jesus’ mission, a longing and urgency we may glimpse during Advent but is usually hard to appreciate after 2000 years. Nevertheless, I sometimes stop and ponder this line, wondering what I can do to help bring God’s kingdom to full realization on earth. Lately, in view of what’s happening in the world, I find myself wanting to help and wanting to see it fully realized. And I want it *now*, please God, not tomorrow!

“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us:” The difference between Anglican and Presbyterian translations was once explained to me this way: Anglicans preferred trespasses because they were primarily landowners and worried about such things, whereas Presbyterians were primarily merchants and worried more about debt. This may or may not be true, but scholars agree the Greek is probably best translated as debts, though they also agree that trespasses or sins, as in Luke’s Gospel, also work. To understand how our faults or sins against God or our neighbor can be understood as debts, it may be helpful to know that forgiveness is closely related to the notion being redeemed which, in the bible, has the sense of being bought out of enforced servitude or even slavery, as in paying a ransom. In this view, our faults or sins enslave us and our freedom must be purchased for us. In any case, debt was a major problem for the poor in Jesus’ time, as it is in ours, and it seems Jesus is implying that having our debts forgiven by God may be dependent on forgiving those who are indebted to us. This may be the way forgiveness works; we may not be able to accept or receive forgiveness if we cannot give it. If this is true, it should give us pause.

“And lead us not into temptation:” This line used to puzzle me but now, I confess, it just offends me. How could a God who is good and loving deliberately lead us into situations where we would be tempted by evil? The Epistle of James says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God...each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire’” (1:13-14). So, in this case, Luke’s prayer is probably closer than Matthew’s to the one Jesus used. Luke writes, “Save us from the time of trial,” that is, save us from being *tested* in a trial by persecution for our faith, something Jews and early Christians knew about in the Roman Empire. As we discussed last week, God does not promise to keep us from the evil effects of our choices or the choices others make, but that doesn’t mean that God wills those evil effects. What God wills for us is to avoid or to escape evil when we can and, when we can’t, to endure with hope and faith. Thus, other translations might be, “Keep us from failing you when tested” or “Do not let us fall victim to the ordeal [of persecution].” I like this one: “Do not let us crack under pressure.”⁴

“But deliver us from evil.” This line follows quite naturally from the line we just discussed, especially when that line is better translated, but a more precise translation is “deliver us from the evil one.” This always brings me up short. Like Jesus I recognize that there is much evil in the world, but unlike Jesus I’m not sure I’m ready to affirm the existence of an evil being identified as Satan. That being said, in the Jewish tradition Satan is not the devil we imagine now. “The Satan” was originally a title not a name, and it means the Accuser, what we would call a prosecuting attorney. Satan was viewed as the one who would do the testing and the tempting, just as happened to Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism.

I know this is a lot to digest in one sermon, and I apologize for that, but as usual I'm trying to encourage our personal reflection and deeper exploration outside the church service. I hope, if nothing else, I've convinced you that there's a lot going on in the Lord's Prayer and that unpacking it can help us appreciate Jesus and his mission a bit better. We typically say that Jesus' teaching is simple, and in some ways it is; but it is also profound. His understanding of God, the clarity of his mission, and the breadth of his vision, continually draw me deeper into our faith, and I hope this may be case for you as well. Amen.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, pp. 42-44.

² Diogenes Allen, *Theology for a Troubled Believer*, pp. 4-5.

³ Ben F. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, p. 12.

⁴ Meyer, pp. 8-11.