



“The Prayer Jesus Taught”
Scripture – Matthew 6:7-13
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 4, 2018

How many of you have been in a worship service when the Lord’s Prayer was prayed, but not everyone said the Presbyterian version? When we are in those situations, we “debts and debtors” people have to pause and wait for the “trespass and trespasses” folks to catch up.

Why don’t all Christians say the prayer exactly the same? Did Jesus offer different versions? We do not really know.

What we do know is that by the end of the first century, there were at least three versions of the Lord’s Prayer circulating in the early Christian communities – one in the Gospel of Matthew, one in Luke, and one in a document called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. This last document was part catechism and part instruction manual for the early church.

Matthew’s version is nearly identical to the one found in *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. It may not have sounded identical to your ears because we recite the King James Version with its “Thys” and “Thine.” Neither does Matthew include the doxology: “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever.” The King James Version includes it; the New Revised Standard Version puts it in a footnote. You can see that in the pew Bible if you are younger than 45 and can read miniscule font sizes! Why do they do that?!

Like many churches, we pray the Lord’s Prayer nearly every Sunday. Most of us know it so well that we recite it without thinking. Kudos for knowing it by heart; but has our familiarity with it deafened us to its edginess? Or is it our 21st Century context that mitigates its radical nature?

Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan calls the Lord’s Prayer a “revolutionary manifesto and a hymn of hope.” As a revolutionary manifesto, it embodies a spirit similar to our Declaration of Independence. It demands that all people be treated fairly. As a hymn of hope, it expresses the vision of the world as God yearns for it to be.

Matthew says that during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his audience that when they pray, they should not fill the air with lofty phrases and empty words. Instead, he said, pray this way: “Our Father who art in heaven.” Stop right there. His opening words jolted them. I suspect some did not hear another word after his opening phrase because Jesus did not address God as Yahweh or any other customary word that highlights the power of God. Instead, he addressed God the way a child would speak to his earthly father. He used the word for “Daddy” or “Papa” – an intimate and personal name.

The jarring word for some contemporary ears is the use of male language. In the past 40 years we have become aware of the use of masculine language emanating from patriarchal cultures. Many of us grew up with the notion that God is male, not female, and we may have envisioned God similar to what Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel – an old man in the sky. Such conceptions limit the nature of God, and for many render God unbelievable.

When we address God, we use metaphors because God is more than we can comprehend. I suspect that we forget how often we employ metaphors in our routine conversations. How many of us have said at the end of an exhausting day or a strenuous workout, “I’m dead!” Those standing nearby do not call the coroner. We know it’s a figure of speech.

When we read the Bible, some imagine that the ancient writers meant their words literally because they were unsophisticated. Not true. The ancient Hebrews understood metaphors and that is why they used many titles for God. No one metaphor was sufficient, so they named God Shepherd, King, Judge, Rock, and Potter. Deuteronomy describes God as an eagle.

Some are surprised to learn that not all of the metaphors are masculine. Hosea describes God as a mother bear who has been robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:8) and Isaiah compares God to a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15). God is beyond our comprehension, but we need ways to talk about God that help us grasp God’s character. So, we use metaphors.

Rather than imagining God with one set of body parts rather than another, it helps to think of God according to another concept found in Scripture – Spirit. Spirit is not limited by gender identity.

Another troubling part of this opening phrase for contemporary minds is: “who art in heaven.” In the first century, people believed in a three-story universe. The earth was a flat plain in the middle with hell below and heaven above. Ancients could not fathom distances in space in terms of light years. They believed heaven was a layer just above the dome of the sky. With that mindset, it was not especially difficult to imagine God as a man sitting on a throne overseeing the happenings on earth. Today such a thought is laughable. Moreover, physical beings are limited by space and time. Spirit can be everywhere including within us.

Changing the words of the Lord’s Prayer would likely cause a coronary for traditionalists, but it would help us conceptually if we occasionally began the prayer with something more like: *Loving Spirit of the universe*, which I believe Jesus would find more fitting given our current understanding of the cosmos.

We could easily breeze through the next line of the prayer, “Hallowed be thy name” but there is more at stake than we might imagine. What does it mean to call God holy? Crossan urges us to turn to the 19th chapter of Leviticus where it describes holiness. God says to Moses, “Tell the people: You shall be holy, for I the Lord you God am holy.” The remainder of the chapter provides examples of holiness. Revere your father and mother, keep the Sabbath, do not turn to idols, offer sacrifices to the Lord. Then, God says, “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the foreigner.” Holiness includes making sure everyone is fed.

The passage continues. “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.” Holiness has to do with respecting others.

The passage continues, “You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind.” Holiness means treating your workers justly and not making it difficult for people with mental or physical maladies.

Next: “You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial...but with justice you shall judge your neighbor.” Holiness has to do with fairness in human relations.

Then, near the end of the chapter, we read: “When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. The immigrant shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love him as yourself.” Jesus drew from this chapter when he commanded his followers to love your neighbor as yourself.

The next line is “Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” During the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire ruled the known world. The imperial power demanded allegiance and kept the majority in poverty. The Jewish people naturally resented the oppressive laws, heavy taxes, and occasional brutality. They longed for a Messiah who would lead an armed rebellion to overthrow the Romans and give birth to a new kingdom. But Jesus disappointed. He sought the kingdom envisioned by the prophets where all would be treated fairly, the poor would be cared for, and assault rifles would be beaten into plowshares.

When we pray, “Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying for how the world would appear if earthly rulers were unseated and the Holy God of justice and mercy ruled. And if that is the world for which we pray, that is the world for which we are to work. The Lord’s Prayer is not a plea for God to clean up the mess we have created. We are praying that our wills may be brought into harmony with God’s will. We are praying for a change within us that will create a change in the way we live – a change that can transform the world.

The next line underscores the fact that this prayer is not simply a spiritual exercise with no earthly relevance. We pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” For people who lived in poverty, which was most of the population during Jesus’ time, the threat of starvation was acute. And when we, who have more than plenty of food, pray these words it should be a poignant reminder that the world for which we strive is one where no man, no woman and no child goes to bed hungry.

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” In both Matthew and *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, the Greek word is debt, not trespass and not sin. It follows the petition about bread, because next to having enough to eat, the greatest vulnerability was to fall into debt. “Failure to repay a debt could result in loss of their land or indentured servitude...This petition asks God to forgive what we owe God, and a pledge to forgive what others owe us...Everybody is to have enough, and nobody is to be enslaved by economic misfortune.”¹

Then, perhaps the most puzzling line of the prayer: “Lead us not into temptation,” but deliver us from evil.” Why would a loving God lead us into temptation? Would God set us up to fail?

If we backup to the beginning of his ministry, what happens to Jesus immediately after he is baptized? Matthew says, “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” When Jesus was famished, he went face-to-face with the temptation to turn from God’s way and pursue a course at odds with God. I think the prayer has that event in mind. In longhand, this verse would be: “Lord, we face enough temptations in our everyday lives and we are not always as faithful as we ought to be. Do not put us to the test. Deliver us from any evil that lures us.”

This is where the prayer ends in Matthew. Only *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* includes the closing doxology, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”

Can you see why Crossan believes the Lord’s Prayer is a “revolutionary manifesto and a hymn of hope?” It calls for a new world order; one that is no longer divided between the one percent and the rest, no longer giving

privilege to the powerful over the weak. It calls for a transformation of the world to a place of freedom, equality, justice, and peace.

The first followers of Jesus must have taken these words seriously, because the accusation leveled against them was that they were trying to turn the world upside down. If we would slow down and take the words of this prayer to heart and live them daily, the same might be said of us. And would we ever be a blessing to the world.

NOTES

1. Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 228.

Prayers of the People

Eternal God, Jesus taught us how to pray by calling on you with the same affection as a child reaching out to his or her loving parent. We pray that we may develop a closer, more intimate bond with you so that we may live the rich life you intend for us.

We pray that when we call you Holy, we will be mindful of the ways we hallow your name – by revering you, by honoring our family and by treating others with kindness and compassion, respect and equality, a gentle heart and a generous spirit.

Loving God, we pray that the luster of your kingdom will illumine the earth, and the world's dark kingdoms will fade into the shadows, so that love, justice, and peace may prevail. And as we yearn for your kingdom to spread across the land, we pledge to live in harmony with its ideals and to nurture its growth.

We give thanks for our daily bread and pledge to share our bread, so that none will go hungry and all may have their fair portion.

We ask your forgiveness for the wrong we have done and for too many things we have left undone. May we use our energy, our intelligence, and the many resources at our disposal to put an end to homelessness and poverty, and to do a much better job of caring for people with mental illness and addictions.

Gracious God, each day we are faced with temptations to corrupt ourselves and undermine our relationships. Grant us the wisdom to choose well and the will to do what is morally right and just for all.

Now, hear us as we pray together,

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**