

## Making the Lord's Prayer Personal Prayer Proper 12 C

As children, it is one of the first religious acts we ever do: the praying of the Lord's Prayer. The words said countless times have become more of a recital than a prayer! Familiarity can breed mediocrity. Let's look afresh at this famous prayer upon which we model all others. My hope is that we might find a new way to pray it with our hearts as with our minds.

Luke in our gospel gives us a shorter, simplified version of the ancient Jewish prayer Jesus taught his disciples. The words are slightly different. It's theorized that Matthew, Mark and Luke borrowed from a common material for their gospel that had been circulating in the early church for years. We don't know why Mark chose not to include the material on the Lord's Prayer in his gospel. This common source however, does explain the essence and similarity to the Lord's Prayer used in Matthew and Luke. And there is humor in Luke's version: he applied the KIS principle – keep it simple!

Yet simple does not mean his version of the Jesus Prayer was any less worthy of our learning. Surely, when reading the King James English, Matthew's "Our Father" flows and sounds better to our ears. St. Matthew's is a thorough teaching on prayer adding reflections on God's kingdom, God's will, forgiveness, fasting, petitions, and getting answers to prayer. Matthew has the complete package for \$99.99 whereas Luke with his KIS approach to Jesus Prayer majors on the essentials for a working man's wage.

We like teachers who can give the essentials. The package may be small but it packs substance. The words may not be delivered with much flower but they "got" meat! There's a phrase that could become an advertising campaign for the church. Television has given us "Got milk?" Evangelicals give us "Got Jesus?" So why don't we Episcopalians start an ad campaign with "Got Meat?"

The "meat" that Luke's Jesus Prayer delivers has enough to keep us chewing for a while. Luke makes his prayer personal from the start. Rather than using the first person plural "Our" to address the Father he simply directs the prayer personally – "Father." Yes, in Luke's mind he must see that God belongs to all of us. But Luke sees the Jesus Prayer as one for the common child, man and woman. The Father is our God but he is more importantly my God as well. And he wants us to pray directly to him.

In seeking God's forgiveness Luke uses both the word for sin and for debt. Sin is a word which literally means, "to miss the mark." It comes from the archer whose aim is bad (perhaps he needs a new contact prescription) and misses the target. And because we all miss the target of pleasing the Father with our disobedience we fall into sin and we are in God's debt.

The word "debt" refers to wages, labor or property owed to another. While I was in New York visiting family I had a cracked windshield repaired. I owed the technician a \$50 deductible for his work. I was in debt to that man until I called and paid him by telephone. My debt was cleared and forgiven when his company got my payment.

And here is another subtle difference between Matthew's prayer and Luke's prayer: Luke assumes sin is forgiven by God because the sinner always forgives the other person's debt toward him. Being forgiven of my sins by God is dependent on the relationship I have to the one that needs forgiveness of their debt to me! Herein lies maturity in the faith. Christians and churches alike will not grow until they learn to forgive the debt of another.

There is a three way forgiveness operating in the Lord's Prayer that can not be separated. I forgive the debt of another person, I seek forgiveness of my debt toward another, and then I am forgiven my sins. I admit that seeking forgiveness of another person for my debt is not mentioned in either Matthew's or Luke's prayer. I believe that both imply this type of forgiveness with the KIS approach. If I truly want God's kingdom to come, I am going to want to show the same mercy to others that the Lord shows to me. And as well, I also will need forgiveness of the person I have wronged.

You might say that in the grammar of prayer, forgiveness *received* always has to be linked to forgiveness *given*. It's like a subject and a verb — both are needed to make a proper sentence. All types of forgiveness are needed for proper prayer.

A 4 year old's interpretation of the Lord's Prayer said it best: "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." For a child of faith prayer becomes the spiritual means of taking out the trash!

The last sentence in Luke's prayer petitions the Lord not to bring us to the time of trial. In the long history of God's people, we know that there have been many times of testing — the testing of Job in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New, the testing of the

Israelites in the wilderness and the testing of the church as it seeks to reclaim its relevancy in today's secular society.

Fortunately, we do not have to be at a loss for words when we face a time of testing. Jesus instructs us to pray for deliverance, asking God to protect us from anyone or anything that can endanger our bodies, our minds, our spirits or our relationship with God himself. When we pray to be delivered from the time of trial, we are asking to be spared the kind of testing that can lead to our extinction.

It is in that hour of desperation that Luke encourages us with a story from the heart. A friend knocks on your door at O' Dark Thirty and begs for something to eat. Most would understand our reaction to a stranger. But this is a friend. And we some day will need such friends to help us in our need. We tell the person to come back tomorrow but something more at stake than food is presented by your friend. **His honor is at stake**. And in Jesus day **honor** was worth more than food, more than a home or one's personal safety. Having nothing for guests to eat was shameful. It's hard to imagine in our day why there would be nothing to give one's houseguests. So our friend dares to search the neighborhood, dares to ask us, dares to keep on knocking until we leave our comfort zones and give the friend an answer.

Again, Luke appeals to our hearts asking us how we would respond to our child if she asked us for food. We would go out of our way to provide that child with something to eat because of our love for our child. How much more will God give the good gifts to his children whom he loves so very much! Luke concludes his brief lesson on prayer with the best gift; God will give the most precious gift of all – Himself!

A George Barna survey, in 2001, said that 82 percent of adults say they pray at least once a week and 89 percent believe there is a God who watches over us and who answers our prayers.

Yet, praying once a week hardly seems like a strong endorsement of the power of prayer. If we really believed that God answers prayer, and that prayer unleashes the power of God, would we pray just once a week?

Perhaps it's a case of people just mouthing the words, racing through the Prayer of Jesus, using prayer as a minority language like some unknown tribal dialect. Have we pushed the language of prayer to the verge of extinction, making it a tongue that is barely spoken?

If we really listen to what we are saying in the Lord's Prayer as we say it each week, we will no longer be able to "recite" it. It is a living prayer to the living God that plugs us into the power of a whole universe by simply calling on the name of God in faith. It is a prayer that reminds us that all our needs are ultimately met by asking the One who created all things. Jesus Prayer is one that reminds us that we connect to the power to be forgiven and to forgive others. It is a prayer that reminds us nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I commend to you Luke's version of Jesus Prayer: "Father, hallowed be you name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Amen!