

The Lord's Prayer, a message by Dr. Ian Storey

Jesus' followers once asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray". His reply, "The Lord's Prayer", has become one of the most often recited texts in human history. But we need first to remember that what we have in our prayer books is not Jesus' actual words, but a translation of a translation. Jesus spoke to his followers in Aramaic, the spoken language of first-century Palestine (not Hebrew, for that was the sacred language of the priests and the scriptures). We don't have the text in Aramaic. About 40 years later the Gospels were written, in Greek. Then St Jerome translated the Greek version into Latin, and the King James scholars into English and so on. Translation can never be exact and must always allow for different meanings and interpretations.

To begin with some general observations about The Lord's Prayer:

- It is found only twice in the New Testament, in its full and familiar form in *Matthew* 6.5-14, and in an abbreviated form at *Luke* 11.2-4;
- These two versions are not identical – Luke leaves out "in Heaven", "let your will be done, just as in heaven so too on earth", and "deliver us from evil"; he slightly changes the verse about "forgiving others"; and he uses a different word for "trespasses" – Luke also omits the "our" from "our Father";
- Matthew has a long prefix which needs to be better known:
Whenever you [pl.] pray, you will not be like the hypocrites, because they like to pray in the synagogues or standing in the corners of the public squares, so that they may be seen by people. I tell you, they get their reward. But when you [s.] pray, go into your store-room, close the door, and pray to your father on your own. Your father who sees you on your own will repay you. And when you [pl.] pray, do not keep going on and on like foreigners do, since they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask. Pray then as follows...:
- Note that the "you" is mainly plural. Unlike the Ten Commandments where the commands are singular ("thou shalt not") and unlike the psalms where we hear again and again "*my* God", this prayer begins "*our* Father" and the word "we/us" occurs in each of the personal petitions;

- In the famous parable of the Prodigal Son God is to be viewed as a “Father”, and as Kenneth Bailey (*Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*) puts it, “the Lord’s Prayer affirms a family of God that has one Father, and this prayer includes all followers of Jesus in that family”.

With that beginning I want to comment briefly on some passages in the Lord’s Prayer that have caught my attention:

(1) “Give us today our **daily** bread” – the problem here is that the word “daily” (*epiousion*) is found only in these two citations of the Lord’s Prayer, and simply put neither the ancient fathers nor we don’t know for certain what it means. It seems to come from a verb meaning “come on” or “come around” or “coming tomorrow”. But does it have the meaning of time: -- “give us today the bread that comes daily” [our daily sustenance] or “give us today the bread of tomorrow” [the Messianic banquet promised in *Luke 14*]? Or does it have the sense of “amount” -- “give us just enough bread for today” [subsistence but not luxury, and “bread” not “cake”] or finally “give us each day the bread we live on” [assurance of on-going sustenance]? You will find Church Fathers and modern commentators supporting all of these interpretations of this strange word.

(2) “Forgive us our *opheilemata* (Matthew) or *hamartias* (Luke)”. The second choice is easy – *hamartia* is the standard NT word for “sin” – but *opheilemata* and in the next line *opheileitais* really mean “debts” and “debtors” (the same word used in *Luke 16* of the “unjust steward”) – so in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer neither “sins” nor “trespasses” catches the meaning of the original Greek. The New Testament uses different images for sin: *hamartia* (the word in Luke) means “missing the mark” (of an archer), or “falling short”, or straying from the right path (in Latin *transgressus*, “crossing the line”), dirt or contamination (that marvellous image in Revelation of the saints “washing their robes in the blood of the Lamb”). Here the image is that of “owing” – by sinning against God and our neighbour we “owe” them a debt, and one explanation of the Atonement is that on the Cross Christ paid what we owe for our offences. So something like “forgive us what we owe, just we have forgiven those who owe us” – this moves very easily into the area of sins or offences, but it keeps the basic economic image of the Greek, and we do talk of “forgiving debts”.

(3) Quite a number of years ago a parishioner at St John's, a staunch supporter of the *Book of Common Prayer*, asked me, "How can the *BCP* say 'lead us into temptation' and the *BAS* "save us from the time of trial"? He was clearly expecting me to say that the green book was wrong and the purple book was right, but I had to tell him that both versions were right and both missed the full force of the Greek word *peirasmos*. That word means both "temptation" and "test", for one way to test someone is to tempt them – witness the experience of Jesus in *Matthew* 4, where Jesus can just as easily be saying to the devil "do not tempt/test the Lord, your God". Of course, not all "testing" involves "temptation" – look at the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac, for example.

Now *James* 1.13-14 bluntly states that "Let no-one say 'I am being tempted by God' for God has nothing to do with evil and tempts no-one. Each person is tempted by their own desires". It's not God who "leads us into temptation". Many scholars believe that James is directly replying to this line from the Lord's Prayer. Or if we try "test", should we be expecting and praying that we will never be tested? It is specifically said many times that our way will not be easy – *John* 16.33 "in the world you will have troubles, but take courage, I have overcome the world". So "leading us not into temptation" is not what God does, and to ask that we not be tested is not going to happen.

I suggest three possible solutions here: (1) that we weaken the force of the verb "lead us not" to something like "do not let us take the path of temptation"; (2) to add an overtone such as that in *I Corinthians* 10.13 "It is not a superhuman trial (*peirasmos*) that has come upon you, you can trust God not to let you be tested beyond your endurance and with the testing he will give you the way out so that you can endure it." Are we asking God to fulfil that promise?; or (3) to take "trial" in the sense of a really massive and horrible experience ("the crunch", so to speak) – don't put us in a situation like Abraham and his son, or Peter at the high priest's house.

I suggest that we look at the next line "but deliver us from evil". It should explain what "lead us not .../ save us ..." means. First the verb doesn't mean "deliver" as much as it means "keep away", so "keep us away from". From what? The next words can mean "evil" or, and perhaps better, "the evil one". I like the second option, for then this petition means: "don't let us get into a really testing situation, but keep us away from the Evil One". Don't let us ever come face to face with the Devil, Satan the Accuser.

So to conclude – Jesus is not teaching his followers a typical Jewish prayer, but a prayer that is for all people (God is “*our* Father”), and as a Father he is both close to us as a father would be in a first-century family culture, but also “in heaven”. He is both out there and close to us (in us) as well. I would venture something like: “Our Father in heaven, let *your* name be made holy, let *your* kingdom come, let *your* will be done, as in heaven so too on earth. Give us the bread we need each day. Forgive us what we owe, just as we forgive those who owe us. Do not bring us to a Test, but keep us away from the Evil One.”