

The Lord's Prayer: Introduction and "Pray in this Way"

Introductory Comments

1. **A Great, but Strange, Prayer.** The Lord's Prayer is the greatest prayer in Christianity. But there are a lot of strange things about it. From its intention (was it meant to be prayed "exactly" that way, or as an example? Is it a uniquely "Christian" prayer? Is it Jewish? Something else?), to its content (there are two distinct versions in the Gospels, and another one from the First Century *Didache*), to definitions of its terms (how do we best understand words like "Father," "will," "Kingdom," "bread" and "debts/trespasses"?), there is much to consider as to the meaning of this prayer. Strangeness notwithstanding, the Lord's Prayer is essentially a summary of the gospel message, and serves as a unifying refrain amongst Christians worldwide.
2. **Explaining Versions.** Scholars have attempted explain the differences in the two Gospel versions in a variety of ways. Some claim they are both original – with Jesus saying the extended Matthean version at an early point in his ministry, and then the Lukan version a year or so later to a different audience. For those who accept the "two-source theory" (that Matthew and Luke used Mark and another source, "Q," to compose their gospels), the fact that the Lord's Prayer does not appear in Mark (accepted as the earliest of the four gospels) suggests that it appeared in that unknown source. Other scholars suggest that perhaps Matthew and Luke articulate the prayer differently because they preserve versions used in two different communities: the Matthean Jewish Christian community, and the Lukan Gentile Christian community. Others still believe that the Lukan version used the Matthean version, but removed unnecessary verbiage and repetition.
3. **Particular or Universal?** Is the Lord's Prayer a Christian prayer, or a Jewish prayer? This class will take the approach that it is neither. Instead, and in alignment with the universal message of the Gospels, it is a prayer for all humanity. It speaks in broad strokes and a hymn-like, poetic voice of God's intentions for the world – namely, that God's way of justice will take hold. This is the reason that Jesus prayed these words, and why we still do today.
4. **Doxological Ending.** The concluding doxology ("For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen") is often added within Protestant traditions and emerged in English usage at least by 1549 (in the "First Prayer Book of Edward VI"). It was originally included as a means for the priest to conclude the prayer (which was often recited aloud by cantor and congregation). Within scholarly circles, it is generally not considered to be an original part of the Matthew 6:9-13 text.

Questions, then read four versions of Lord's Prayer

Questions for Discussion

- 1. To this point in your life, what were your impressions about the Lord's Prayer? What have you thought it was about?**
- 2. Jesus says, "Pray in this way." How is prayer portrayed in the Bible? What do people pray for?** *There are largely two types of prayers: prayers of request – often complaints or petitions asking for divine assistance or qualities of wisdom, understanding, or union with God; and prayers of gratitude – often expressed in the form of praise as well as thanksgiving. But there is an interesting shift that happens when one moves from those who "speak **TO** God in prayer" to those who "speak **for** God in prophecy." The prophets are much more bold and confident in their speaking about God and what God desires. And God's concern is consistently "justice and righteousness." For prophets like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah, living in the ways of justice and righteousness is the only form of prayer that means anything to God. Religious piety and ritual mean little outside of justice and righteousness (cf. Amos 5:21-24; Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1:11-17; Micah 6:6-8; Isaiah 58:5-7). In a sense, biblical prophets eschew prayer, except when prayer means enacted justice. What do you think about this statement?*
- 3. The word "justice" triggers many responses. What do you think of when you hear that word? What is the difference between "retributive" and "distributive" justice? Which one is God's greater concern?**
- 4. If the Lord's Prayer is prayed by God's Spirit within and through us, to whom and for what is that prayer uttered? Are we praying for God's intervention, or is God praying for our collaboration?**

****For next session, we will cover "Our Father in heaven" and "Hallowed be your name"*