

August 8, 2021

Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4

You Asked For It: What is the historical/biblical context of the Lord's Prayer? Can we change the words and still preserve the original intent and message?

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Sermon and Scripture

***Title Slide**

As I prepared for this week's sermon, I remembered one of the most holy moments I've ever experienced in worship. When my oldest son, Christopher was about 5 years old, he was sitting next to me one Sunday morning as the congregation prayed the Lord's Prayer. He was coloring on a bulletin and, frankly, I assumed he was checked out, not paying much attention to what was going on around him. And then...my ears picked up his voice, praying the prayer along with the rest of us.

I didn't know he knew the words. I hadn't taught it to him, and I oversaw Christian Education at that church. He learned it by being present week after week in worship. It was something we all did together, and he had become part of that, almost accidentally. I looked forward to the Lord's Prayer every week from that day forward. I loved praying with that little guy. In some very lovely ways, if we do them right, making an effort to include and explain them, our traditions are a way of bringing us together, of making us one. So, today's questions "What is the historical/biblical context of the Lord's prayer?" and "Can we change the words and still preserve the original intent and message?" are important, I think, because they give me an opportunity to explain where this particular tradition came from and what's important about it.

What we call the Lord's Prayer is in the Bible in two places. In both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, the authors tell us Jesus prayed a specific prayer.

I thought we would begin by looking at those texts side by side. We are using the New Revised Standard Version.

***Text Slide (Matthew first)**

This is Matthew 6:9-13-

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

The author of Matthew has inserted this prayer into the Sermon on the Mount, a familiar section of his narrative when Jesus was teaching his followers what it meant to be his disciple. Right before this prayer, Jesus told his followers to be authentic, not to show off by praying in public, not to use more words than necessary, and not to try to imitate the ways in which other people prayed to their gods. And then he gave them this example of how to pray.

The author of Luke inserted his version of the Lord's Prayer into his narrative in this way, he wrote, "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

***Text Slide (Luke)**

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

4 And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

You can see on the slide or the insert to the bulletin, that not only did the authors use the prayers in different ways in their narratives, the prayers themselves are very different. But, let’s talk first about the ways in which they are similar.

We can see first that both prayers begin by addressing God as Father. Scholars agree that Jesus likely used the word Abba, which is Aramaic for Father, to address God. Why not just call God, “God?” you might be wondering. Among Judeans, the name of God was sacred and was not to be pronounced. Jesus’s followers understood the role of father in their culture...protector, leader, and provider. God was all of those things and more.

Jesus used this familiar form of address and then asked that the name be sacred, “hallowed be your name.” This is actually a pretty Jesus-y thing to do as he often used what was ordinary to make a point about what was extraordinary. Let us not forget that in the gospel stories, in the company of Jesus, bread and wine become sacred, water was turned to wine, and a little fish and bread fed the multitudes, with plenty leftover. The Holy showed up in the mundane all the time...and still does today.

In addition to the initial address of the prayer, both prayers mention: bringing about the world God desires, bread, forgiveness, and temptation.

These easy to see similarities tell us something important about the texts because the authors of Matthew and Luke did not have access to each other’s stories. They weren’t sitting next to each other in class, one copying from the other, and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke

were written around the same time, with Matthew maybe completed a smidge earlier, so the author of Luke hadn't read or heard the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Mark, though, was written 15-20 years prior to Matthew and Luke. Based on what is shared by all three gospels, it is clear the authors of Matthew and Luke had access to Mark. But there is nothing in Mark that compares to the Lord's Prayer. How can we explain the similarities in these prayers?

Scholars have concluded that there must have been another common document. They have named that document Q. Here's what's tricky, though. We don't have Q. We only think it existed because of texts like the two we are dealing with today where two or more gospels have things in common, things that seem way more than coincidental, but it is unlikely or impossible that the gospel writers had access to each other's work.

***Timeline Slide**

For reference, on the screen (and on the back of the insert) is a chart of some of the development of early Christian tradition, which you will see next week as well, as I answer the question, "Who decided what would be in the Bible? I have highlighted the points in time I have mentioned this morning to provide some clarity.

So, Jesus's tendency to use the ordinary to talk about the extraordinary and Q explain the similarities between these two passages, but what about the differences? If the authors of Matthew and Luke both knew about Q, why are the prayers different in the two narratives and what does that mean for us as we pray the prayer today?

***Text Slide**

While the prayers deal with the same subjects for the most part, the gospel authors treat the subjects differently. And we will see that both

authors veer in places from what scholars believe the original prayer would have been.

For example, Matthew's version of the petition for daily bread was probably closer to the original Q version and more like something Jesus would have said. Jesus would have encouraged his followers to trust in God's provision, like the ancient Israelites wandering in the wilderness who were instructed to gather just enough manna for the day, not to hoard food selfishly and fearfully, keeping others from having what they needed. The author of Luke veered from that sentiment amid anxious times. "God, make sure we have something to eat today, and in the days to come."

Another example of Matthew sticking truer to the more original prayer is his use of the word debts compared to Luke's use of the word sins. I laughed last night when I ran into a friend downtown who told me he grew up in Disciples church. He talked about having communion every week and, mentioned "debts and debtors" as the right way to pray. What I didn't tell him is that all Disciples churches don't use debts and debtors, though they should. Luke does return to the language of debt in the second part of the statement, "...as we forgive everyone indebted to us." For Jesus, the plight of the oppressed poor, whose debts overwhelmed and caused daily suffering, was likely the subject of his prayers, not sin. Luke's change began the transition from the combined economic and religious sense to an exclusively religious sense. From that point on, Christian tradition picked up sins and trespasses. Truth be told, if Jesus was here, I bet he would tell us that the real sin is preying on the ones who are poor, like the people who have no choice but to file bankruptcy due to medical debt. According to a 2019 study, there are 530,000 people a year in this country who find themselves in that situation. That is debt/sin we should be praying about.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/11/this-is-the-real-reason-most-americans-file-for-bankruptcy.html>

I don't want to only highlight the author of Luke's edits, though. Matthew did his share of tweaking the likely original as well. For example, Matthew added "in heaven" to "Father" in the address. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, the author inserts heaven and heavens, which is unlike the other gospel authors. We can see a similar addition in verse 10 of the Matthew text when the author adds, "...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

And last, Matthew added the villain to his prayer, "...rescue us from the evil one." It is important to remember that Jesus was Jewish, in Judaism, "satan," or the evil one, is not a being able to perceive and feel things, but a metaphor for the inclination that exists in every person, tempting us to do the wrong things. Praying for protection against an evil being would not have been common in Jesus's tradition.

So, given all of this information, you may be wondering, if our goal is to pray like Jesus, what would that sound like?

Truthfully, even if we reconstruct what is likely in Q, it is unlikely that prayer would be word for word what Jesus would have taught his followers. Oral traditions just don't work that way. What scholars do think is that, likely, given the ways in which the oral tradition was passed along, Jesus prayed, from time to time, the individual petitions in the prayers we have in Matthew and Luke.

***List Slide**

So, it is likely that Jesus prayed these four things:

Bring about your kingdom.

Provide us with what we need for today.

Forgive what we owe to the same extent we forgive what others owe us.

Don't test us over and over.

Someone in the community from which Q came probably gathered the individual petitions, that they had heard from the oral tradition, into

one prayer for the first time. The authors of Matthew and Luke then copied the Q version and revised for their own purposes.

So, about the second question I am trying to answer today, “Can we change the words and still remain true to the text?” The reality is, the texts we have are not the original words and, in some ways, the authors have shifted a bit from what scholars believe was the original meaning. It seems to me, if we want to pray like Jesus, we ought to talk to God like we would imagine talking to anyone we know and trust. And our priorities ought to be God’s priorities: bringing about a world where the ways of God reign, a world in which goods are shared, we all have what we need today, and people are not held hostage by economics and fear. If we pray about those things, we honor what we call the Lord’s Prayer. And I don’t think Jesus would mind a bit if we used different words to say those things and added our hopes for wholeness for ourselves and the ones we love.

Prayer is a spiritual discipline that requires practice. If you struggle with prayer, I recommend reading and praying prayers that other people have written. Writing your own prayers is not a requirement. You can pray prayers like the Lord’s Prayer or other prayers in the Bible. The book of Psalms has many of them. Our very own Scott Taylor has a book in which he has compiled some of his pastoral prayers. And it’s good! I love to read prayers that other people have written and tweak them, like the authors of Matthew and Luke did with the original Q prayer. Whatever way you choose to spend your prayer time, it’s right. There isn’t a wrong way to pray when you are praying by yourself. You do you. Just know that wherever you are, whatever you are doing, you are never alone. Prayer teaches us that.

I hope this was helpful! As I mentioned earlier, next week’s question deals with what’s included in the Bible and who decided. I look forward to tackling that. Thanks so much for your questions and your

engagement in some pretty heady topics. I love learning and growing with you. Amen.

Hymn: Be Thou My Vision (Tim leads)

Communion

At Disciples Christian Church, communion is open to everyone, whether we are worshiping in person or virtually. You don't have to pretend you believe things you aren't sure about or be a member of the church. No matter who you are, what you have said or done, if you seek to love and be loved, you are welcome at this table where every week we remember the story of the last night Jesus spent with his friends. That night, they gathered around a table for a meal.

All these years later, we gather around this table to get a glimpse of that moment. For when we do, we remember that God welcomes all of us and there is a place set for every one of us. At the table, Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it. He gave some to all of them and there was enough for everyone. He took the cup, blessed it, and passed it around, and again, there was enough for everyone. Let us pray.

(Elder prays)

Building the Community (announcements)

Love in a Pantry

Pride Picnic Sign-Up

Family Promise Meals Sign-Up

Your generosity makes a difference in Bartlesville and beyond.

Please don't forget to give to the church by either going to the church by going to the website (www.dccbville.org) and clicking "Give" on the homepage, dropping a check in the mail, or if you are worshiping here in person, you can drop a check in the offering box. Thank you for trusting us with your gifts.

Please stand in body or spirit as we sing our closing song.

Hymn: Every Time I Feel the Spirit

Benediction

Postlude