

Notes on the Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is so familiar to us -- we say it whenever we gather for the Eucharist -- that we don't usually think about where it comes from. In fact, it's has been passed down to us in two of the four Gospels (Matthew 6.9-13 and Luke 11.1-4) and in an early Christian teaching manual called the *Didache*. In each place, the form of the prayer is different: although the version in Matthew and the version in the *Didache* are very similar, Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is quite distinct. The reason for this likely lies in the way this prayer itself was first prayed.

By the end of the first century of the Common Era, a standard daily prayer in Jewish worship was the Eighteen Blessings, or the Amidah, which bears some resemblances in form to the Lord's Prayer and was to be said three times daily (as was the Lord's Prayer according to the *Didache*). It's hard to be certain but it seems likely that the Amidah or something very similar had been in use since long before the time of Jesus. Although not codified as a set liturgy until after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the formal prayer consists of three blessings of praise, six blessings of intercessions (originally five), and three blessings of thanksgiving. It could be varied on Sabbath or holidays and in times of particular need.

Thus some scholars speculate that Jesus taught his followers to combine petitions like those we have in the Lord's Prayer with the Amidah as part of their daily prayers. If so, then the three versions of the prayer reflect the ways that different groups of Christians put those 'extra' petitions together to create a new prayer that was uniquely the Lord's. Likely these three versions represent three distinct traditions of prayer, with each writer having recorded it as they were used to hear it prayed in their worshipping communities.

We should also keep in mind the contexts in which the Lord’s Prayer occurs. The Matthean text is part of the Sermon on the Mount. There it is part of a section of general instruction about prayer, beginning at 6.1. Jesus counselled his disciples to pray with brevity, since their Father already knows what they need before they ask and introduced the prayer by saying ‘So pray like this’. In Luke on the other hand the prayer is given as Jesus’ response to a request from his disciples: ‘Lord, teach us to how to pray, as John also taught his disciples!’ His answer is the prayer, introduced with ‘Whenever you pray, say’. The *Didache* is not a narrative of events in Jesus’ life and ministry like the gospels; thus the context of the prayer is completely different there. It comes in a section on prayer and fasting. The author exhorted his readers not to fast as hypocrites do, and also not to pray as they do. Rather, he writes, one should pray as the Lord did in his gospel.

If we put the three versions together in a table, it's easier to compare them:

<i>Matthew:</i>	<i>Luke:</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Our Father in heaven,</i>	<i>Father,</i>	<i>Our Father in Heaven,</i>
<i>Your Name be made holy;</i>	<i>Your Name be made holy;</i>	<i>Your Name be made holy;</i>
<i>Your Kingdom come;</i>	<i>Your Kingdom come;</i>	<i>Your Kingdom come;</i>
<i>Your Will be done also on earth as in heaven;</i>		<i>Your Will be done also on earth as in heaven;</i>
<i>Give us today our bread for the coming day;</i>	<i>Give us day by day our bread for the coming day;</i>	<i>Give us today our bread for the coming day;</i>
<i>And forgive us our debts as we also herewith forgive our debtors;</i>	<i>And forgive us our sins, for we truly ourselves forgive all our debtors;</i>	<i>And forgive us our debt as we also forgive our debtors;</i>
<i>And bring us not to the trial, but deliver us from the Evil One.</i>	<i>And bring us not to the trial.</i>	<i>And bring us not to the trial, but deliver us from the Evil One;</i>
		<i>For the Power and the Glory are yours forever.</i>

In the fullest version, that of the *Didache*, there are eight individual clauses in the prayer, in Matthew's version there are seven, and in Luke's, six. Let's look at each one in turn.

First clause:

Our Father in Heaven Matthew and *Didache*

Father Luke

This clause is simple yet very profound. Jesus taught his disciples that when they pray they should first address God as 'Father'. Not as King, or Creator, or any other title we know for God, but as a parent. This points to the same truth as is expressed differently in the Fourth Gospel, that Jesus has made us able to be part of the familial relationship that exists between himself and his Father. We too are now children of God and should address God as our father. The old categories, such as king and mighty warrior, so important in the First Testament, have been subsumed or even removed by the new relationship.

Note that in the Lucan version the address is simply 'Father' – the intimacy of 'our' and the glory of 'in Heaven' are both missing. Certainly it sounds simpler and some have concluded it is the earliest form of the prayer. It may also have to do with the different audiences and traditions underlying the two gospels. Matthew arose from and was originally addressed to a Jewish Christian community and Luke arose from and was originally addressed to a Gentile Christian community.

Second clause:

Your Name be made holy Matthew, *Didache*, and Luke

This is the first of three opening petitions, all of which concern God and our relationship to God. All three are somewhat difficult to render in English, because of the ways that English syntax differs from Greek. But basically we are here expressing our desire that the holiness of God's Name should be known and recognised. Obviously we know before we pray this petition that God is intrinsically holy and so is God's Name. Why pray for God's Name to be hallowed or sanctified when we know that in fact it is holy? This petition is really a prayer that all humankind join us in that recognition and share in glorifying God for God's holiness.

Third clause:

Your Kingdom come Matthew, *Didache*, Luke

In this second petition, we pray for the coming of the Kingdom which was so important a part of Jesus' preaching. He exhorted his hearers with the words, 'The Kingdom of God has come near' in Mark 1.15 and Matthew 4.17, and here he taught his disciples to pray constantly for the full arrival of that Kingdom among them. He also spoke of this Kingdom in his parables, particularly in a series of parables in Matthew 13: the soil and the seed, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, the leaven and the dough, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and the net of fish. Each parable illuminates a different aspect of the Kingdom as we experience it on earth, such as its transformative power, its growth, or its concealment.

But in all Jesus' words about the Kingdom on earth, we also grasp what will be fully revealed only at the end, when the Kingdom comes in its fulness among all people. That is the coming we pray for here.

Fourth clause:

Your Will be done also on earth as in heaven Matthew, *Didache*

In the third petition, we pray for the day when God's will is carried out by humankind as it is already done in heaven by God's angels. As individuals and as Christ's body, the Church, we strive to do God's will in this way. Our obedience to God's will in conformity with the example that Jesus has set for us is a vital component to our Christian life of faith. As John tells us in his gospel, this obedience in love is part of the relationship of trust and belief we have with Jesus, which allows us in turn to participate in the relationship between the Father and the Son.

Taken collectively, these three petitions are all eschatological, that is, they look to the future time of fulfillment at the Lord's Day. What they ask for – universal recognition of the holiness of God, the coming of the Kingdom, and the accomplishment of God's will – are the features of the new covenant community, inaugurated by Jesus' sacrificial death but only to be brought to completion in Jesus' glorious return. In the meantime, in these on-going 'last days' we pray these three petitions as a reminder of our future hope and of the need to complete God's purpose in the world.

Fifth clause:

Give us today our bread for the coming day Matthew, *Didache*

Give us day by day our bread for the coming day Luke

There are two important points to make about this petition. First of all Matthew and the *Didache* use the expression 'Give us today' while Luke uses 'Give us day by day' – the

focus of the former is more immediate, looking no farther ahead than the coming day, while Luke's version looks ahead to a succession of days as we ask day by day for our needs. It seems that the Matthean version suits the eschatological outlook of the previous three petitions, while the latter version is more suited to our needs in a world in which the coming of the Lord's Day is not and cannot be expected immediately. Possibly this reflects differences between communities more heavily influenced by the presence of converts from Judaism and Gentile proselytism (as is likely the case for Matthew's original audience) and those more heavily influenced by converts from the Gentile world less influenced by proselytism (as was likely the case for Luke's). In either case in the petition we acknowledge our dependence upon God our Father for our needs.

The other point concerns the expression we have translated here as 'for the coming day' – it is usually translated as 'daily'. In fact, we cannot be sure what the Greek word here, 'epiousion,' exactly meant, because the word appears here in the Lord's Prayer for the first time, and its subsequent occurrences are all in passages based on or explaining this prayer. Although some scholars prefer the interpretation that has led to the traditional translation 'daily', Greek scholars believe that the word to have been coined from the expression 'he epiousa', 'the coming day'. This interpretation fits well with the general eschatological outlook of the prayer. As we pray this prayer, we are encouraged to live in God's time, looking no farther ahead than the coming day, and relying upon God for our daily needs.

Sixth clause:

And forgive us our debts as we also herewith forgive our debtors Matthew

And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors *Didache*

And forgive us our sins, for we truly ourselves forgive all our debtors Luke

The tenses here are important to understand the meaning of the second part of this petition -- Luke and the *Didache* both use the present tense but Matthew's text has a Greek verb form that doesn't exist in English, called an aorist subjunctive, which emphasises that the action of forgiveness here is single and unrepeated. Above I have used a translation suggested by NT scholars J. Jeremias and Raymond Brown. We are therefore asking God to do what we ourselves do: forgive our debtors unconditionally at the last, when we stand before the Judge.

This petition thus has affinities with the parable of the unforgiving steward in Matt 18.21-35 (where it is told in answer to a question from Peter about forgiveness). We pledge ourselves to radical and unconditional forgiveness not as part of a transaction or bargain with God but because in offering that forgiveness to one another we live out the life God desires for us. Just as elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus points out that if we who are evil can still give good things to our children when they ask, how much more will our heavenly Father give good things to those who ask, so here our willingness to forgive is the best possible basis for confidence in God's forgiveness. For where else do we learn the lesson of radical and unconditional forgiveness more truly than from God's forgiveness of us?

Seventh clause:

And bring us not to the trial but deliver us from the Evil One	Matthew, <i>Didache</i>
And bring us not to the trial	Luke

This petition looks explicitly forward to the Lord's Day and the tribulation that will come before the end. Many of us aren't comfortable with the picture of the end times that we see in the New Testament -- its apocalyptic flavour jars with the vision we have of Jesus. But there is no doubt that this apocalyptic language and images are part of the message of the

earliest disciples and of Jesus himself. And one thing is very clear in that message, the time of trial will be terrible -- according to Jesus in the Markan version of the 'Little Apocalypse': 'And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days.' So it is appropriate that we pray not to be brought to that time.

In Matthew and the *Didache*, this petition is completed with a prayer to be delivered 'apo tou ponerou' -- a phrase that could be translated either 'from evil' or 'from the Evil One'. The traditional translation, still followed in the latest version from the English Language Liturgical Consultation, retains 'deliver us from evil' (though they acknowledge 'widespread dissatisfaction' with the translation of this entire petition). Brown argues persuasively that the change from 'temptation' to 'time of trial' in the first part (which the ELLC adopted) actually fits in better with the translation of 'the Evil One' in the second part. I have adopted his suggestions.

In this form the prayer looks ahead not to the Lord's Day as do so many other of the petitions but to the time of suffering that will precede it. When we pray this petition we are acknowledging God's sovereignty over future events and praying for his help and deliverance from the one whom the New Testament acknowledges as prince of this world as that Evil One struggles to maintain his power in the face of the new reality that will come into being with the coming of the Lord's Day.

Eighth clause:

For the Power and the Glory are yours forever *Didache*

This is likely a liturgical conclusion, summing up our acknowledgement of God's sovereignty throughout the prayer. Given that acknowledgement, which comes more to the

fore as we pray each petition, it is most important that we never forget the insight of the first clause, that this sovereign God is someone that we also claim as Our Father.

When we pray this prayer with due attention to each clause, we speak of our love of God as our parent, our desire for God's Kingdom, our need of God's providential care for our daily needs as well as for our future preservation. It is the common prayer of all Christians, whatever our confessional stand, because Jesus gave it to his disciples and because nothing better expresses our relationship with God.