

## "THE LORD'S PRAYER"

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Deuteronomy 6:4-7

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*The Lord's Prayer.* It ranks alongside the *23rd Psalm*, or may be above it, in any and every list of favorite Scripture verses. It is that part of the Bible that is known by heart by more people than any other. In fact, it would be very strange for someone having anything at all to do with any Christian church not to know it from memory.

But knowing it so well and praying it so often makes it difficult to pray. Who is there among us who can say that when we say "Amen" following the *Lord's Prayer*, we were not distracted, and that we were able to concentrate on all of the petitions? I can't. I have to work very hard to think about what I'm saying and I'll bet you do too.

A few thoughts may help and at the end of this sermon, I'm going to give you a new translation that, from time to time, may help. It helps me. And no, it does not replace "debts" with "trespasses," although there is a new word at that point in the prayer.

To begin: this prayer was taught to the disciples by Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke are clear about that. One of the disciples had asked, saying, "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1) Consequently, this prayer is for disciples to pray. It has meaning only to those who have pledged or committed themselves to Christ. It is not a child's prayer even though it is regarded as one and taught to children. It is just not easily meaningful to a child. It also is not the Family Prayer, as it is sometimes called unless we mean the Church Family. It is specifically and definitely a disciples prayer and only on the lips of a disciple does it have full meaning. It can only be prayed when the pray-er knows what he is saying and that knowledge belongs only to a disciple.

The Lord's Prayer has six petitions. The first three have to do with God and the last three with our needs. The first three: "Hallowed by thy name" - "Thy kingdom come" - "Thy Will be done." First God is given his Supreme Place and then we turn to our needs and desires. The final three: "Give us this day our daily bread" - "Forgive us our debts" - "Lead us not into temptation." Notice that these three petitions touch God in His wholeness - wholeness that reflects the idea of the Trinity. The needs are ours. He fills them.

1. Daily Bread is provided by God, the Father, the Creator.
2. Forgiveness comes through Christ the Son and
3. Lead us not into temptation conjures up God the Holy Spirit who is the Sustainer, the Comforter, the Guide and Guardian.

The most moving part of the entire prayer for me is the fifth petition. "Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors." I take that very seriously. It means to me that to enjoy God's forgiveness, I must forgive others, all of them. No holding back. If I hold back, God hold's back and I cannot afford that.

George Bernard Shaw makes a player in "Major Barbara" say, "Forgiveness is a beggar's refuge. . . We must pay our debts." But how? Even if I am honorable today, how do I cancel yesterday's dishonor? There isn't a lot of forgiveness these days. Our courts prove that. John Wesley reported a conversation he once had with an Army General (Ogelthorpe), who said, "I never forgive." Wesley says he answered, "Then, sir, I hope you never sin." I pay attention when I pray "Forgive us . . . ."

For the rest of the sermon, I want to speak about how the prayer begins. "Our Father who art in heaven." Missionaries report that one of the greatest reliefs - one of the greatest happy discoveries for a new convert - is the certainty that there is one God. Almost everywhere in the world before Christianity came, there was a belief that there were hordes of gods. Every stream and river, every tree and valley, everything had its own god. The world was crowded with gods, and all of them were jealous and hostile. All of them had to be placated and men and women tried so hard not to offend any of them. They lived in terror of the gods. They were haunted and not helped.

Enter God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Father of Jesus. A whole new idea of God comes to these people. The power and might is still there but He does not scare us to death because he comes in love.

And old Roman story helps us to understand. Those powerful emperors who ruled Rome, who fanned out over the world making conquest after conquest, would return to Rome after each foray. These men would return to Rome to the cheers, the applause, the admiration and the love of the citizens. When they approached the city, thousands would line the roads as the victorious, heroic troops marched before them. The soldiers would display all their captured trophies and those who were taken prisoner. Finally, the chariot of the Emperor would come into view and the crowds would go wild. Tall and strong legionaires lined the route to keep people from getting too close. Here was the world's most powerful person.

At one point on this triumphal route, there was a platform or a stage where the Empress and her family could watch with pride as her husband came home. This Emperor had sons, the youngest, upon seeing the Emperor approach, jumped down from the stage, burrowed through the crowd and tried to dodge between the legs of one of the legionaires, and run out on the road to meet his father's chariot. The legionaire stooped down, grabbed the little boy and said, "You can't do that. Don't you know who that is in the chariot? That's the Emperor. You can't run out there!" The little boy squirmed out of the legionaire's grasp and laughed as he ran to the chariot and said, "He may be your Emperor, but he's my father!"

The Lord's Prayer makes much about God plain to those who are truly God's disciples but mostly it makes plain that might and the majesty and the power of heaven all belong to the someone whom Jesus taught us to call, "Our Father."

Oh yes, the new approved translation:

Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name,  
Your kingdom come,  
Your will be done,  
On earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
Forgive us our sins  
As we forgive those  
Who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
And deliver us from evil,  
For the Kingdom, the power,  
And the glory are yours,  
Now and forever. Amen.