

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
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The Lord's Prayer - Part II - "Changes"

This is the second of a four part series of sermons which will explore the prayer that, according to Biblical tradition, was given to us by Jesus himself. It is known to us as "The Lord's Prayer." Today we will begin to look at the changes suggested in the new version of the prayer as it is printed in our Prayer Book.

Last week we learned that the Lord's Prayer is intended as a proper preparation for our worship and for regular prayer in our daily lives. It is called "proper" because it is a "model" prayer. It is intended to get us started on the right path as we develop our individual prayer lives. It was originally given, not to a reporter for the Jerusalem Times, but to a small group of disciples who believed in and were committed to Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. In fact, it was given in direct response to a question asked by one of those disciples who said, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus replied with a prayer that contains everything that a prayer to God needs, at least in general terms. It is a unique prayer that brings the past to the present and offers it to God for our future.

So why change it? Why not keep it and use it in its original form, which everyone knows is "the King's English?" I mean, if it was good enough for Shakespeare it ought to be good enough for us, right? Amidst all the changes of this life, we ought to keep something just the way Jesus gave it to us - the way it is printed in the King James Bible, right? Indeed, there is an argument for the idea that we could just keep the old form and teach the meaning to our young people. We could, as a recent TV program suggested, allow young people to keep their "street language" as long as they are willing to learn "proper" English. They have to do that in order to get a good job, so why not require Elizabethan English for their prayer lives? I think we all know the answer - we change our language simply because its everyday meaning changes. Just as Webster prints a revised dictionary every few years, so we revise our prayer language. It's not that God couldn't understand us; it's so that we understand what it is that we are praying. The intent remains the same. Only the words change. Sort of like life in general, isn't it?

As we grow older, we keep wanting to say, "Life used to be so simple!" But you and I know it wasn't! Here is a personal example. As many of you know, I did not begin life as an Episcopalian. By the way, that puts me in the majority! Instead, my family belonged to the old German Evangelical and Reformed Church. Eventually we united with the Congregational Christians of New England and became what is now the United Church of Christ (UCC). But back then we were something between Amish and Lutheran. That means we used many of the old "catholic" liturgical forms, but they were spoken with an "evangelical" flavor! Some of those forms were even in "Dutch," Pennsylvania "Doitch", that is - a cross between German and English. For example: "make schnell," or, "Quicken sie!" meant "hurry up!" Translations and verb forms are famous, like "outen the light" and "throw papa downstairs his hat." No kidding, we talked like this, and our prayer language was no different. God must have been *very* confused. I know I was!

The Lord's Prayer was a case in point. As a child, I had learned the old German phrase "forgive us our *debts*, as we forgive our *debtors*." (Smiles of recognition?) I remember having lots of discussions about that word "debt" with my pastor, my Sunday school teachers, my parents, who were also Sunday school teachers, and my friends. The problem was that as young people we didn't understand the concept of "debt" in this context - that of prayer language. We understood that a "debt" was something you owed to somebody, but at age ten to twelve, we didn't owe anything to anybody, so far as we knew! My, how that has changed! Then as a teenager, my girl friend introduced me to the Episcopal Church. Suddenly we were praying about "trespasses." To me, that meant to "step across", as in a boundary line, or to disobey a law or rule. Now I will admit to "bending" a few rules at school or trying to get away with as much as I could under my parent's noses, but I sure didn't understand why I had to pray to God about it! For me, there needed to be a change in my prayer language.

That change didn't occur until long after my ordination when I began to work with deaf people. They taught me the necessity of making my prayer language more concrete. They had the same problem with "debt" and "trespass" that I did. A debt to them was simply a financial obligation and so the concrete sign was one of "paying out." The word simply didn't fit with what Jesus was trying to say. Likewise the concept of "trespass", while it had a concrete application, was mostly abstract. It was hard to "draw a picture" in sign language of a "trespass." Again, it wasn't what Jesus intended. They needed something graphic, something that would describe what it is that needs to be forgiven. The only thing they could come up with was the word "sin." "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Suddenly we had a change that made sense!

The deaf community didn't know it, but in their attempt to simply "make sense" of their prayer lives, they had stumbled onto a concept that was probably the closest the English language can get to the original intent of Jesus' words. The dictionary defines sin most simply as "a violation of religious law." But it is much more than that. To a Christian, sin is something, some thought or act, which alienates, or separates, us from each other or from God. Thus sin can be anything which intentionally "pulls apart" the harmony of God's creation. Thus in American Sign Language, "sin" is the following sign (demonstate).

In the New Testament, there are no less than five different types of sin that could be included under this phrase in the Lord's Prayer.

First there is the sin of "hmartia" (hamartia), which in the Greek means "to miss the mark." It is the failure to become what we were meant to be. St. Paul thought of it in terms of what he ought to do and didn't, etc. The second type of sin is called "parabasis" ("parabasis"). This is the one that encompasses "trespassing." It describes "stepping across the line," as in knowing right from wrong and stepping across the line that separates them. It is knowing truth and choosing falsehood. The third is hard to pronounce in the Greek; it is "paraptoma" (paraptoma). This is not so much of a "stepping across" the line as it is a "slipping" across the line. You could describe it as a temporary loss of control. A fourth kind of sin is most like the dictionary definition. It is "anomia" (anomia), lawlessness. It is intentional defiance of a barrier, law, rule, or regulation. From it we get our word "anomaly", something inconsistent or

abnormal - often used on "Star Trek" to describe anything that doesn't "fit" known patterns of Space.

Then finally there is the form of sin that is directly translated from the Greek word used in the Lord's Prayer. It is "ofeilema" (ophilema), the word for "debt." But it is much more encompassing than just financial debt. Ofeilema is the failure to pay that which is due in all cases. It is the failure to do one's duty, to meet *all* of one's obligations. It is a failure which includes all four of the previously stated ideas of sin. It is the cause of all separation from God and from each other. Thus it is the intention of the Lord's Prayer to forgive *all of the above*, everything that you have done. "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven."

It all sounds pretty complete, doesn't it? But now, here is the "kicker!" It says "forgive them *as indeed* we forgive those who, etc." The phrase in Greek is explicit, "ws kai" (os kai), *as indeed*, or, "in proportion to!" In other words, forgive us "in proportion" to the way we have forgiven others! Wow! Like we've said before, "what goes around, comes around!" A change in language makes quite a difference after all.

So, instead of using words like "debt" or "trespass", which have very restricted meanings, why not call a spade a shovel? Why not call a sin, "a sin?" Please consider that later on in the Service when we offer together "The Lord's Prayer."

Next week: "Temptation vs. Trial, and the Evil One!"