

World's Greatest LP
Sermon on Luke 11:1-13 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, July 29, 2007

Many of you know that I struggle to cope with modern technology: the computer I use is a desktop, not a laptop; I use cell phones only in cases of extreme necessity; and I have sent only two text messages in my entire life. I fail to understand the point of text messaging, or perhaps, more accurately, I cannot come to terms with the abbreviations, misspellings, and grammatical absurdities necessary to communicate in this medium. The phrase "See you later" in text-speak, for instance, becomes the letters 'c', 'u' and 'l8r.' Somehow this is comprehensible to most people my age and younger (and not a few of you who are older). This deliberate shortening of words and phrases has become commonplace in communication of all types, but particularly in advertising and e-mail correspondence.

I regret to report that it has even made its way to the Bible. The British website ShipofFools.com sponsored a contest to see who could write the shortest text-message version of the Lord's Prayer¹, which in the spirit of the times, I'm going to call simply The LP. The winning entry is a masterpiece of text-message simplicity, addressed to dad@hvn, asking God "giv us food&4giv r sins." The third-place entry, written by the Rev. Stephen Moore of Bellevue, Washington, is admirable for actually using complete words: "God@heaven.org, You rule, up and down. We need grub and a break. Will pass it on. Keep us focused. You totally rule, long term. Amen."

Now I might typically complain about this treatment of the Lord's Prayer, except that the writer of Luke's Gospel has come up with his own "text-message" version of the LP, one considerably shorter than the version we find in Matthew's Gospel. And maybe that shortening

¹ <http://www.shipoffools.com/Cargo/Features01/Features/RFather.html>.

has a point: it focuses attention on the simplicity of the prayer's language and the directness of its petitions.²

We say the LP—or at least Matthew's version of it—so often that I wonder if maybe it begins to lose its meaning. What if we were to use Luke's version instead? Would that rouse us from our liturgical slumber to a new awareness of our prayer? What really are we praying for?

First, however, we take note of whom we are praying *to*. Jesus taught his disciples, and us, to pray to God as “Father.” This is remarkable for two reasons: First, calling God “Father” is striking in its simplicity. Many prayers in Jesus' day had devised elaborate forms of address for God. For example, the “Prayer of Eighteen Benedictions,” which was to be repeated three times a day, began, “Lord God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob! God Most High, Creator of Heaven and earth! Our Shield and the Shield of our fathers!”³ But before he gave the disciples his prayer in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told them, “[D]o not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words” (6:7). Although we should praise and adore God, we don't have to string together the most complicated adjectives we can think up in order to call on God. We can address God simply as Father.

Second, although God's people Israel knew to call God “Father,” they did to do so only in what Joseph Fitzmyer calls “a corporate, national, or covenantal sense.”⁴ God as Father meant Father of a collective entity or group. But Jesus addressed God in Aramaic as *'abbā'*, the respectful but intimate form of address adults used for their parents. Jesus spoke to God in familiar terms, as Father, because they shared a relationship as Father and Son.

² R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*, New Interpreters Bible, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 234.

³ Rudolf Bultmann in *Theology* 1.23-24, quoted by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) 903..

⁴ Fitzmyer, *ibid.*

Now that we know to whom we are praying and the privilege of praying to the God we can call Father, what are we praying for? Jesus tells us we are to pray concerning two main things: things concerning God and things concerning us. Concerning God, we pray first that God's name would be hallowed. 'Hallowed' is a funny kind of word, one that we don't use very often, except at Halloween and when discussing the latest Harry Potter book.⁵ To hallow something is to sanctify it, to make it holy by setting it apart from everyday use for divine use. Of course, we know that God's name is holy. Why then should we pray that God's name be hallowed? Is it not holy already? Martin Luther answers that God's name "is always holy in its nature, but in our use it is not holy." We profane God's holy name "in words and in works." Thus we are to act and pray such that God's name would be holy among us here on earth, just as it is by nature and in heaven. Our prayer, then, is really for that which is demanded in the Second Commandment, i.e. that God's name be holy and revered in our words and in our deeds.⁶

Next we pray, "Your kingdom come." Suddenly, "Unexpectedly, quite surprisingly, politics has crept into our Christian praying at this point."⁷ We may think that in praying the LP we are being quite spiritual and pretty far removed from the realm of politics. But if Jesus was simply a spiritual leader, it's hard to understand why anybody got bothered enough to kill him. Those people who did execute him realized that in preaching and teaching about God's kingdom, Jesus threatened the powers-that-be, telling them that the way things are is not the way God wants them to be. Cyril of Alexandria knew that to pray, 'Your kingdom come' is to pray that Jesus will "come and descend as judge" of the world. Yet God's coming kingdom will bring not only judgment, but also God's vision for a new world. As Tom Wright points out, "to call on God as 'Father' was to invoke the God of the Exodus, the liberating God, the God whose

⁵ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J. K. Rowling.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, XII.

⁷ William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 50.

kingdom was coming, bringing bread for the hungry, forgiveness for the sinner, and deliverance from the powers of darkness....”⁸ To pray, ‘Your kingdom come’ is to pray as St. Augustine did, that God’s kingdom would come within us and that may we be found within that kingdom.

Having focused first on the things of God, only now are we in a position to petition God for our own needs. Thus we pray, ‘Give us each day our daily bread.’ “Daily bread” does not sound very complicated, but it is. The Greek word for ‘daily’ is found in only two places in the New Testament: Matthew and Luke’s versions of the LP, so it is hard to know exactly how to translate it. Origen said the word means bread in service of our being, bread we need for our subsistence, bread we require to exist, essential bread. John Chrysostom believed that daily bread was just that: bread for the current day, bread for today, daily bread. Jerome and others thought that this bread was in fact bread for the coming day, bread for tomorrow, bread for the future. However we translate the word, it is clear that it “has something to do with the food necessary to sustain life.”⁹ Thus it is both physical bread and spiritual bread that we need, bread that only God can provide as the good gifts of a Father to his children.

As Alan Culpepper says, “As surely and desperately as we need bread, we need forgiveness,”¹⁰ so we pray, ‘And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.’ We don’t forgive those indebted to us because it comes naturally or easily or because we just can’t help ourselves. We forgive others because we ourselves have been forgiven. None of us is blameless, pure, and altogether righteous. In fact, St. Paul declares the opposite is the case: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). But he also assures us that when we “were dead in trespasses ..., God made [us] alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands” (Col. 2:13-

⁸ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 135.

⁹ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 163.

¹⁰ Culpepper, 235.

14). And so because we are forgiven, our records of wrong erased, our debts to God canceled, we can in turn forgive those who have wronged us, who are indebted to us. Being forgiven and forgiving others are two sides of the same coin: those who will not forgive others cannot themselves receive forgiveness, for to forgive and be forgiven are part of the same gift.¹¹

Having asked for provision and forgiveness, finally we ask for deliverance, beseeching God ‘not to bring us to the time of trial.’ In Matthew’s version of the LP we pray, ‘Lead us not into temptation.’ And there are some temptations that may be particular to contemporary Americans: the temptation, in former televangelist Jim Bakker’s words, “to have more, do more, earn more, build bigger, emphasize material things rather than spiritual, protect the image regardless of cost, look the other way rather than confront wrongs.”¹² But Jesus is instructing us about something even more profound, pushing us beyond praying about “[our] personal faults and foibles, [our] petty temptations and peccadilloes.”¹³ We need to be delivered from the power of evil and the testing of the devil. We ask to be liberated from the realm of Satan’s power, for according to Ephesians 6, “[O]ur struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (v. 12). We turn to God for deliverance from evil, for with God alone is the power to vanquish evil, and nothing will separate us from God’s love.

Calling God Father because we have a personal relationship with him through Jesus Christ his Son; asking God to make his name holy in us and in our lives; seeking from God our Father the good gifts of bread and forgiveness and deliverance—these are not insignificant

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jim Bakker, *I Was Wrong* (Thomas Nelson, 1996) p. xiii, quoted by James Mulholland in *Praying Like Jesus: The Lord’s Prayer in a Culture of Prosperity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) 110.

¹³ Willimon and Hauerwas, 89.

things. And so it is always “with the confidence of children of God” that we are bold to pray as Jesus taught us the world’s greatest LP.