

Text: Matthew 6:7-15 Mark 11:25-26 Luke 11:1-4.

Title: Teach Us To Pray

Date: September 25, 2011

So last week we looked at the different words that Matthew, Mark and Luke and found out that it really didn't matter whether you used Debts, Trespasses or Sins, for the operative word was **aphes** *αφεσ* - forgive- cancel the dept. Or as one wise man put it, forgiveness is not about saying it's OK, it's about removing your hands from around the other guys neck.

Actually, the Lord's Prayer is far more important than speaking of forgiveness. What is interesting is that the Gospel writers give slightly different twists to the prayer and how it is to be used. To get handles on this we are going to have to give up the idea that the Gospel writers wrote their books the same way we would write a book. We would sit down and write out the story from beginning to end, trying our best to put things in the right order. Oh, they sought to put things in the right order all right, but which order? One of the best definitions for the gospels that I have come across is: *The Gospel was a message long before it became a book.... It is a literary work to interpret theological meanings of a concrete historical event to a people in a particular historical situation.* In other words, the Gospels are about what happened, and why it happened.

Let's start with Matthew, not just because he is first in line, but because his agenda is easiest to track. Matthew is writing after the disastrous 66-70 Jewish revolt against Rome that resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. This was an era in which all that the Jews held dear was called into question. Gone were the Sadducees. Gone were the Essenes. When the smoke cleared the only group left standing were the Pharisees, the fore runners of the modern day Rabbi. Their first task was to rebuild Jewish religious identity apart from the Temple and to standardize Jewish Scriptures. Believe it or not, they hadn't done that yet, and now that the pesky Christians were using their Scriptures for their own evangelistic purposes, they had get that job done. Many in the Jewish community were angry that that Jerusalem church did not get involved in the fight against Rome- there were even moves to expel Jewish Christians from the synagogues!

Which is where Matthew steps in. He is writing to these Jewish Christians, to encourage them in their faith; to give them arguments that Jesus really is the Messiah. Even more, he wants them to understand that Jesus fits into the Old Testament tradition, to the point that he organizes his Gospel along the lines of the Pentateuch. He begins with the beginnings of Jesus and right where you might expect to find the Law in Deuteronomy, you get the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5,6 &7 where Matthew concentrates all of Jesus' ethical teachings.

So we see Jesus placing his pattern of prayer over and against those whose idea of prayer was public piety, a way to garner public acclaim; or even worse, those who think by repetition and their own eloquence that they could somehow twist God's arm to do their bidding. Gee, it looks that they had TV preachers back in the day! No, for Jesus, Prayer is designed to bring us closer to God, not for us to ask God to get our own way. God knows our needs before we ask- and wants to meet those needs. So Jesus starts with Abba, Father, a term of intimacy- far from the distant formal God of the synagogue. Names were not mere handles as they are now, a name captured the essence of one's identity- and for God that is Father. Hallowed means to make holy; this is a prayer that God's essential holiness be recognized by all. Linked with God's holiness in the inevitability of God's will. It doesn't matter how desperate, how hopeless, how challenging our appraisal of our situation may be- since God is revealed as Father and as Holy, the God's will be done- Period.

Given this statement of God's power and will, we ask the 3 "We" questions. 1) we ask for bread- for our daily needs to be met. That's obvious enough, but it was part of the Messianic expectation that when the Messiah does come in all his glory, then world hunger would be a thing of the past, so this is also a prayer for the Second Coming, when Jesus will reign with power and glory. 2) We ask for forgiveness and the ability to forgive. That was last week's sermon- I think we can skip it now. 3) We ask for deliverance. This is a frank admission that we live in an evil world, where sometimes we step on landmines. The Gospel is all about redemption, recreation and transformation, but that seems never to be a one shot deal. Most of the time it feels like a painful, step by step process, sometimes we lose hope- so we go back to God's will being done. All in all, this is a great pattern for prayer, it covers all the basis.

We can be forgiven if Mark's version, even if it only the forgive as we are forgiven part. But Mark uses this in a very different way than Matthew. Mark puts this episode towards the end of his gospel, the day after Jesus kicked the moneychangers out of the Temple. According to Mark, we have the Palm Sunday procession to Jerusalem, Jesus looks around and returns to Bethany. The next day, as they walk back to Jerusalem, Jesus sees a fig tree that has not borne fruit and curses it. This sounds weird to our ears, but the fig tree had long been a national symbol of Judea, much like the bald eagle is a symbol of America. They enter Jerusalem, chase the moneychangers out of the Temple and when they pass by the fig tree again, they see that it is not withered and dead. Mark is painting a vivid picture of not only the power of prayer, but of the consequence of not taking God's purposes seriously. When the disciples point out the withered tree, Jesus uses this as an opportunity to speak on the power of prayer to move mountains- but the prerequisite for this kind of prayer is our setting aside of an grievance we may have against another. Come to think of it, isn't that how it naturally works? If I am angry and holding a grudge- then prayer feels lifeless and a waste of time. According to Jesus, it is!

Luke use of the Lord's prayer is very similar to Matthew's. Makes sense, Luke is using a lot of the same material. I love Luke, we not only know who he is, he tells us why he is writing his Gospel. He addresses both Acts and his gospel to one Theophilus (lover of God) who appears to be a Roman official. That might be a stretch, but Luke goes out of his way to cast the Romans in a good light. Anyway, he tells us straight out that he is writing a history, so Theophilus will know what happened and he explains Jewish customs along the way.

Luke's Lord's prayer is almost in the dead center of his Gospel. In his version, the disciples come asking Jesus to give them a distinctive prayer. After all, John's disciples got a special prayer, what are they, chopped liver? So Luke gives them the same version that Matthew has, with one exception. Luke changes the tense of ***aphes*** *αφεσ*. Instead of a simple past tense, Luke uses a tense that has past action continuing into the present. Not only are we to forgive others- we are to continue to forgive them! letting go on our claim to get even never ends.

The more I think about it, I think Matthew had it right. For us, the Lord's Prayer is more than a mere pattern of prayer. In Matthew's day (continuing to today) religious Jews opened and closed the day by reciting the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) **Hear O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one!** this is a statement of the totality of God, that nothing happens that is outside of his knowledge and power. The Lord's prayer for us is much the same- it is a pattern of prayer linked with a statement of the power, nature and intimacy of the God who came in Person to call us to Himself.