

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 4

Matthew – Part Four

Sermon on the Mount #2

By spending an extra week on the Sermon on the Mount, we are able to focus more attention on two aspects of the sermon that stretch a little beyond the text itself. The additional focus areas come from the Lord's Prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Most Christians in most churches say the Lord's Prayer at various times in their lives. The prayer, as said in various churches, can differ in several aspects. Some churches pray "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Other churches pray "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Where does this difference come from? Similarly, some churches end the Lord's Prayer with "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen." Other churches do not add that tagline, but instead end the prayer with the prior verse, "and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Why the difference?

➤ "Debts" or "Sins"?

The New International Version (N.I.V.) of the Bible translates Matthew 6:12 as "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." The Greek word Matthew chose for "debts" is *opheilema*. The primary meaning of this word is "debt" or "wrong;" hence, the N.I.V. translation "forgive us our debts." The word, however, has a secondary use or meaning of "sin" or "guilt;" although, the primary Greek word used in scripture for "sin" is *hamartia*.¹ In fact, you can see another usage of this "debt" word in Romans 4:4. There, Paul writes that "when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation." The word translated "obligation" is this same word Matthew uses in the Lord's Prayer that the N.I.V. translates as "debt."

So, where does our usage of "trespasses" or "sins" come from? Actually, it comes from several places. First, the Greek word *opheilema* can certainly carry the meaning of "sin." Further, the theology behind the Lord's Prayer involves the premise that our sins are in fact debts that need forgiveness

¹ *Hamartia* stems from a Greek meaning of "missing the target" or "missing the mark." It references sin as a shortcoming or failure to do right. In contrast, the emphasis with Matthew's word *opheilema* is sin as a wrong that has an effect. In essence, it is a debt or obligation result of wrong actions being emphasized.

before God. This includes the teaching that Christ's crucifixion was "payment" of a debt Christ did not owe.

There is another source of the oft used translation of "sins" instead of "debts." The Gospel of Luke also gives some limited information about the Lord's Prayer. Luke 11:4 references the same prayer as Matthew, but the N.I.V. reads with a slightly different translation: "forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." The reason the N.I.V. uses "sin" to translate in Luke but "debt" in Matthew is found in the Greek of Luke 11:4. Luke does not use Matthew's word *opheilema*, but instead uses the common word for "sin" (*hamartia*) in the first part of 11:4, "forgive us our sins (*hamartia*)." Luke then shifts and uses the Matthew term *opheilema* when Luke speaks of those who "sin" against us. Thus, we see a clear reference for those who recite the Lord's Prayer with the word "sin" or "trespass," instead of "debt."

This change in Luke, however, does raise an additional question. Why the difference between Luke and Matthew? Most likely, Luke's usage of both terms indicates that the Matthew term is meant in the sense of "sins" as opposed to "debt" in a classic economic sense.

A final point – some may say that Luke's use of a different term indicates that the Bible is not accurate on a word by word basis. Anyone so opining needs to remember that both Matthew and Luke are translating something that Jesus said in Aramaic. As both try to put it into Greek, it is just as natural that they might choose different Greek words, just as our English translators choose different words to translate the scriptures into English.

Bottom line – the usage of either "debts" or "sins" is an authentic and accurate reproduction of the Lord's Prayer. The usage of one over the other is merely a matter of convention and clarity.

➤ *The Ending – "Kingdom, Power, and Glory" or not?*

The N.I.V. ends the Lord's Prayer in Matthew with the phrase "but deliver us from the evil one." If one looks at the footnote, then one finds the additional phrase, "for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen." Where did this footnote ending come from and does it belong? Before we answer that question, we need to spend a moment understanding some basics behind our translations of the New Testament.

The New Testament books were written by a number of different authors. We do not have any of the “autographs” available today. By “autographs,” we mean the actual, original documents Matthew or Paul wrote, for example. Matthew did not keep his gospel on a word processor so that it might be sent to print each time a new copy was needed. Instead, any copies of the gospels or other New Testament writings required hand copying, a time-consuming and somewhat error prone task.

For the first several hundred years A.D., Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire. In fact, the Emperor Diocletian (284–305 A.D.) ordered all Christian scriptures destroyed. This edict meant that in addition to having a great chore in copying scripture, folks also had a great chore in keeping the authorities from destroying any copies.

Notwithstanding such difficulties, the early church was not without copies of scriptures. We have about 5,000 different ancient Greek manuscripts that have at least partial texts of the New Testament. These texts date from as early as the 100’s going throughout the Middle Ages. Scholars are able to study these texts and understand with relative clarity what the original, autograph texts would have looked like.

This fact also gives insight into why certain changes in the text crept in over the centuries. Some changes are as apparent as a misspelling or changed word order. Some, however, include the wholesale incursion or exclusion of certain words, verses, or even stories. In determining what the originals said, scholars have demonstrated some texts are more reliable than others. This conclusion leads us to the issue under consideration.

The Greek of Matthew’s conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer (6:13) ends in a number of different ways, depending on which Greek manuscript one reads. The oldest manuscripts (Codex Sinaiticus–350ish A.D.; Codex Vaticanus–350ish also; Codex Bezae–400/500 A.D.) do not have the addition. Similarly, early commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer (Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, all dating 200-250 A.D.) do not reference the additional ending. Most scholars do not, therefore, reckon the ending as being in the original writing of Matthew.

The Greek manuscripts that include some or all of the additional ending concerning the “kingdom,” “power,” and “glory” are all of a substantially later vintage (Codex Cyprius–800/900’s; Codex Regius–700’s; Codex W²–late 300’s/early 400’s; Codex Sangallensis–800’s; Codex Koridethi–800’s; Codex Petropolitanus–800’s). There are also various iterations of the ending. Some have “power” and “glory,” but lack “kingdom.” Others have “kingdom,” but miss “glory.”

What does this leave us? Ultimately, the most likely scenario is the one the N.I.V. gives: the prayer Jesus offered Jesus lacked the ending with which we are so familiar. Does that make it wrong to pray the ending? Of course not – and for several reason. First, the Lord’s Prayer was never meant to be a formula. The fact that Luke gives it slightly different than Matthew makes that clear. Second, while the phrase is not original with Matthew, it is, nonetheless, a splendid phrase to have in prayer before God. Hence, it’s inclusion in the Lord’s Prayer is of benefit, not heresy.

POINTS FOR HOME

- Do Right, from the Heart
- Do Right, not for Show
- Invest in Right Things
- God Gets the Worries
- Get Own House in Order

² Codex W is an odd manuscript that, while relatively early, is considered rather unreliable in some respects. For example, Codex W adds the following verses after Mark 16:14 (Don’t look for these verses in the N.I.V.! Scholars do not reckon them as the original text!):

And they excused themselves, saying, “This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things of the spirits. Therefore reveal they righteousness now”–thus they spoke to Christ. And Christ replied to them, “The term of years for Satan’s power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who have sinned I was delivered over to death, that they may return to the truth and sin no more; that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness which is in heaven.”