

The Dangerous Journey

Matthew 6:9-13

Real estate: location, location, location. In interpreting the Bible: context, context, context. Very little in the Bible, if anything, can be lifted out of its context and make the sense the author intended. "Slaves, obey your masters in fear and trembling," is found in the book of Ephesians. One might hear this out of context and think owning slaves was fine with God. But in this context, when the early church fully expected Jesus to return and destroy the Roman Empire, what was the point to put people unnecessarily in danger? God would soon end slavery for good.

Context is especially necessary to understand the Lord's Prayer. In introducing the Lord's Prayer in worship, often the Episcopal priest would say, "Now as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say..." We are bold to say.... Bold, that is daring to say, undaunted, fearless, emboldened to say. I dare say that few approach the recitation of this prayer with boldness in mind. The reason is that we have lost touch with its context. Let's look closely at the setting of this prayer. In doing so, we may be encouraged to boldly proclaim it ourselves.

Palestine at the time of Jesus was one of the most oppressed of the Roman colonies. Not only was it governed by Rome, but their religious life was also overseen by people appointed by Rome. Rome constantly put down rebellions there and exacted high taxes in tribute. Most people eked out a subsistence living and lived in fear of Roman exploitation.

Also at that time there was a high expectation of the coming of the Messiah who would destroy Rome and elevate Israel over the world. All the nations would flow to Jerusalem and worship God. Jesus came preaching about the coming of the kingdom of God, which Dominic Crossan describes as how the world would look with God, not Caesar on the imperial throne. The difference is stark. It would be a world of equals, not the elite taking most everything. It would be a world free of need where all shared alike in God's bounty. It would be a world where love ruled, not forced compliance to the whims of the rulers. In other words, it would be life lived where "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

But the people who were originally taught this prayer did not live in such a world. But they did believe that it was a world worth following Jesus into. And it required great cost. Just as Jesus gave up his life to offer the world a greater way of life, so his disciples lived in peril for advocating a world in total defiance of the Roman way. This prayer became for them a call to live in the kingdom of God, not Rome. And each phrase of the prayer was in total defiance of the Roman way. In fact, this prayer could just as easily be called "The Seditious Prayer." For to pray this prayer meant pledging allegiance to God's kingdom, not Rome's. Anyone caught praying this prayer would immediately be identified as an enemy of the state and summarily executed. This is why praying this prayer was an act of defiance and prayed boldly. Listen:

Our Father—not Caesar

Who is in heaven—not Rome

Hallowed be your name—not the august Caesar

Your kingdom come—not Rome

Your will be done—not Caesar's

On earth as it is in heaven—God's way in the world

Give us this day our daily bread—not Caesar's meager handouts

and forgive us our debts—Relieve us from Rome's crushing usury

And do not bring us into the time of trial—where we may lose our nerve (boldness)

but deliver us from the evil one—the Roman Inquisitor

For yours is the kingdom, and the power and the glory—not Caesar!

Amen—So be it!!! What a bold statement—"Count me among the seditious!"

Is it possible to take the prayer's original context and have it make sense in our day? Can we pray it boldly in our day? I think so! It may appear so far removed from us that it couldn't possibly be made relevant today. However, this overlooks several things.

First of all, our allegiance is challenged in this prayer. If we believe "America, right or wrong," we have fallen victim to Caesar. If we say the Pledge of Allegiance without understanding that "under God" means America living by kingdom values, not national interests, then we subvert God's kingdom. When we do understand this, we move from being a subject of a nation to participating in the kingdom of God. No one can serve two masters," says Jesus. "Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both...."

Secondly, to pray this prayer, to say, "your kingdom come, your will be done," is to align yourself against the forces that would keep America and other nations from rising above national self interest and embracing wholesale love of neighbor. I'll never forget when then presidential candidate Donald Trump was on Dave Letterman's show. Dave showed him several of his ties and asked them where they were made. "In China," he replied. He asked Mr. Trump why they weren't made in America? His answer? "Well, the Chinese need jobs, too." Yes, they surely do.

Thirdly, to pray this prayer is to live into the two Great Commandments, to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Not surprisingly, the Lord's Prayer follows what we learn from the Ten Commandments. That loving God, that is, by putting God as our highest priority, it naturally follows that we will be loving toward our neighbors, even our enemies. For the LP begins with Our Father, the recognition of whom we pray to. The second half of the prayer involves petitions for our wellbeing and that of our neighbors.

We must never lose sight that the prayer begins with "Our Father," not "My Father." Christianity is not about me or you, it is about us. When "Our Father" is prayed, it is not reduced to just those who pray the prayer, but to all whom God has created and called to God's self, those beyond the sheepfold of Christianity. "For God so loved THE WORLD." It is incumbent upon those who pray this prayer to love the world as God loves it. By seeking the best for it in all possible ways. Even through self-sacrifice.

The Marvel Comics superhero movies' enormous popularity indicates a world-wide hope for someone to solve Earth's pressing problems. Again, it is one more application of the myth of redemptive violence. A "good man (or woman) with a gun," or Thor's hammer. But Jesus' answer to violence was not to come down from the cross and extract vengeance, but to forgive.

Christianity has suffered under the common misunderstanding of "Jesus meek and mild." And that his followers are to be meek, understood as "Casper Milquetoasts." But when Jesus blessed the meek, the word in Greek is used to describe a wild stallion who formerly roamed the hills free to do as he pleased. But this stallion has been tamed from his wild ways, has been given a bit and a bridle, and does his master's bidding. So it is with the "meek" Christian. We are no longer left to ourselves to do as we please but are now under the control of God and used for God's purposes in the world.

To live this life, is to live contrary to the ways of the world. To live for the sake of the world requires a bold person who prays the Lord's Prayer boldly. *This is a dangerous journey not to be taken alone.* The Lord's Prayer is designed to help us make the change from self-serving to world-serving. As G. K. Chesterton put it, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." Untried, that is, except for the bold.
AMEN