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## A Series on the Lord's Prayer 2. – “As It Is In....”

(Matthew 6:9-13 NASB) ""Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. 10 'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. 11 'Give us this day our daily bread. 12 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

***Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*** What two very simple sentences. But what a huge amount is packed into them and what questions they can raise. Every single one of those first hearers of Jesus' instructions about prayer would have been instantly and viscerally familiar with this idea of “Kingdom.” But **we** have to use our imaginations to understand the kind of freight, the kind of emotional intensity that the word carried for first century Jews. For us, the notion of “kingdom” may connote little more than cute baby pictures of English royal children. But there is one place in the United States where the emotional freight of the word “kingdom” still can be felt, and that is in Hawaii. There, you are surrounded by reminders of the fact that those islands were once indeed ruled by a king or queen. It is not some far-off, far away, European thing, but rather a reality that many of the state's inhabitants have heard their own grandparents talking about hearing from *their* grandparents first-hand. It's only been a little more than a hundred years since the country of Hawaii's independence ended when the United States deposed the last queen, Liliuokalani, and those of you who have visited the state know that reminders of that kingdom are everywhere still in names like Prince Kuhio Mall, and King Kalakaua Park, and Queen Liliuokalani Park.

It was indeed the five years that Barbara and I spent in Hawaii that made it easier for my imagination to understand something of the weight of that term “kingdom”

when Jesus told his first hearers to “pray like this”: “*Thy kingdom come.*” For unlike us modern mainlanders, the folks of Jesus’ day were steeped in this image. Their faith assured them that God had put King David on the throne centuries earlier and told him that the Kingdom of Israel would be forever, would never lack for a king. Many of the writings in the Old Testament, of course, are concerned with the history of kings and queens and kingdoms. And by the time that Jesus stood there on that hill in Palestine instructing his followers, the memory was still fresh – in the same way that it remains today for many Hawaiian folks – that Rome had overthrown the Jewish kingdom a century before. And since that time there had developed an expectation that the Messiah would soon come – an urgent hope, a fervent desire that God would intervene to keep God’s promise that there would always be a king of Israel and that God would therefore soon send a Messiah King to rout and conquer the hated Romans.

So, “*Thy Kingdom come*” would not have been a new prayer, but a reminder of an old prayer, a prayer that linked those earliest followers of Jesus with the God who had cared for them since day one. It’s in the next sentence, though, that things get tricky: “*Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*” It seems to me that there are at least three ways to look at this sentence of the prayer – and two of them are not what Jesus had in mind at all. The first interpretation might be called the fatalistic interpretation. That is, it is *possible* to say “*thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” in a fatalistic way, thinking that God is going to do whatever God wants on earth, just like God does in heaven, and so with this prayer we’re simply recognizing that things will be whatever God wants them to be. It’s a sort of theological version of *que será, será*, what will be will be. The great British bishop N.T. Wright says this: “*I used to think of this clause simply as a prayer of **resignation**. ‘Thy will be done,’ with a shrug of the shoulders: what I want doesn’t matter too much, if God really wants to do something, I*

*suppose I can put up with it.*<sup>1</sup> I once worked for a man, a good and lovely man, but who had one maddening habit: when there was a decision to be made or a project to be started, he would seemingly earnestly ask the opinions of those who worked for him. He would give the impression that he was carefully considering our thoughts and ideas – and then, over and over again, he did precisely what he had clearly been planning all along to do anyway. We who worked for him became a bit jaded about this, and soon learned not to spend too much time or effort in marshaling our thoughts when he would ask our opinion. It's possible to understand this line of Jesus' prayer the same sort of way: as a kind of gesture of resignation that – oh well! – God will do what God will do, and we need simply to resignedly recognize and acknowledge that fact. But surely that can't be what Jesus meant, for that shrivels our faith, and makes us see God as a kind of cosmic tyrant who just really isn't interested in our efforts. That isn't a kingdom, but a dictatorship and even a benign dictatorship is still a dictatorship.

Even more troubling, though, is a second interpretation of this line of the prayer that I have heard and perhaps you have heard too. There are those who believe that God's Kingdom will be a very limited, very exclusive sort of place – a sorted of celestial gated community – and that God will take glee in excluding some folks from it when the Kingdom finally comes. This is the point of view expressed by those bumper stickers that you sometimes see that say *"In Case of Rapture, This Car Will be Unmanned."* Those who sport such bumper stickers typically think that when the Kingdom finally comes, God is going to suddenly take only a very tiny number of folks to heaven and the rest will be sent to hell. And not only that, but the folks thus "saved" will then have a kind of heavenly ringside seat in which they will then get to watch the torments of those who didn't make the cut. But these folks have badly, badly mistaken the nature of the God who loved the world – the **whole** world – so much that He sent his only son, the

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<sup>1</sup>N.T. Wright, The Lord and His Prayer, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing 2014.

God who is described in Jesus as weeping over creation, the God who cares so very much that each sparrow is known and each hair on each head numbered. Do you remember the test that I have offered you from time to time about whether a statement about God is really and truly a Gospel one? It's this: *If we say something about God, if we say that God is the sort of God who does a certain kind of thing, what would we think of a human being who did that kind of thing? If we can't say it would be a good and moral then for a human being to do, then we ought not say it about God either.* And is our God really the sort of God who could ever takes glee in the loss of **any** life? Who could ever delight in sending a soul to hell? Who could ever take joy in separating loved ones from one another at the end time? If a human being were in charge of the end-times and behaved that way, we'd call them monstrous. And so, my friends, *"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* simply cannot mean that God will ever stop being a God of love.

Now, there's a little less morally problematic version of this interpretation that still ends up not quite being what Jesus had in mind, as I see it. We might see in the sentence *"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* as a kind of plea for God just come in and fix stuff. Just do it. When our daughter Katie was little she would sometimes let her room get in such a state it appeared that a very localized tornado had ripped through her room. One day I told her to go clean her room. Half an hour later, I went to check on the progress only to find her sitting in the middle of the floor, debris strewn around her, not having done a thing, and she said *"It's just too much. You do it. You make it clean."* There are times I understand that feeling, and I'm sure you do to. *But again here what Bishop Wright has to say:*

[Thy will be done] cannot simply mean that we want God to sort out our messes and muddles, so that the church can be a cozy place, without problems or pain. We can only pray this prayer for the church if we are prepared to mean [this]:

make us kingdom-bearers. Make us a community of healed healers; make us a retuned orchestra to play the kingdom-music until the world takes up the song.”<sup>2</sup>

But with that remark, I think we can now also see a third interpretation of what it might mean to pray *“Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,”* an interpretation much more in keeping with what we know of our gentle Savior. For you see the problem with the first two interpretations is two-fold: they make us passive, and they do not describe the kind of God, the kind of King, that Jesus was proclaiming. Last week I said that the phrase *“hallowed be thy name”* is not simply some sort of description of God, but rather it is really a **challenge to us**: to honor, to respect, to never sully God’s name, God’s reputation, by our actions or by our words. And I think that is the same point that Jesus is reinforcing here once again. For the King whose coming that Jesus proclaimed was not – to the surprise of many – a King of violence and coercion, but rather a King of long-suffering love, a Ruler whose weapon was not destructive but creative, a Sovereign whose promise through the resurrection is that even in the face of the worst the world can be and do that love will ultimately win. But that King will be able to do the job more fully, more completely, when we are not passive, waiting for God to fix it all, but are actively seeking to align ourselves with what God would hope for this world. I love the way the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, makes this point when he says: *“[the Kingdom] doesn’t just come with a great clap of thunder at the end of time.... It comes through in quirky little moments when people do extraordinary things, take extraordinary risks and you think ah yes, that’s a life in which God is showing through.”*<sup>3</sup>

*“A life in which God is showing through.”* That’s what I think, finally, it means to pray *“on earth as it is in heaven.”* For as with any good prayer, this petition is not telling

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<sup>2</sup>ibid.

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/prayer/lordsprayer\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/prayer/lordsprayer_1.shtml)

God what God needs to do, it's not telling God what God needs to know, it's not resigning ourselves to being impotent actors in a drama of someone else's making. No, "on earth as it is in heaven" is finally a challenge to **us**: to live **as if** God's Kingdom, God's reign, were indeed here now. It means to **be** and to **do**: it means to **be** the sort of folks who are constantly seeking to overcome the natural tendency to see things through selfish and self-absorbed eyes and instead to see the world as God sees it; and it means to **do** the sort of things that would give life to the least of these, that would give hope to the hopeless, that would offer healing to the hurting.

The late Fred Craddock tells a story about hope to the hopeless and healing to the hurting. Let me share it with you: There once was a family driving along a country road when the children spotted a kitten in the tall weeds by the side of the road. The kitten looked quite sick. Stop, they all yelled. They wanted to take the cat home. The father protested. *Look there is no way we are taking this cat home. We already have two dogs, a goldfish and a hamster. We have a zoo at home already! There is no room for one more animal.* But the children's begging finally got to him. He reversed the car, right there in the middle of the road and got out to pick up the kitten. It was emaciated and its ribs were showing. You could tell that it had not eaten in ages. The fur was matted and there were wounds. As he reached out to pick the kitten up the mangy animal took a swipe at him. The cat hissed and growled! Well he was just frustrated and wanted to walk away. But he looked at his children's pleading eyes and changed his mind. So he went back to the trunk of his car and grabbed a pair of thick work gloves. Then he picked up the cat by the scruff of the neck and wrapped it in his old work jacket.

When they arrived home the father insisted on making a place for the cat in the parent's room so that the rest of the zoo didn't bother it. It didn't take very long before that cat became strong and beautiful. One day the father looked around to see if

anyone was looking and then he gently put his hand down in front of the cat. Instead of being scarred by the claws of that cat, that cat just nuzzled up against his hand and began to purr. And the father just smiled.

Craddock then reflects in this way: *"I sometimes imagine that when God reaches out to each one of us, we see that God's hands are covered with scars and scratch marks.... Even in the ugliest times of our lives, God loves and nurtures us to transformation."*<sup>4</sup> And God offers us the change to join in helping that transformation to happen. We may get our hands scratched; in fact, I know we will. But we will also sometimes find that we have been the ones who helped nurture someone back to live when they thought they were forever dead, we will find that we can be the cause of new hope in someone who thought hope was forever gone, we will find that through our words someone can come to know that they too are loved by God when they thought that they were unlovable.

And then, my friends, it will be just a little more true: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup>Story and quotation cited in a sermon, "God Never Gives Up," found at <http://messiahchurch.com/2014/11/god-never-gives-up/>