

Sermon – Exodus and TLP Part 2

Exodus 32:7-14, Matthew 18:23-35 July 30

First words can be memorable. Upon setting foot on the moon, Neil Armstrong said, “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” First words can make an impression. A fellow says to a lady in a bar, “Didn’t we go to school together? I can swear we had chemistry.” Proof that most pickup lines do not make an impression. First words can also keep us headed in the right direction. Jesus’ first words upon beginning his mission were, “*Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!*” Mt. 4:17

Two-thousand years ago God’s rule or kingdom officially arrived. We’ve been headed for its fulness for 2000 years. I have to stop and think about “kingdom” because I grew up associating kingdoms with castles, Knights of the Round Table, and fire-breathing dragons. What Jesus means by kingdom, though, is life as we know it transformed by God’s goodness. Jesus inaugurated God’s rule and invites all who will to enjoy it. But God’s rule is not present fully, only partially. For one thing, we in the church aren’t sure we want the fulness of God’s rule presently. With our incomes, we generally have it pretty good the way things are. Later would be better than now. But for another, God’s rule is opposed by destructive forces and selfish persons who want to intimidate others in order that THEY rule. We see this arrogance and hatefulness all around us. Special interests attacking the

common good. Lies parading as truth. The powerful crushing the powerless. Still, we also have glimpses of heaven on earth –God’s rule breaks in gloriously on occasion – and there is much more to come. And about the much more to come, we pray in the second petition of TLP, *Your kingdom come*, or in the imperative mood of Matthew, *Rule Fully, God, Bring Jesus’ work to fulfillment*.

When we pray for the fullness of God’s kingdom, we lament the way things are today – namely, the world largely rejects God’s rule – and call on God to complete the work begun by Jesus. And what would this be like? It would be like God’s creation at one with God. In Genesis 1, God creates a productive, orderly world for humankind to enjoy and oversee. But humans disobey and eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Afterward they realize that they owe God better than what they’ve given. Their sin estranges them from God. *“The man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord’s presence.”*

There is also a change of consciousness with this disobedience. Each person becomes estranged from self. *“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.”* Furthermore, Adam and Eve become estranged from nature. God says, *“Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.”* The effect of human disobedience then spreads to the next generation. In Genesis 4, Cain kills his brother Abel, symbolic of our estrangement one person

from another. And in Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel, humankind's arrogance results in peoples estranged from peoples. The different races, nations, tribes, cultures no longer speak the same language, no longer trust each other.

If God is to rule fully, these relationships have to be put right – individuals with God, individuals with self, person with person, persons with nature, and peoples with peoples. This is one way of stating what we pray for when we pray *Your Kingdom Come* or *Bring Jesus' work to fruition!* And one way I support God in this endeavor is by praying petition five, *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*, the word debt meaning sin as opposed to an amount of money. We owe God better.

Sin is owing God better than we have given. Therein, we are debtors. And why would petition five follow petition two? Because, if my hope is for the fullness of God's rule, I strive to live within God's rule now regardless of what the rest of the world chooses to do. I want God in charge. But there is no way I can be one with God apart from God's forgiveness. Those who heard Jesus' teachings during the Sermon on the Mount said, "We can't live up to such expectations! We ourselves can never be right with God!" And they were correct in a sense. Being right with God is a way of life made possible only by God's forgiveness, that persistent form of God's love that takes the initiative in restoring the relationship when we give God less than God's due. But God does not lower God's expectations.

If Jesus commands us to “*Love your neighbor as self,*” God holds us accountable for behavior that is harmful to others. God doesn’t say, “Oh, you didn’t mean it. Forget it this time.” No. Forgiveness is not a free pass to keep harming others. God doesn’t excuse what we have done. God blames us but will forgive. In turn, we must accept God’s forgiveness, which means strive by God’s grace to change our behavior as opposed to continue it. Even when it comes to forgiving those who have harmed us. God not only forgives us but expects us to forgive also. If I am going to be one with God, I have to be one with others.

Listen again to our first scripture reading. “*The fulness of God’s rule can be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents could not pay; thus, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his family, and payment to be made.*

A talent is more than fifteen years of wages for a laborer. Ten thousand talents of silver is more than a laborer can make in one hundred-fifty thousand years. Jesus, at times, exaggerates to make a point, which is there is no way the king’s servant can pay his debt, same Greek word for debt, *opheilama*, as in TLP. *Forgive us our debts*, meaning sins. But to get some of what he is owed, the king orders the debtor and his family to be sold at auction.

“*But then the servant fell on his knees. ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that servant released him and*

forgave him the debt. Wow! The balance owed is zero, account settled, relationship put right. It is expected, though, from then on that the servant give the king his due.

But that same servant, as he went out, came upon a servant who owed him a hundred denarii. 'Pay up!' His fellow slave pleaded, 'Have patience and I will pay you.' But he refused and threw him into prison until he paid the debt. Instead of being thankful and taking his family out to dinner to celebrate being forgiven a debt equal to 150,000 years of wages, this man collars a servant who owes him 100 denarii, the equivalent of three months wages, demands payment, and throws him into prison until the debt is paid. The king finds out and is enraged. *"I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant?"* He then punishes the servant whose debt he had forgiven by locking him in a bank vault for 150,000 years, where he is made to listen to nothing but his teenage daughter's favorite music.

And here is what we cannot conveniently overlook about petition five. Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as or like, we forgive others." Just as we forgive our debtors, forgive us. Doesn't that seem strange to you? Who is better at forgiving sins, us or God? We constantly say that that we cannot forgive what so and so did to us. I hear it all the time. Yet we pray, God forgive us in the same measure as we forgive others? That's often like asking that we not be forgiven.

Maybe we need to highlight what the first people who heard this prayer were well acquainted with, the Exodus Story, our first scripture reading.

The situation is this. Moses and God are chatting atop Mt. Sinai where Moses has just received the tablets of the law. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the Israelites at the bottom of Mt. Sinai give up on Moses. He's disappeared, must be dead. Aaron, Moses' brother, fashions for them a gold calf, similar to one of the gods of the Canaanites. They give this new god credit for freeing them from Egypt, sit down to eat and drink, and then rise up to revel.

This behavior comes to God's notice, and God says to Moses, *"I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn and consume them, and then of you, Moses, I will start over and make a great nation."* Some people would say, "Serves them right, all that reveling and idolatry." But Moses stands up to God and says, *"Turn from your fierce wrath... and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Israel."* And the Lord's mind was changed, extinction averted.

Which puts us on the spot, doesn't it? We're asking God to forgive us our debts or sins just like Moses was willing to forgive the idolators at the base of Mt. Sinai and God was dragging his feet. Jesus must think we're more capable of forgiveness than we let on.

The verb mood of all petitions of TLP in Greek is imperative, the mood of support and encouragement. In the first three petitions, I'm not begging God to act contrary to God's nature. I am supportive of God continuing what God has been doing, is doing, and will be doing yet for the wellbeing of all human beings, the Our of the prayer. *Our Heavenly Parent, Hallow your name, Bring your rule or kingdom to fulfillment, Your will be done, none other.* "Go for it, God! We're with you and we're for you.

In the second three petitions, 4-6, I join with Jesus' church, the *Us* in the prayer, in confidently asking for what I need to be put right with God as God moves this world toward the new world coming. Last week we looked at how *Hallow your name, or Reveal your power to all* requires us to also pray, *Give us daily bread, spiritual bread.* E.G., if we believe that the God of Jesus Christ is THE most powerful force in this life, Hallow Your Name, we trust that God values us and provides strength sufficient for the day. And we set this example of trust before all others. We plod on. For why would anyone else be interested in God based upon my lack of trust in God? What sort of witness to Our Heavenly Parent's power would I be if I behave as though God doesn't provide my needs? Sustain our faith with daily spiritual bread, Lord. It's enough.

Next week we will look at how *Your will be done* calls us to also pray, *Don't let us tempt you with our ways.* But today our concern is with *Your kingdom come,*

Rule fully, God, Bring Jesus' work to fulfilment. And because God can't rule fully if we aren't one with God, we need God's forgiveness. And because we're not one with God when we're nursing a hurt or holding a grudge against someone who owed us better, we also pray, "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*"

Amen