

# EXTRA ESSAY

*Why are Matthew and Luke's versions of the Lord's Prayer different?*

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Many people will be aware that there are subtle differences between the versions of the Lord's Prayer that we find in Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel. That raises the questions: "why are they different?" and "does it matter?" To illustrate the issue, it is probably worth placing the two versions side by side:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our  
debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.

Father,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.  
  
Give us each day our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
for we also forgive everyone who  
sins against us.  
And lead us not into temptation.

When they are placed side by side like this, it is immediately obvious that some elements of Matthew's version are missing from Luke's. Similarly, Matthew talks about 'debts' and Luke 'sins.'

The latter difference can probably be explained by the fact that both authors are writing in Greek, whereas Jesus would actually have been speaking Aramaic. The other differences seem more problematic though – what is going on?

The simplest explanation is that Jesus probably taught the Lord's Prayer twice. Those who have watched the film series may already have picked up that that is what I think happened. That is certainly what is suggested by the context of the prayer in the gospels themselves - Matthew and Luke place the prayer in slightly different settings.

The idea that Jesus might have taught the same material twice probably shouldn't surprise us. After all, he was an itinerant preacher – and itinerant preachers are famous for re-using material!<sup>1</sup>

It is probably worth highlighting that this is also the simplest (and probably best) explanation for a number of other differences between the gospel accounts.

Many scholars devote vast amounts of time to uncovering the pre-history of sayings, or trying to work out whether Matthew's version of a saying is more original than Luke's or vice versa, etc. etc. I have always been sceptical about the possibilities of such study and analysis generally. When it comes to analysing the words of an itinerant preacher (like Jesus), that scepticism becomes downright disbelief – it just fails to adequately account for the nature of an itinerant ministry. I could recount lots of examples of times when I have heard preachers preach the same sermon (often with subtle variations) in different contexts – indeed, I have done it myself!

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Don Carson's excellent commentary, *Matthew* in the *Expositors Bible Commentary* series, which first highlighted this for me (in section 2 of the introduction).