

Title: Our Lord
Text: Various
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Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron

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I'm really, really proud of the work that Justin and Craig have done to make Creed available in electronic form, which means that other churches and individuals can access this resource easily in the future. Technology can be an amazing tool used for God's glory. I encourage you to make the most of it.

Let's Pray

Last week we began our exploration of the Apostles' Creed as Graham reflected on the opening line:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

We continue this week as we come to the Creed's statements about Jesus. I invite you to read it with me:

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,

There is a lot here. There are weeks and weeks and weeks of sermons on the identity and character of Jesus; for example, his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and the means and nature of his conception and birth. So I have to make a choice, and so do you. My choice is where to focus my message today. Your choice is whether you will spend the time this week in the Creed devotional and the other resources it provides, and especially the bible, exploring what we don't have time to cover this morning. Let me tell you about my choice. This morning we are going to focus on two words from this line: Our Lord.

I want to begin with a story, and the best sort of story there is; a true story of a real life.

Polycarp was born in the year AD69. He was a Christian from his earliest years. He lived during the most formative era of the church, at the end of the age of the original apostles, when the church was making the critical transition to the second generation of believers. Tradition has it that he was personally disciplined by the Apostle John, and that he was appointed as bishop of Smyrna (in modern Turkey) by some of the original apostles.

Smyrna was one of the seven churches that Jesus addresses in Revelation. This is part of what he says to them:

I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!
(Revelation 2:9)

The church that Polycarp was thriving, and yet persecuted; impoverished materially and yet spiritually rich.

Polycarp lived to be an old man well into his eighties. In the face of persecution and heresy, he was a robust defender of Christian orthodoxy. His only surviving writing, a pastoral letter to the church at Philippi, shows he had little formal education, and was unpretentious, humble, and direct.

Polycarp is famous for the courageous way he lived, and even more for the courageous way he died. One of the earliest Christian documents we have is an account of his martyrdom written by his friends who were eyewitnesses within a year of his death. This is what we know to be true.

When Polycarp was 86 years old, rumours spread around Smyrna that he was going to be arrested by the Roman authorities. When he heard the rumours, he decided to wait for them at home. Panic-stricken friends pleaded with him to flee, but all he would do is withdraw to a small estate just outside of town. While in prayer there, he received a vision. He heard God say to him that he must be burned alive.

Roman soldiers eventually discovered Polycarp's whereabouts and came to his door. When his friends urged him to run, Polycarp replied, "God's will be done," and he let the soldiers in.

He was escorted to the local proconsul, Quadratus, who interrogated him in front of a crowd of curious onlookers. Polycarp seemed unfazed by the interrogation. Eventually Quadratus lost his temper and threatened Polycarp: he'd be thrown to wild beasts. Polycarp said to bring it on. Quadratus then said he'd be burned at the stake. Polycarp just told him that while the proconsul's fire lasts but a little while, the fires of judgment cannot be quenched. Polycarp concluded by saying, 'Bring it on.'

Soldiers then grabbed him to nail him to a stake, but Polycarp stopped them:

"Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails."

He prayed aloud, the fire was lit, and his flesh was consumed.

The account of his death concluded by saying that Polycarp's martyrdom was remembered by "everyone", even by those who weren't believers. Tertullian said around the same time that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.'

Why I am I telling you this story? This is why. According to the written account, just after he was arrested and being prepared to be transported by chariot into the stadium in Smyrna for his show trial before Quadratus, two Roman officials sat either side of him and pleaded with him in this way:

What harm is there in saying, Lord Caesar?

Here we get to the heart of the charges against Polycarp; he refused to acknowledge the Lordship – the sovereignty of the Roman Emperor, Caesar. The officials were saying to him, just call Caesar Lord and all this will be over – your life will be saved. Be sane, be sensible. Renounce all other allegiances and pledge it to Lord Caesar alone. But Polycarp would not, could not do this. To be a Christian was to worship one Lord alone – Jesus Christ.

The earliest confession in the Christian church and defining belief was the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul says this in Romans:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
(Romans 10:9)

To understand the weight of this confession we need to understand the meaning and context of the word 'Lord'.

Old Testament

In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, the word 'LORD' appears more than 6000 times referring exclusively to God. For example, in Psalm 8 King David cries out:

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

(Psalm 8:8)

In the Old Testament, wherever you see the word 'Lord' capitalized like this, it refers to the proper name of the one, true God. It is a translation of the word Jehovah, which in turn, represents the most sacred name for God for Jews, Yahweh. The Jews thought this name was so sacred it could not be spoken or written precisely for fear of the name of God being blasphemed. And so Yahweh became Jehovah which is translated as LORD.

For Jews, LORD was and is the sacred name for the one, true God.

Pagan Religion

A few centuries before Christ, the Old Testament was translated into Greek and the name for God was translated in Greek as Kyrios – or Lord. Kyrios or Lord was not a word used exclusively by Jews. In fact, the Greeks and Romans used it to address their many gods. Kyrios or Lord denoted a deity who could answer prayers and who deserves thanks for divine help. For example, we have a fragment of a letter dated from the first century Roman sailor who writes to his father:

I thank the Lord Serapis that when I was on peril on the sea, he saved me immediately.

For Jews, LORD was the sacred name for the one, true God.

For the followers of the many pagan religions, Lord was the name of a deity who could answer prayers.

Roman Empire

At the time of Jesus' birth, the cult of Emperor Worship began to develop. Caesar Augustus had united the empire in such a way it was thought that he must have some divine qualities. At the time when much of the New Testament was being written during the first century after Christ, Nero was the emperor. Nero claimed divinity – that he was both human and divine. Seneca called Nero the long-awaited saviour of the world. Nero was addressed by his subjects as Lord and Master. A piece of pottery from that era has this written on it:

In the year nine of the Lord Nero.

For the Romans, Lord was the divine name given to the Caesar – the god-man, the savior of the world.

For the followers of pagan religions, Lord was the name given to one of the many deities who could answer prayers.

For the Jews, Lord was the name representing the one and only true God.

But for Christians, Lord was the term of address given to Jesus Christ – the name above all other names, the only true savior of the world. It was the name the Polycarp would give only Jesus, even knowing that to not offer it to Caesar was to guarantee his own funeral pyre. At the same time that Emperor worship was at its zenith, at the same time when there were many pagan gods clamoring for attention – Christian believers were boldly and courageously claiming that Jesus was the only Lord.

Let's turn again to the New Testament. In the gospels of the New Testament there are two Greek words that are translated as Lord.

The first is Kyrie. Kyrie is a term of address – it is a term of respect given to someone who has a position of authority. A servant would call their master kyrie. A slave would call their owner kyrie. A disciple would call their rabbi kyrie. While kyrie is a term of respect, it does not have any divine connotations. To call someone kyrie was not necessarily to say they were God.

The second Greek word translated as Lord in the New Testament is Kyrios. Kyrios is the term given by Jews to God, or claimed by Caesar as god or given to the many pagan gods. Kyrios is more than a term of respect - it is the name given to god.

Let me give you a couple of examples.

Mary was the brother of Lazarus who was sick. Mary and her sister Martha came to Jesus and said to him:

Lord (kyrie), the one you love is sick.
(John 11:3)

Mary addresses Jesus as her master, her teacher, the one in authority over her. But she does not confess him to be God. Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to come to Lazarus to heal him, but Jesus delays and Lazarus dies. When eventually Jesus arrives in Bethany, Mary falls at his feet and cries out a grief-stricken accusation:

Lord (kyrie), if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
(John 11:32)

Twice in this story Mary addresses Jesus as Lord with the term of respect and honor – kyrie. She calls him kyrie, but not Kyrios. Jesus is Lord – but for Mary he is not yet the Lord of Lords.

Here is the fascinating thing. In all four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – during his ministry before the Cross, not one person addresses Jesus as Kyrios – as Lord of Lords. Every time we see people address Jesus as Lord they address him with the phrase kyrie. Are you with me? Are you starting to see the significance? But look at what happens after the cross and after the resurrection.

After Jesus' death, his body was laid in a tomb and his disciples had scattered in fear and confusion. Another Mary, Mary Magdalene, visited the tomb to find the stone rolled away and the body missing. She gets Peter and the other disciples and they see the same. All of them are still confused as to what has happened. The disciples leave the tomb and Mary stays there quietly weeping when two angels appear and who ask her why she was crying. She tells them that someone has stolen Jesus' body. As she says this, she turns around and sees someone she mistakes for a gardener. But then he speaks. With one word, the scales fall from her eyes:

Jesus said to her, "Mary".
(John 20:16)

She immediately recognizes Jesus. She is the first to witness him in his resurrected form. She runs joyfully to the other disciples and says:

I have seen the Lord (Kyrios)!
(John 20:18)

No longer was Jesus her master or teacher, no longer was he lord. Now she knew fully and completely – he was the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, he was God clothed in human flesh. It was this revelation that she was compelled to share with the other disciples. They too saw Jesus and recognized him as Kyrios – as the Lord of Lords. One of them was not present when Jesus appeared to them. His name was Thomas. When the others told him they had seen Jesus, he did not believe them. 'Unless I see his nail-pierced hands – unless I touch his side, I cannot believe.' Jesus in his grace appears to Thomas. Thomas sees and knows that it is Jesus. And he responds:

My Lord (Kyrios) and my God!
(John 20:28)

Mary and Thomas and the other disciples weren't worshipping a dead hero, but a risen and conquering king – the Kyrios of Kyrios – the Lord of Lords. Caesar had his armies and his empire, but Jesus had host of heaven at his right hand and the earth as his footstool.

It was this revelation that enabled Polycarp and countless men and women like him to stare down the Roman authorities and to say there was only one Lord who could have their allegiance.

For the early church, Jesus was either Lord of All in their life, or he was not lord at all. Jesus was not just kyrie – a person to honor and respect. Jesus was Kyrios – the King of kings and the Lord of lords – the one to whom nothing short of total and complete allegiance was deserved.

Here are the questions for us:

Is Jesus kyrie or my Kyrios? Do I respect him as a great teacher or do I follow him as the creator, sustainer and redeemer of my life?

Are we a fan of Jesus, or are we a follower?

Jesus is either Lord of All, or he is lord not at all.

My best friend in high school was Ian Wicks. His father's name is Kevin – Kevin Wicks. I never called him this – to me he was always Mr. Wicks. I would never dream of calling Mr. Wicks by his first name – that would have been disrespectful. In fact, to this day – even as a 45 year old man and he is in his eighties I cannot call him Kevin. He was, and always will be Mr. Wicks. It is a term of respect.

We can fall into the trap of calling Jesus 'lord' simply as a term of respect. Jesus is kyrie, but not Kyrios. To some of us Jesus is a great teacher or even a miracle worker – perhaps even God's representative. But here is the thing; Jesus does not want our respect – he wants us. Jesus tells us that on the Day of Judgment:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' ('kyrie, kyrie') will enter the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 7:21)

You see, we may respect Jesus – we may pay him lip service. But Jesus doesn't want our respect or our lip service; he wants our lives.

For the early church, including those who helped shape the Apostles' Creed, if Jesus was Lord – if he truly was God – then this fact demanded that we give Jesus absolute and complete allegiance – that all of our life is submitted to him.

Augustine says this:

Christ is not valued at all, unless he is valued above all.
(Augustine of Hippo)

I told the story last year of a little girl who was in church with her mother. Her mother gave her a one dollar coin and a twenty cent piece.

"Sweetheart," the mother said, "you can place either one in the offering bag. It's entirely up to you."

As they were driving home, the mother asked the daughter what she had decided to give.

"Well, at first I was going to give the dollar," said the daughter. "But the man behind the pulpit said God loves a cheerful giver, so I felt like I would be much more cheerful if I gave twenty cents instead."

Many of us have little problem in giving God part of ourselves. We are happy to give God twenty cents in every dollar – so to speak. We are very keen to give God the parts of our lives that aren't working, or the things that we don't truly value. But God doesn't want part of us; he wants all of us. Jesus is Lord of all or he is not lord at all. CS Lewis as usual puts it beautifully:

He cannot bless us unless he has us. When we try to keep within us an area that is our own, we try to keep an area of death. Therefore, in love, He claims all. There's no bargaining with Him.

(C.S. Lewis)

Lewis is saying this: God doesn't do deals. But still many of us persist in attempting to be flexible with our faith.

Our daughter Emily is a vegetarian. I don't know where we went wrong. Having said this, Em follows through on her convictions that meat is murder. For four years now she has not eaten any. She is a real vegetarian. Others have a more flexible approach. There is a term for people who want to be vegetarian but still leave open the possibility of eating meat from time to time. They are called flexitarians.

A *flexitarian* is a person who eats primarily vegetables, but also indulges occasionally with meat. Flexitarians even have their own recipe books. The subtitle reads:

The mostly vegetarian way to lose weight, be healthier, prevent disease and add years to your life.

28 year old Christy Pugh is a flexitarian:

I usually eat vegetarian. But I really like sausage...Sometimes I feel like I'm a bad vegetarian, that I'm not strict enough or good enough. I really like vegetarian food, but I'm just not 100 percent committed.

This is such a useful concept. Some of us might be food flexitarians – being vegetarian most of the time, but occasionally breaking out and eating a 500 gram T-bone. Others of us might be exercise flexitarians. For example, I believe in the power and benefit of regular exercise. I am committed to it. I am committed to my daily walk, except on those days when I wake up and I don't feel like walking. On those days I lie in bed and pray for rain.

Here is the thing. Some of us take a flexitarian approach to faith. We really like Jesus; we're just not 100% committed. We prepared to give Jesus part of our lives, even most of our lives – but not all of it. The bible teaches that Jesus is Lord of all, or he is not lord at all. There is no such thing as a flexitarian Christian.

Jesus does not want our lip service; he wants our lives.

Jesus doesn't want part of us or even most of us; he wants all of us.

Polycarp was able to stare down the power of Caesar simply because he had found a better lord; or more particularly a better Lord had found him. Like Mary Magdalene, he had encountered the risen Christ and he had become enough for him. The bible tells us that to find our life, first we must lose it. We find our life only in God, as we submit all that we are to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Corrie Ten Boom didn't pay for her faith with her life like Polycarp did, but she did suffer the horrors of a WW2 concentration camp and seeing most of her family die. She once wrote this:

You may never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have.

(Corrie Ten Boom)

Pastor and preacher CH Spurgeon made a similar point:

Having made Jesus your all, you shall find all in Jesus.

(CH Spurgeon)

Have you found your all in Jesus?

Have you discovered that Jesus is all you need?

The answers to those two questions are dependent on another; is Christ your Kyrios – your Lord?