

# A Guide to Thees, Thous, Et Cetera

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Normally, when you come upon a new word, you can look it up in a dictionary or google it. But every once in a while, you hear or read something that is half-familiar. You understand the sense of the text even if you wouldn't say or write it that way.

Many older words are actually very familiar to Christians. We sing hymns written in ages past. We remember men and women who lived—and sometimes died—for the faith, some of whom have written exquisite prayers, poetry, and more.

Of course, as English-speakers, the King James Version of the Bible has played an important role in standardizing English. We join a long, historical throng of Christians praying, "Our Father, who *art* in heaven" and "hallowéd be Thy Name!" Yet English continues to change.

We may not turn to a dictionary about these words since we generally grasp the meanings. But even if we did, some of these terms can carry religious nuances that dictionary-makers and the Internet fail to notice.

This guide to thees, thous, etc., will address simple meanings and religious nuances with some historical and grammatical explanation on the side.

### In Most General Terms

- *Thou* & *thee* are words that are the singular form for our word "you."
  - *Thou* is for subjects of sentences.
  - *Thee* is for objects.
- *Thy* means your (singular possessive).
- *Thine* means your or yours (singular possessive).
- *Ye* refers to a plural "you," when used as the subject of a sentence. (Our word "you" was only used for direct or indirect objects.)
- *Art* means are.

*Thy Word is a lamp unto  
my feet, and a light unto  
my path. Psalm 119:105*

Thees and thous may sound old fashioned, but they are not actually "Old English." "Old English" is associated with the Angels and Saxons of *Beowulf*, with its extensive German influence. "Middle English" is associated with the Middle Ages and Chaucer. What we are considering today is actually a feature of "Early Modern English." This is the dialect of Elizabethan English as used by Shakespeare and many other great English writers. (The 1700s are considered the beginning of spoken "Modern English.")

“Fine,” you say, “but why do I care?” Because these terms allow for much more precise communication! Also, there are religious implications. “How could these possibly have religious impact?” you ask. I’ll tell you, although it is a bit of a story.

As you know, the King James Version of the Bible is famous for this somewhat archaic, nuanced language. The grammatical precision of using the words better reflected the precision of the original biblical languages. Furthermore, these forms of “you” actually imply a special relationship.

In some languages, including German, Spanish, and French, people use different words for formal and informal situations. English does, too, to a more limited degree. For example, there is something called the Royal We or Majestic Plural: in it, royalty addresses themselves as a third person in plural form (ie. “We are not amused.”)

However, formal and informal isn’t the only difference between some forms. Some forms you only use with people you are very close with, such as family members or closer personal friends. When we speak in terms of *Thee*, *Thou*, *Thine*, it actually draws upon that use of special language amongst those who know us intimately. It is called the Familiar Form, including the German *du* and the Spanish and French *tu*.

“Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). That “thou” art not a textbook, but Almighty God Incarnate who befriends the world and brings man into His own family, the God-Man whom Peter loves.

Martin Luther, as he translated biblical text, was specific and articulate about the Scriptural use of Familiar Form. Not by speaking in grammatical jargon, but in embracing that our Father, who art in heaven, is indeed “our *dear* Father” even as we are His “*dear* children.”

Do people always use these words to mean that? No. Not anymore. Did the translators in the era of King James intend to call upon familiar use? I don’t know. Martin Luther certainly did in his German translation.

It’s a neat and refreshingly insightful tool used in times past. And, in the sense that it reminds us of God’s gracious revelations of Himself and His relationship to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord, it’s pious.

These words aren’t the only differences between contemporary vernacular English, so this page will address a few more matters, too.

## Endings

Endings play an important part in many languages. English has gotten rid of some endings, but kept others, with the result that it now uses fewer endings than a) English used to, and b) other languages continue to.

We know that -ed generally means a verb happened in the past. For example, “Yesterday I walked home.” Often in our speech, we shorten it to sound more like “-t” or “-d.” That’s ok. But

it's also correct to pronounce the "-ed." In hymns and poetry, it may be necessary to pronounce the "-ed" to get the rhyme right!

Nowadays when that happens, the editor might signal the needed pronunciation by writing "éd" with an accent mark. Remember *hallowéd*? You can see it.

Pronouncing the vowel makes "-ed" a full syllable. That can come up when chanting psalms, because the singing sometimes moves pitches according to the remaining number of syllables. It also happens in hymns when the poetry and music follow a pattern of syllables.

The ending "st" or "est" marks the second person singular form of a verb, as in "Thou sayest unto me." The ending "th" or "eth" marks the third person singular form of a verb, as in "Thus saith the Lord."

Another role English endings can play is to make it easier to say phrases. When we choose between saying "an" or "a," we think about whether the next sound is a vowel or consonant. That same rule applies to thy/ thine, my/mine.

My and mine are sometimes interchangeable, but it is easier to have a consonant between saying two vowels. "Thy apple" is harder to say than "thine apple." You have to stop your breath to halt a vowel and then speak another one. Put your hand to your chest and try it. The result is that several of these older words essentially follow the same rule as a/an.

## A Grammatical Recap

Word	Translation	When to Use
<i>Thou</i>	You	As the subject of a sentence when addressing someone very familiar.
<i>Thee</i>	You	As the object of the sentence.
<i>Thy</i> a	Your	Possessive form used before a noun that begins with either a consonant or a consonant sound
<i>Thine</i> sound	Your	Possessive form used before a noun that begins with a vowel or a vowel sound
<i>Ye</i>	You (plural)	Either a plural or a formal form used as a subject in a sentence.

## What Can Make This Extra Confusing?

"Even more confusing? Are you kidding me?" Nope. No, I'm not.

English once had more letters than it does now. One such letter looked a bit like a *y* with the result that sometimes our word "the" looked as though it were spelled *ye*. It was still pronounced *the*, but it can be confusing in print.

Also, Quakers who settled in America retained some elements of Elizabethan English. However, they gradually used more words interchangeably. That's confusing, but mostly evident in literature rather than Bibles or hymnals.

Much of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry, however, used it both properly and beautifully! As does literature even as late as our modern times.

## Thought to Remember

We've mostly lost the singular forms of "you." Which means we've removed both the informal and familial forms. And what might be the result? People try to find their own ways to use informal language. Hence, slang & text spelling! U think?

## An Example of Awesome Grammatical Application

*The Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowéd be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation. But delivery us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

It is a remarkable honor to address God not only as Father but as our familiar, close father. He is our dear father, who allows us to be close to him so that we may speak directly to Him. And how does that intimate understanding shape the rest of the prayer?

First, yes, He is in heaven, yet because He is ours, His heaven is that much closer to us.

Hallowéd be Thy Name contains several rich elements. First, who is it that hallows the Name of God? We surely "pray in this petition that it may become holy among us also . . . as the children of God also lead holy lives in accordance with it" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, First Petition). At the same time, this third person imperative, a form we do not have in English, allows that it is Our Father – He who Himself is holy – also sanctifies His Name. Doubly so since this could be interpreted as a grammatical structure known as the divine passive. And this name is particularly precious and intimate to us as it is how we call upon our God, in praise and lament, prosperity and poverty!

*Thy kingdom come.* An active third person command, that *Thy kingdom come*, precisely because it *is Thine*. Not some strong but frightening kingdom under unknown leaders and influences. It is the kingdom revealed and ruled by Him whom we love and trust above all!

Similarly, *Thy will be done*, because it is *Thine*. Again, this is a third person imperative. We, admittedly as children, are telling God what to do.

On earth as it is in heaven. Grammatically, this phrase can actually describe all three preceding commands.

"Let Your name be holy (as in heaven, so on earth)"

"Let Your kingdom come (as in heaven, so on earth)"

"Let Your will be done (as in heaven, so on earth)"

In a similar sense, I argue, if there is a familial use within the Lord's Prayer, it applies throughout!

Give us this day our daily bread. *Because You are with us everyday. You know our need and well provide.* Straightforward language, especially within a familiar, family setting, allows so much to be acknowledged, yet with an emphasis on the next moment and steps before us, as our dear heavenly Father provides.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Again, thinking of this within the family household, and then the churchly household, offers a nuanced perspective. It is not us vs. them. Rather, we are all both sinner and sinned against. And, facing the Lord in prayer, it is our duty to acknowledge the logs in our own eyes before addressing the motes often found in others. Yes, there is judgment, but in such a way that it is the Holy Spirit who convicts us, even as God Himself shapes our relationships with those who sin against us.

And lead us not into temptation. But delivery us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is a corporate prayer. *Our Father delivers us!* For what? *His gracious Kingdom!* How? By His own power. To God be the glory forever! Yes, yes, this is most certainly true.

What sort of corporate prayer is this? A familial one, given to the adopted children of the Father by whom all fatherhood is known (Ephesians 3:15). With the result that even its grammar is precious and beautiful!

# Chart Forms!

## Nominative Forms

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
First Person	I	Ye
Second Person	Thou	You
Third Person	He, She, It	They

## Single Genitive/Possessive Forms

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
First Person	My/mine*	Our/ours
Second Person	Thy/thine	Your/yours
Third Person	His, hers, its	Their

## Object Forms (Direct objects or Indirect objects)

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
First Person	Me	Us
Second Person	Thee	You
Third Person	Him, Her, It	Them

\*Why in the world are there two different forms? Because one form is used before a noun while the other can stand alone as a predicate adjective. And to smooth out the articulation hiccup of back to back vowels.

## Organized by person and declined by function:

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
First Person	I, my, mine, me	we, our, ours, us
Second Person	Thou, thy, thine, thee	ye, your, yours, you
Third Person	He, she, it; his, etc.	they, their, theirs, etc.

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*\*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil: my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

*Psalm 23*