

Teach Us to Pray: Our Father in Heaven

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Introduction

Over the next 6 weeks, we're going to meditate upon what's been historically called the Lord's Prayer. Many of you will have memorized this prayer as a child. That's when I was taught it. We recited it every week in the United Methodist church at which my parents were members. And, there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it can be a rather good thing to recite this prayer together during corporate worship. It can be quite unifying and uplifting unless, of course, we're reciting it mindlessly—without thought or understanding.

To recite it mindlessly would be, as one of my old professors points out, ironic since Jesus has just forbidden his disciples to pray like the hypocrites and pagans do, with “meaningless repetitions.”¹ That's the immediate context of his teaching here on prayer. Listen to what Jesus says leading up to this lesson.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.... And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

This, then, is how you should pray... (Matthew 6:5, 7-9).

The Lord's Prayer must never be recited as corporate or personal performance, and it must not be a mere ritual divorced of its meaning. To make it either of these would be to miss the very point of Jesus' teaching about prayer. For the Christian, prayer is the most intimate and meaningful conversation we are privileged to have—a conversation with our holy and loving heavenly Father.

¹ D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, 80.

And, before we say this prayer together, allow me to highlight one more thing. Did you notice that Jesus says this is “how” we should pray.² This is very significant. This isn’t “what” we should pray. Rather, it’s a model of prayer for us.

This prayer is ultimately a pattern. Through it, we learn *how* we should pray.

And, over the next 6 weeks, that’s what we’re going to do—learn how to pray. We’ll study this model prayer one phrase at a time to see how Jesus wants us to pray. But, first, let’s begin by reciting as a congregation what Jesus taught us.

Matthew 6:9-13

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.

[For, yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]

I think asking two questions will be helpful as we begin studying this prayer—(1st) **Who is praying?** Jesus is teaching this prayer. That’s obvious. But, for whom? The answer teaches us something profound about prayer, I think. (2nd) **Who is God?** In short, what do these opening lines tell us about the one to whom we are speaking? The answer to that is paradoxical and should amaze us.

Let’s look at each in its turn as we learn how to pray.

1. Who is praying?

When I pray naturally, it usually emerges out of some perceived or real need in my life. I have an especially challenging meeting ahead, so I pray for God’s help.

² Ibid.

I have a health screening, so I pray that I'll receive a positive report from my doctor. I'm taking a cross country road trip with my family, so I pray for God's protection during the drive. (When you go on a long trip with five children, a lot of protection is needed—protection from dangerous drivers, from hazardous weather conditions, and from sudden homicidal urges. *Are we there yet?*)

You see, my focus is most naturally on what seems paramount to me.

And, there is nothing wrong with praying for such things. In fact, we should. You should pray for what seems vital to you. The Lord cares about you individually. He cares about your challenging meeting, and he cares about your health screening. Your heavenly Father even cares about your sanity during that crazy family vacation because he loves you personally and deeply.

Our prayers, however, cannot remain just personally or individually focused. That would be to treat God like a genie in a bottle—someone to grant our every wish. And, it would be to imagine ourselves as the center of the universe.

Jesus wants better for us than that. So, he teaches us how to pray...*Our Father*. And, immediately we remember that we're not the only one who has God as Father. Immediately we're reminded that we're not the focus or the center of the universe. Immediately we recall that we have brothers and sisters with needs (*just like ours*) and a Father in heaven who cares very deeply about their needs (*just like he cares about ours*). There's a lot in that pronoun.

The "our" forces us to think outside ourselves. Whenever we reflect upon it, we're challenged to pray for those inside the church and those outside the church—for God's kingdom and will to come progressively into our lives and into their lives, against temptations for us and for them, for daily bread on our tables and their tables. Do you see? *Jesus is shaking us out of our selfish, me-centered ways!*

And, friends, if we begin to pray with the "our" in mind, then it won't be long before we begin to live differently in response to such praying. We can hardly reflect upon the struggles and needs of others—as well as bring them to our heavenly Father in prayer—without being moved to do what we can for them.

Prayer is one of the ways God is pleased to move our hearts into action.

In 1992, Arloa Sutter opened up a storefront to show hospitality to individuals from this very neighborhood “who were struggling with poverty and addiction.”³ And nearly 30 years later, that little storefront’s become a ministry which has helped and blessed tens of thousands—not the least of whom, Arloa would say, is herself. (The ministries God calls us to are never one directional. He calls us to bless people, and he blesses us through those people in return.)

Yet, we might be tempted to believe that that ministry began with a storefront. There’s no way it began with a storefront. It began way before the first person came through the doorway of that storefront. It began with the recognition of brokenness and prayers over that brokenness. It began as those prayers were changed into action. Only then did the storefront come into play.

Only after other focused prayers! Only after “*Our Father*” was prayed!

Look, the last thing I want this illustration to do is send you away feeling low, like you have a selfish prayer life or like you’ve failed to pray with an outward focus and start something like Breakthrough Urban Ministries. Please don’t feel that way. “Our Father” type praying doesn’t always, or even *usually*, end up like that.

On the contrary, it mostly ends up going unnoticed—shoveling the driveway for the single mother next door, baking and delivering some warm bread for someone who’s homebound, or welcoming a bunch of neighborhood kids to your dinner table because they have nowhere else to go. These are the kinds of actions that usually emerge out of other-centered prayers. They don’t draw a lot of attention or hoopla from the world around us, but they are celebrated in heaven.

Your heavenly Father sees it all and is pleased! Well done my child!

Keep it simple, friends. Keep the “Our Father” in mind whenever you pray. Bring the brokenness you see around this city to your prayers. Defend the helpless in your prayers. Feed the hungry in your prayers. Heal the wounded in your prayers. Then, see how God changes your heart and moves you to act.

Well, we need to spend a little time with our last question.

2. Who is God?

³ See arloasutter.com.

When Jesus taught us to pray, he told us to call God Father. And, then, Jesus told us to confess the desire to see God's name reckoned as hallowed or sanctified or holy. In short, Jesus sets our sights on bringing reverence to the name of the Lord. *Hallowed be your name!* Or, in modern terms: *Honored be your name!* Do you see? That's a mission statement for us.

We, as Christians, are to be about the business of making God's name holy. We're to work to see his character crafted into our lives *and* the lives of our families *and* the world around us—working for all that reflects and pleases God.

In his little book *The Lord and His Prayer*, English theologian N. T. Wright puts it this way. He expounds:

*Our Father in heaven, may your name be honoured. That is, may you be worshipped by your whole creation; may the whole cosmos resound with your praise; may the whole world be freed from injustice, disfigurement, sin, and death...may your name be hallowed.*⁴

That's our mission. That's what you and I, if we are Christians, are to be about. We're to be magnifying the name, or the character, of the Lord in this fallen world. Not magnifying our own names. Magnifying God's name.

So, let's step back for just a moment to consider this first section of the prayer by which Jesus teaches us how to pray. It begins: *Our Father in heaven, / Hallowed be your name....* Do you see a paradox there? Two things which seem contradictory about God's character yet, nevertheless, are both true?

- The Lord is our Father—personal, loving, intimate, and relational to us.
- The Lord is holy—totally separate, completely other, altogether different than we are.

That's the paradox. And, when we pray to the Lord, we must feel this tension. We cannot overemphasize one characteristic of our God at the expense of the other. We can't make God holy but not Father, and we can't make him Father but not holy because, in Christ, he is forever both of these to us.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 22.

You know, when Jesus taught this prayer, the disciples would've been amazed at the word Father. Indeed, it may even have been offensive to many who met Jesus that he would encourage the term to be used to describe our relationship to our God in this way. While the term may have been used of God before Jesus introduced it, it certainly wasn't used with such intimacy. Rather, religious leaders in Jesus' time emphasized the transcendence and sovereignty of God in their titles.⁵

But, in our culture, it's not the intimacy of God which offends but his holiness. We cozy up to God as Daddy but pretend he's the kind of Daddy who's permissive and can be pushed around. Isn't that the case?

I recently listened to a sermon from a pastor who's more liberal theologically than I am. And, I was wowed by his oratory skills. He is truly a very gifted speaker. His sermon may have been a little light on Scripture, but it was totally entertaining. I listened to the whole thing—start to finish. That's rare for me.

During it, he talked about two kinds of Christians—the intellectually dull ones (like you and me) who think too much about sin, and the educated open-minded ones (I presume like his congregation) who dwell on God's love represented in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. *And*, what became clear in the sermon was that God really isn't as concerned about being holy as he is about being loving. In short, God doesn't care about being hallowed as long as he gets to be our Father.

In a sense, the sermon seemed to indicate that God would give up his standard of perfection in order to love you and love me as sinners. *Is that what God sacrificed in order to love the world?*

The prayer Jesus teaches us says, *No!* It tells us God will be known as Father, and God will be known as holy. The Lord does not dumb down his standards for us. Rather, he raises us to his standards. He makes us holy, through the person of Jesus, so that we can call him “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15).

I often wonder what Jesus was thinking as he interacted and taught individuals and crowds during his ministry. I wonder what went through his mind as he taught about prayer—as he taught the Lord's Prayer. What was Jesus thinking when he said to his disciples: “If you follow me, you can call God your Father.”?

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, 81.

- I think he knew the infinite value of being able to use that name.
- I think he knew how much it would cost to purchase that privilege for us.

Friends, the Lord God did sacrifice something in order to make us his children, but it wasn't his holiness. He sacrificed something in order for us to say, "Our Father in heaven" and simultaneously say, "Hallowed be your name".

N. T. Wright points out that the 1st time that God is called Father in the Bible is during the Exodus event. How fitting that God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt so that they might know him as Father. And, he rescues you and me from our slavery to sin and death by the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ so that we—for all eternity—can call God our Father. Amen.