

OUR FATHER (*Lord teach us how to pray...*)

Matthew 6:1-13; Psalm 100 - April 26, 2020 (ONLINE) - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

One night a father heard his young daughter speaking, although she was alone in her room. The door was cracked, so he could see she was kneeling beside her bed in prayer. Interested to find out what his child would bring before God, he paused outside her door and listened. After tuning into her speech he was puzzled to hear her saying the alphabet: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G..." and she just kept repeating it. He didn't want to interrupt her, but soon his curiosity got the best of him and he broke into her prayer, "Honey," he asked, "what are you doing?" "I'm praying, Daddy," she replied. "Well, why are you praying the alphabet?" he asked. She explained, "I started my prayers, but I wasn't sure what to pray. I decided to just say all the letters of the alphabet and let God put them together however He thinks best."

Have you ever felt that way? You knew you needed to pray, but just weren't sure how. You didn't know the right words to say or what was an appropriate request. In the Bible Jesus' best friends and closest followers felt the same way. They obviously noticed how Jesus spoke to the Father with ease. He seemed to always have the right words to say and his prayers were powerfully answered. So, they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Jesus granted their request. He gave them, and us, some blueprints for building our prayer life, what we call "**The Lord's Prayer.**" As I said last week, I don't believe Jesus intended these words to be repeated ritualistically without any thought to what we are saying. Instead, I believe Jesus intended this prayer to be an outline of how to pray and what to pray about. So for the next several weeks we will walk through Jesus' model for prayer.

One of the reasons Jesus Christ came to earth is show us what God is really like. Jesus exploded many stereotypes about God. He showed us that God is not some impersonal force. God is not some angry tyrant who sits up in heaven waiting to make things miserable for people or waiting to catch up mess up. God is not some apathetic creator who winds up the world, sets it down, and then just sits back with some popcorn to watch what happens.

Speaking to his disciples, Jesus described God in two words, "Our Father." I spoke a little last Sunday about how we are adopted into the family of God when we put our trust in Christ - so I won't repeat that. But know that these instructions about prayer assume that a faith commitment has already been made. It is grace through faith in Christ which makes it possible for us to become children of God. Jesus is speaking to Christian disciples about how to pray.

In Matthew 6:9 He said, "This is how you should pray, *Our Father* in heaven." Jesus wants us to think of God as our Father.

This is not such a big deal to us now, because we talk a lot about the Fatherhood of God, but when Jesus said those words 2000+ years ago, it was really radical stuff - mind bending.

The hearers must have been absolutely shocked when He said, *“When you pray, God wants you to call Him Father.”* In the entire Old Testament over thousands of years, God is only referred to being like a Father seven times. Jesus refers to God as the Father twelve times in this chapter of Matthew alone. In His life and in the gospels, He talks about God being our Father more than 150 times. Jesus said this is how God wants to relate to you when you pray.

The good news is that since God is our Father, we know that we can enjoy a personal relationship with God. It is very difficult to relate to a power, or force, or an energy. But when Jesus says God is the Father, I can relate to a father. I can be intimate with a father. I can talk to a father. I can have a relationship with a father. That’s the good news.

The bad news is, when we use the word “father,” for some people that conjures up all kinds of painful memories. Rather than it being a happy term, it’s a sad term for some, or a fearful term, or even an angry term for others. Some of us had difficult relationships with our fathers or no relationship at all. I have heard people say, *“If God is like my father..... no thanks! I don’t need a God who is anything like my father.”* I can relate. I get that.

Jesus foresaw this problem so He qualified the term. He said, *“This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven.”* He said you pray to your Heavenly Father. He’s not talking about where God is located. God is everywhere. He’s talking about the quality and character of God. He’s a heavenly Father as opposed to an earthly father. God is very, very different from even the best human fathers. God’s perfect. And none of us who are human fathers are perfect. We make mistakes. We mess up. God has never messed up. He’s on a higher plane. We are to say “Our Father in heaven” or “Our Heavenly Father” to remind us of the kind of relationship God wants us to enjoy, and the kind of God to whom we are related. I want to quickly share a few characteristics about our heavenly Father.

Our Father Is a Caring Father. He is compassionate, loving, gracious and He cares about you. In fact He loves you more than you will ever know. He loves you more than you will be able to experience on earth. You can’t fully understand how much God loves you because your brain just isn’t big enough to handle it. The Bible tells us in Psalms 104 *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who honor Him.”*

There’s a story in the Bible where the first disciples were out on the lake fishing while Jesus was in the back of the asleep. All of a sudden a storm comes up, the waves start rising and the rain is pouring down. The little boat begins to be rocked to and fro. The water is coming in over the sides of the boat and it’s sinking. It’s starting to capsize. Jesus is asleep, obviously not worried about anything. The disciples, the story tell us, go over to shake him and wake Him up, saying, *“Lord! Don’t You care that we’re about to die here!”*

That is one of the most profound questions in life - Does God care about my problems?

Does God care about my hurts? The things I'm going through? The stresses I'm feeling? The worries I'm experiencing? Does God really care about what happens to me? Until you settle that issue, you're not going to get to know God or enjoy a close relationship with Him - and you will struggle with prayer. Does God care about the details in your life?

The answer is yes. God cares about you. God reveals His caring many times in the Bible. One place is in 1 Peter 5:7 where it says, "*Cast **some** (?) of your anxiety on Him...*" No that's not right... "*Cast **all the spiritual sounding problems** (?) on Him.*" No, it doesn't say that either. It says, "*Cast **all** your anxiety on Him, [that means every kind of anxiety you have - financial, physical, social, spiritual, mental, relational] because He cares for you.*"

That doesn't mean that God is going to give us everything we think we need or say we want - but a good earthly father wouldn't do that either. We'll come back to this later, but sometimes we don't know what we really need, or we don't understand God's purposes or plans, or how God is going to use some short-term suffering for some long-term good. Jesus is not answering all our questions about when the plan of God is apparently different from our plans. Jesus is telling us that God cares about us - even more than the wisest, and most loving, and most kind and most capable fathers you can imagine. Choose to believe it by faith.

Our Father Is Never Too Busy for You. Your parents may be or may have been too busy for you. You may be too busy for your own kids. But God, our heavenly Father, is never too busy for you. When you pray, God doesn't say, "*Not now. Let me finish this other work I'm doing which is more important than you.*" No, God is never too busy for you. He never turns away.

Our Father Loves to Meet Our Needs. Jesus said it this way in Matthew 7:11, "*You know how to give good gifts to your children. How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him.*" Christ is saying, "*If you being an imperfect parent love to give good gifts to your kids what do you think a perfect parent like your heavenly Father wants to do?*" Now, I know I am selfish a lot of the time. I'm self-centered. I think of my own needs. But still, as a parent, I love to give to my kids. I love to meet their needs. I really do. It gives me great joy. And if I, with my mixed motives, love to do that, how much more does God want to meet our needs. **Philippians 4:19** says, "*My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (from his resources and wealth).*"

Our Father Is Sympathetic to Our Hurts. God cares, God is never too busy, God loves to meet our needs and God is sympathetic to our hurts. When I come to God with my pain, God doesn't say, "*Oh, come on! Suck it up, quit whining, you're bringing me down.*" No. The Bible says, "*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*" (Ps 34:18) I feel certain that somebody listening to this message feels like their heart is broken. Some of you feel crushed in spirit. What do you do? Turn to God. God is sympathetic to your hurt. God loves to meet your needs. God is never too busy for you. God wants to help you out! God is your heavenly Father.

Our Father Is Able to Help Us. He can handle any problem you give Him. Nothing is beyond His ability. Nothing is beyond His resources. I was scanning the television last week and flipped through several family oriented sitcoms. Most TV fathers are weak idiots, the butt of joke, incompetent. (BTW have you ever noticed how many Disney films have at least one missing parent? What's up with that?) I heard two school kids on one of these show bragging on the schoolyard. One said, "*My daddy can beat up your daddy.*" The other kid goes, "*Big deal! So can my Mom.*" **Maybe so, but nobody can beat your heavenly Father. Nobody!**

In Luke 1:37 the Angel Gabriel said, "*For nothing is impossible with God.*"

Ephesians 3:20 says "*God is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of - infinitely beyond our highest prayers or desires or thoughts or hopes.*"

Let me go on, Jesus said, "*When you pray say, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.*" So - once we have correctly addressed our prayer - we move right to **PRAISE.**

I like a story I read about a man from my old home state of New Mexico. He was a part-time preacher and a full time rancher and he was trying to sell a horse. A potential buyer came up to his home in the mountains of Taos, NM for a test ride. The preacher said, "*Now, before you start you should know that this horse only responds to church talk. So if you want him to 'GO' you need to say 'Praise the lord.'* The louder you say it the faster he will go. Then when you want him to stop you have to say or shout 'AMEN.'"
The man thought that was pretty strange but he liked the horse, so he figured he could get used to it. So he took the horse for a ride. The man quietly said, "*Praise the Lord,*" and the horse started to trot. Then the man shouted, "*Praise the lord,*" and the horse broke into a fast gallop. Suddenly the man realized he was headed straight for the edge of a cliff. He said, "*Stop horse*" then "*Whoa horse...*" but the horse keeps going. In a panic, the man finally remembered the right command and yelled "*Amen!!!*" The horse stopped just in time at the edge of the cliff. The relieved man wiped the sweat from his brow and said, "*Praise the Lord.*"

(I'm going to imagine that you're laughing right now, which is what I usually need to do when you're here at church with me! Whether you laugh at me or with me - it is good to laugh!)

It is also good to praise the Lord, and to know why to praise and when to praise God.

I suggest one of the most important times to praise the Lord is whenever you're praying.

In our text for today Jesus says, in effect, "*When you pray... begin with praise.*"

Many Bible commentators observe that the first half of the Lord's Prayer is concerned with God's honor and agenda while the second half is concerned with our human needs and concerns. It is very much, and not accidentally, like the Ten Commandments in this regard.

The first half is vertical (God focused) the second half is horizontal (focused on us and our relationships). I like what Andrew Murray wrote about this passage, he said,

“There is something here that strikes us at once. While we ordinarily first bring our needs to God in prayer, and then think of what belongs to God and His interests, the Master [Christ] reverses the order. First, Thy name, Thy kingdom, Thy will; THEN give us, lead us, deliver us. The lesson is of more importance than we think. In true [prayer] the Father must be first, must be all.”

Murray, With Christ in the School of Prayer, Revell: 1967, p. 28.

Many of us think of prayer as something we do to get God to bless our plans and desires, when it is really meant to bring us into alignment with God’s plans and desires. That means, for many of us prayer is mostly a shopping list of personal requests for ourselves and others. We are supposed to go to God with our requests, both our petitions for ourselves and our intercessions for others - but if that is all we are doing when we pray then we are likely to experience failure and frustration in our walk with Christ. We need to put God first.

James Boice writes,

“Unfortunately, we often pray first for things (that might take us from God), for friends (that might compete for God’s friendship), or for an ordering of events (that might accomplish our plans, but not God’s). Instead we must learn to begin our prayers with thoughts of God’s honor and the advancement of His purposes in history.”

(Boice, The Sermon on the Mount, Zondervan: 1972, p. 198-199).

Exactly. In other words, begin with praise - begin by honoring God and His will.

When we come to God in prayer we must come first in worship. Psalm 100:4 says, *“Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him; bless His name.”* Jesus is reminding us that we should never simply burst into the Lord's presence asking for things for ourselves or even for others. I struggle with this, but then I catch myself, and it helps. There is a proper way to approach God in prayer, and that way begins in praise.

The word we translate “hallowed” is from the Greek verb “hagiazethai” which includes the adjective “hagios.” It means to treat something as hagios, and we most often translate the word “hagios” as “holy.” A thing or person which is “hagios” or holy is different or more sacred than other things or people. So it means to recognize and honor the holiness of God. You might paraphrase this part of the prayer by saying, *“Let God’s name be treated differently from all other names; let God’s name be given a position that is absolutely sacred and most honored, for God is holy. His is the name that is above every other name.”*

Therefore when we pray, “Hallowed be thy name,” it means, *“Father, enable us to give to you the unique place which your nature and character deserve and demand.”* Or, *“My Father in heaven, my first desire is that in everything you might have preeminence.”*

Jesus says, begin your prayer with praise. Why do you think He directs us to do this?

First, God is quite simply, worthy of our praise. As I've already said, God is our heavenly Father, and as such He is the source of our lives, and all of creation around us, including our loved ones and opportunities in life. All that we have and are comes from His loving hand. God is worthy of our praise for who He is, for all that has done for each and every one of us.

Second, we praise because God manifests His presence and power in a special way when we praise Him. The Bible says, "*God inhabits the praises of His people*" (Ps 22:3). We enter into a special communion with God when His praises are on our lips. There was a woman I worked with in prison ministry years ago, and she always said, "*When the praises go up, the blessings come down.*" I have found that to be wonderfully true again and again.

The third reason is that praising God changes us for the better. Speaking of some wayward people, the prophet Jeremiah said (2:5), "*They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.*" Jeremiah was observing this important point - you become more and more like who or what you worship. Who or what do you hold in highest esteem? You can ask it this way - Who or what do you honor most with your time, and talent, and treasure? Whoever or whatever is most "hallowed" is the focus of your worship and it will shape you.

If you worship superficial things - your life will become more and more superficial. If you worship perverted things - your life becomes perverted. If you worship evil things - your life becomes evil. If you worship the true God - you become more and more good and godly. 2 Cor 3:18 says "*... as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like Him.*"

Jesus began His model prayer by saying, start like this,
"OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME..."

Christ wants us to go to God in prayer trusting that God is our Father who loves and cares for us. And Jesus wants us to remember that God is most worthy of our praise and of our honor - in all the ways we pray and in all the ways we live.

I don't know how bad your cabin fever is during this pandemic - I know I'm struggling. I don't know how you are choosing to spend your time - you may have more of it, or it may just be differently ordered so that you need to be more thoughtful about how you use your time.

My number one suggestion is this - take more time to pray! Pray alone, pray with other family members in your home, or with people over the phone - but just take more time to pray. It'll bring you closer to God and closer to others. The more you do it the more natural it feels. The Bible says that God can work in all things for good - but we see that more, and we experience that more - when we spend more time in prayer. Don't miss this opportunity to pray to our Father in heaven - and as you pray - start with praise. **Amen.**