

Teach Us To Pray: What's in a Name?

Psalm 20 Matthew 6:7-13

This past year I received a couple requests to revisit a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. I thought I had done this series fairly recently, like in the last couple years, but it was in 2017! Where does the time go? I looked it over and found this to be useful and relevant, so let's enjoy, and continue to learn, what Jesus teaches us in the simple, yet profound prayer.

Our goal these 5 weeks is, of course, to learn about the Lord's Prayer and what Jesus is teaching in this prayer, and to expand and deepen our prayer life and practice. And, beyond prayer, to learn what we are called to be and do as we go out into the world, our changed and changing world.

Many, if not most of us have recited the Lord's Prayer since childhood, and it has become so familiar to us, and maybe so rote, that it's good to pause—to slow down, and take our time to avail ourselves of all the wisdom that is in this simple, yet profound prayer.

So, we'll look at each phrase of the Lord's Prayer one week at a time. And I will be encouraging us to pray that one line of the Lord's Prayer at home every day of the week when we reflect on it, on Sunday morning. This is a time-tested

practice, of taking one sentence, one phrase, and making that one sentence a daily prayer, or an hourly prayer throughout each day for several days in a row.

I'd like us to see how this practice affects our praying, and what we discover and learn and what God reveals to us as we simply repeat one line of the prayer each day throughout our week.

One short note before reading today's text. There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament: In Luke's gospel (ch.11) and in Matthew's gospel (ch.6). I'm going to be using Matthew's version, mostly because it is better known and it is the most often-used version in corporate worship and personal prayer—because it is most comprehensive. Luke's version doesn't have a couple of lines that we normally use.

But we'll bring in Luke occasionally, especially when we're trying to figure out whether to say "Forgive us our debts," "Forgive us our sins," or "Forgive us our trespasses."

Matthew 6: 7-13

`When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that 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.

`Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Some ancient manuscripts include the line: yours in the Kingdom, and the power, and glory, forever. Our chair Bible doesn't have it, but I'm going to include it because the Church has used it for centuries, and, in my opinion, it belongs.

This is the word of the Lord! **Thanks be to God!**

There is a cute story about a young Catholic boy whose mother had taught him to say his prayers at bedtime. And he had a little statue of Mary on his night stand, as a reminder of this motherly love and nurturing faithful presence, as part of the cloud of witnesses, as he prayed to Jesus every night as he went to bed.

Well, a week before his birthday he started praying that he would receive a new bicycle for his birthday. It's what he really wanted. And so every night, in addition to his usual prayers, he prayed that Jesus would bring him a new bike. His birthday came and, no bicycle. So, the night of his birthday as he was going to bed, he took the little statue of Mary, wrapped it in a towel, put it in a box, and hid it in the very back corner of his closet behind a bunch of stuff. And he prayed, "Ok Jesus, if you want to see your mother again, I better get a new bike."

Nothing like holding mother Mary hostage until you get what you want!
That is not a good example of how Jesus teaches us to pray, but don't you love the stories of children learning the faith?

I suppose there are grown-up versions of that...

One of the things we notice, as we read the gospels, is that the only thing the disciples ever asked Jesus to teach them was, "Teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Nowhere is it recorded that Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to preach. Or teach us how to heal (though he did teach them how to do that; they just didn't *ask* him to teach them). They didn't ask, "Teach us how to lead." Again, they learned how to become leaders by following Jesus—but they didn't ask Jesus to teach them how to lead. They didn't ask, "Teach us how to convert people." The only thing they asked him to teach them is, "Teach us to pray."

And they probably asked him this because they saw that his preaching, his healing, his leading, his witness, and simply his groundedness as a human being—his good vibe and his personal strength and vitality—came from his relationship with God, his heavenly Father. Because the gospel writers tell us that Jesus frequently went to solitary places to pray. So, let's learn from Jesus together! And ask Jesus, along with the disciples, to teach us to pray.

As we begin this series, let's first take a look at why the Lord's Prayer is a great gift to us, and then briefly look at the first line, "hallowed be your name."

The Lord's Prayer is one of the great gifts that Jesus has given us. It's a great gift for two main reasons:

1. First, the gift of praying this way frees us from a universal anxiety of the human heart—that is, the anxiety of wondering whether or not we praying in a way that is right, or a way that pleases God. I have heard that anxiety over the years, "Am I getting it right? Am I using the right words? I don't know what to say. Or, how can I pray when I feel unworthy or undeserving of God's love? Why would God listen to *me*?" We'll hopefully address all of these questions over the next few weeks.

Jesus frees us from this anxiety about "Am I praying the right way, or with the right words?" because he gives us a simple prayer. It's not complicated. And it's down to earth in its language. This is everyday, common language. Every rabbi taught their students/followers how to pray. But the prayers most rabbis taught were lengthy and very formal and were to be said with a certain posture (literally a physical posture and with a certain type of fear and trembling). In light of that, Jesus' prayer is somewhat surprising in its simplicity and informality.

In fact, he surprises everyone by first saying, “You don’t need to go on and on with a lot of words; your Father knows what you need *before you ask.*”

Whew! What a relief! Jesus has relieved us of the burden of having to say the right words, or say a lot of words, or say them in the right way; we don’t have to stand on ceremony, and, we don’t have to be afraid of God. He teaches us to address God as Father, Abba. That’s a surprise, too, and is not a huge theological burden—you know, we have to figure out, theologically, who it is exactly we’re praying to and address God formally, or “no answered prayer for you.” Like the soup Nazi from Seinfeld: His soup was the best in New York, but if you didn’t order your soup just right, he’d say “no soup for you.” I wonder how many people view God this way; and therefore view prayer this way—you gotta get it right, or else, or... no answered prayer for you! Just the opposite: the Lord’s prayer is a gift in its simplicity, and its intimacy.

That’s the first gift of this prayer: simplicity.

2. Second, the Lord’s Prayer is a wonderful gift because in it Jesus reveals the heart of God the Father. Now, I want to pause here for a comment. And that is, if Father isn’t an edifying word for you in thinking about the God who loves you and is near to you, and Mother is a better word for you, then by all means use that. Jesus was speaking in, and to, a patriarchal society

and context, so he used the word “Father” (which was also somewhat of a new concept; it was more intimate and familial language than “God” or “the Lord”). The word and image of God as Mother is completely appropriate, though, and helpful. This is not controversial! Because the Bible actually contains many maternal images. For example,

- In psalm 131 David says, “Like a child at rest with its mother” so I have calmed and quieted my soul, in God. That’s a nice maternal image.
- In Isaiah 49 God says, “Can a mother forget the baby she is nursing, and have no compassion on the child she has borne? As one whom a mother comforts, I will comfort you, says your God.” That’s a beautiful maternal image. Btw, the word “compassion” in Hebrew is the exact same word as “womb.” Ponder that for a while. “I will have *compassion* on you” would also be heard as “I will ‘*womb*’ you.”
- When Jesus was lamenting over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday after his triumphal entry, his lament is: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a *hen* gathers *her* chicks under *her* wings.” Jesus uses a maternal image to express his love and desire for his people.

So, while the word used in the prayer here, and elsewhere, is “Father,” maternal language and images are absolutely appropriate. And I may use those terms interchangeably as well. For some people, the word “Father” or “Mother” can be hurtful images, *and...* they can be healing images. They are meant to be, Biblically. It’s up to each of us to receive the images that best help us know and trust God, and help us grow or heal and be better equipped for life and love in our relationships to others. After all, God has no gender—Genesis says, God made human beings, male and female, in God’s image. So we are equally image-bearers of God as women and men.

Back to the Lord’s Prayer...

In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus reveals what makes God’s heart beat, what God cares about in our lives and in our neighbor’s life and in the world. This fatherly, motherly love and compassion. Again, we don’t have to complexify things when we want to ask that God’s will be done. We’re asked to pray about it, or pray for it, and let God pour the Holy Spirit into us as we wait upon God’s will to be known, and God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, with things like daily bread, reconciling relationships through forgiveness. These reveal God’s heart of love.

And as Jesus reveals the heart of the Father in this prayer, it's partly revealed as we notice the *structure* of this simple prayer. When Jesus teaches us to pray, he doesn't go straight to "Give us our daily bread" or "deliver us from evil." The beginning of the prayer (hallowed be *your* name, *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done) invites us, right away, to take our eyes off of ourselves, and raise them up to larger matters, and larger perspective. Kingdom perspective! The prayer ends this way too: *thine* is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. These are the great bookends of the prayer, and they are meant to give us larger vision, larger perspective.

And this is a gift to us because it helps us to keep our lives in perspective, and not get so myopic and self-focused that we stress out about what's happening in my life, or in the world from *MY* perspective. In fact, when Jesus assures us, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask," he's saying in effect, "God's got your back. Now, let's set aside your self-focus and concerns for a moment and see a bigger picture."

Sometimes when I pray, I'm tempted to go straight to the to-do list. Or, my to-do list *for God*. And in doing so it's easy to see God as a cosmic vending machine, giving me what I want, or to see myself only as a needy person with a list of wants (like that new bicycle...). God edifies us by clearing our vision, raising

our eyes and our hearts and minds to the bigger picture of what really matters.

This is God's heart.

So in the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches us to begin our prayers with a focus on God, not ourselves. Jesus is saying, "We'll get to your needs in a moment, but first let's see the bigger picture" (and we'll end with the bigger picture too).

There is a tremendous grace gift in this, and I'll explain more next week. Jesus reveals the heart of our Mother/Father in this prayer.

Let's look briefly at the first line: Father in heaven (Mother in heaven), hallowed be your name.

We instinctively understand this to mean, keeping God's name holy. To hallow something is to holy-fy something. In this regard to pray 'hallowed be your name' we are praying that God's name be treated as something sacred and holy.

And certainly the Jewish people throughout the centuries have held God's name as sacred. So much so, that they don't even speak the name of God that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush. They use the word 'Lord,' or 'Adonai,' or 'Shaddai,' or use a metaphor like rock or fortress or mighty warrior or

shepherd, or they just say, “*Your name*... be praised—or, *your name* is our pride and protection, etc. As you heard in Psalm 20 a few times.

Yet, when Moses asks God at the burning bush, “What is your name?” he is not simply asking, “What should I call you?” He is really asking, “Who are you?” “What is your essence, your character?” Because a name, to the people of old, was not just a label, or something on a name tag. A name meant something; it revealed a person’s character, their personality traits, their being, who they are. So at the burning bush Moses is asking, not just ‘what is your name?’ but “Would you please reveal yourself to me? I want to know who you are.”

And so when Jesus teaches us to pray, “Hallowed be your name”—beginning the prayer, don’t forget, with familial, parental language (not distant and formal)—he is teaching us to pray, “Father/Mother in heaven, reveal who you are.” “Show us and the world your character, your nature.” “Expand our understanding and our experience of you.”

And this is why it’s so important to slow ourselves down when we pray the Lord’s Prayer in our personal prayers. It’s wonderful in worship to say this prayer as part of our tradition and to keep our worshiping community prayerfully focused on the Living God, yet when we take it home with us, this is where we slow ourselves down and listen, as we pray, “Reveal yourself to me; show me

more of who you are; expand my vision and perspective of who you are and what you can do.” And then watch and wait and listen, and explore and expand our understanding of who God our heavenly parent is.

Yes, let us honor God’s name with dignity and respect. After all, “Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain” is an important command—literally, don’t *empty* God’s name of its meaning by flippantly or mindlessly using it as if it’s just another word in our vocabulary, or by invoking it for selfish reasons, or try to gain some advantage. Yet at the same time we need not become so over-focused on God being so holy and so “other than” or separate or distant, that we forget that God is close to us, and to all. Because this name, Yahweh, is translated “I am who I am” or “I am the one who is” or simply “I am.” However we translate it, it means “I am present.” “I am now.” “I am here.”

And so, again, when we’re praying “Hallowed be your name” we are asking God to make real and manifest his presence with us, and the world, in the present moment. To know that “I am” is present always. It’s the phrase, or name if you will, that Jesus himself used consistently: “I am the bread of life;” “I am the Good Shepherd;” “I am the light of the world;” “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” All of these expand our understanding of who Jesus is, and remind us of the various ways that the risen Christ is present to us as God.

As I mentioned at the beginning, over the next 5 weeks you're invited to say one line of the Lord's Prayer at home every day, each week. You can say this line at one time of the day, say, morning, or evening, or both, and take time to sit with it for several minutes. Or perhaps you can say it throughout the day, as kind of a sentence prayer, and in the evening take stock of how it affected you to say it throughout the day, and what it meant to you, and what came to your awareness in the reciting of this line. Put it on a sticky note, and attach it to your fridge, or your bathroom mirror, or your computer screen, or your t.v. screen, as your reminder to pray.

This week: Father (or Mother) in heaven, hallowed be your name. Or perhaps you'd like to recite it this way: Father in heaven, reveal who you are; reveal yourself to me. Say it slowly; leave space for silence to reflect on it; listen; ponder.