

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Part 1: "Our Father in Heaven"

Matthew 6:5-13

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Sunday, January 210, 2021 (Epiphany Season)

Pastoral Address

Before we turn our attention to our Scripture reading today, I did want to offer a brief word of pastoral encouragement and exhortation in light of the events this week. The images that we saw unfold last week shook many of us to the core. It's haunting to witness violence and death in the capital of our nation. Those events were, in my view, a manifestation of the very real powers and principalities of the air that seek to divide and destroy nations, as they seek to divide and destroy churches.

In this season, how crucial it is for us *"to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Eph 4:1–3).

People of God, our unity is in Christ and Christ alone. We have people in this congregation that are going to have differing political opinions. But the reason we belong together is not our political views. We belong together because we are following Jesus.

My prayer is that we can show a divided world that what unity in Christ alone looks like. We will not be perfect. At times we will fail. But we can live out the gospel by walking in forgiveness and grace. And I pray when we do stumble, we can stumble toward Christ together.

So, I want to encourage you – regardless of where you land on the political spectrum – to be mindful that our ultimate hope is not in any temporary kingdom of man but solely in the unshakable kingdom of God. Let us challenge ourselves to live in the calm confidence that rests in the fact that Jesus will one day wipe away all tears and vanquish the powers of evil and death forever.

Secondly, I want to remind you of our mission as a church. We exist to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ with our words and display the gospel of Jesus Christ with our lives to our neighbors and to the nations. With that said, I want to charge to be mindful of the words you send out into the world in this emotionally charged time. Let them be words that the character and the truth of Jesus Christ. Likewise, be mindful of what your life is displaying to a watching world. A prayer that I pray often for the people of this church is that we would be known for displaying the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is

“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23).

Lastly, I want to ask you, in the next coming weeks, to intentionally spend more time reading your Bible and praying your tears and your fears to the Lord than you do scrolling social media or watching the news. Let’s build the habit this year of turning our sadness, our fear, and our anger not into a Facebook post that only fuels the cycle of outrage. Rather, let us learn to take our desperation to our heavenly father on prayer. For that reason, we are going to be taking the next six Sundays to learn about the heart and nature of prayer from Jesus himself. So, with that in mind, I would like you to turn in your Bible’s to Matthew chapter 6.

Scripture Reading

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: ‘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 lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’” (Matthew 6:5–13, ESV).

Introduction

The disciples had never seen anybody like Jesus. Yes, they had heard other rabbis teach with the word of God, but Jesus was different. Jesus taught with a *divine authority* (cf. Mt 7:28-29). Yes, they had heard the stories of the great Old Testament prophets like Elijah and Elisha that performed mighty miracles of God. But here, again, Jesus was different. Now Elisha performed fourteen miracles over the span of his lifetime. That’s pretty amazing. But for Jesus, fourteen miracles was like a normal Tuesday.

This is how Matthew records the early ministry of Jesus: *“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them” (Mt 4:23-24).*

No one had ever seen anybody like Jesus. This helps us understand why when Jesus called you to be a disciple; you didn’t mess around with your answer. When you met Jesus and had the opportunity to follow him, you dropped your fishing poles and your nets, cleared your calendar, and began to follow Jesus (Mt 4:18-22). Because if you were a disciple, that meant you had special access to Jesus. You weren’t just able to listen to

Jesus's teachings: you had been invited to walk with Jesus, be close to Jesus, and learn the character and habits of Jesus by way of imitation.¹

And very early on you would have seen the key to Jesus's power. After a long day of teaching and ministry, Jesus would often be physically exhausted. He would retreat into solitude for rest and restoration. But unlike us, when Jesus had time off, he didn't use his time alone to get caught up on emails or binge watch a series on Netflix. Instead, he spent time communing with his heavenly Father in prayer (Mt 14:13, 23).

It was *prayer* that fueled the extraordinary ministry of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Thus, in the gospel of Luke, when the disciples, as those with privileged access, had the opportunity to ask Jesus anything, they asked Jesus, "*Lord teach us how to pray*" (Lk 11:1b). When Jesus began to answer this question, you better believe the disciples would have leaned in and paid attention to the answer. And the response that Jesus gave to them, which is also recorded here in Matthew, is known as "*The Lord's Prayer*."

One thing that is a little unique about how Matthew approaches this topic is that before he teaches his disciples how to pray, he teaches them *how not to pray*. He wants them to avoid the overly religious prayers of the hypocrites as well as the pagan prayers of the Gentiles (Mt 6:5-8).²

He is not interested in the type of hypocritical prayer that people do to put on a show. Such a prayer isn't a conversation with God as much as it is a piece of performance art designed to recruit to the approval of other people. Nor is Jesus interested in the ritualistic, repetitious prayers of the pagan world. These types of prayer were more focused on mysterious techniques and magic words designed to manipulate God than they were a sense of communion with God. Jesus wants us to know that prayer isn't something that has to be done in King James Version English in order for God to pay attention to you. Nor is prayer some secret magical spell that you learn from Hogwarts. Rather, *true prayer is a sincere, personal conversation with the God who made you.*

God desires to talk with his people. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus has shown us how to do just that.

For the next few weeks, our goal is not quantity but quality. I want us to slow down and intentionally walk through each phrase of the Lord's Prayer for the next few weeks so that we too can be a people of prayer. In each phrase of the Lord's Prayer, we will be looking to the rich theological truth contained in these words. And even more, we are going to examine how the Lord's Prayer might help us to practice the spiritual discipline of prayer.

As we begin 2021, I want to begin this year with a challenge for our church to grow in the spiritual disciplines. I want to call us to adopt those rhythms of grace like reading Scripture, prayer, and committing to times of spiritual community and worship. In a

¹ R.C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord*. (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2009), 2.

² Sproul, 6-12.

year like 2020, it was easy for those life-giving rhythms to fall by the wayside. For this reason, it is all the more crucial to commit ourselves to spiritual practices that cultivate spiritual health in 2021. The “Lord’s Prayer” is a perfect place to start.

Exposition

To begin our study of the Lord’s Prayer, we will take a closer look at the very first phrase of this prayer: “*Our Father in heaven*” (Mt 6:9). By giving us this phrase, Jesus is teaching us how to view God when we pray to him.

What you believe to be true about God will determine the way you pray to him. If you think he isn’t real or isn’t good or doesn’t care, then you will pray one way. But if you believe what his revealed word says about him is true, you will pray in another way altogether.

What you know about someone determines the way you would communicate with that person.

Imagine for a moment if I wanted to write a love letter to my wife Kate. But if in that love letter I used all of my linguistic skill to praise her beautiful blonde hair and her dark brown eyes, no matter how beautiful the words were, my wife would not be happy. At best she would be confused and at worst she would be furious. Why? Because she has dark brown hair and gorgeous blue eyes. And it wouldn’t help if I said something like, well to other people Kate might have brown hair and blue eyes, but I prefer to think of her as a blonde.³

Thus, Jesus doesn’t desire for us to pray to a self-made version of God that meets our preferences. He desires for us that we pray to the one true God as he has been revealed to us by his word.

So, what do we know about God from the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer? I would suggest that Jesus is teaching us three truths about the God that will vastly affect the way we pray. Those three truths are as follows: *1.) He is Ours, 2.) He is in Heaven, and 3.) He is our Father.*

1.) He is Ours.

Jesus teaches us to pray to God as specifically as “*our* Father.” He is not just the God, he is not just my God, and he is not just your God. He is *our* God.

Even in the first words of the prayer, Jesus is calling us to remember the doctrine of the church. He is calling us to remember that we are praying *with* our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. In other words, we are not called to a privatized faith. Rather, we are called to pray with and for one another; and even, when we are alone, we are to pray

³ This illustration is adapted from a similar one given by Pastor Matt Chandler concerning the importance of accurate theology.

knowing that we belong to a community of believers that spans space and time.

This is an awesome idea to take in. When we get to spend eternity together, I don't think there is going to be a Redeemer section in heaven. I don't think that God is going to divide us up into our denominations or theological tendencies. Nor do I believe that he will divide us up into our different age brackets or races or even historical periods. No, every believer is equally a part of the one body of Christ. We belong to the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We belong to the people of Moses, David, and Elijah. We belong to the people of Peter, James, and John, as well as Augustine, John Calvin, and Martin Luther King Jr. We belong to God's people.

This is one reason why I think the Lord's Prayer is so special. For when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are praying something that all Christians have prayed for almost 2000 years. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are standing on hallowed ground.⁴ We are praying alongside the church of the ages.

Why is this important? It is important because our sense of identity in part comes from our sense of community. And as part of God's people our communal identity is rooted in God's covenantal faithfulness to his people throughout the ages.

The God who heard the cry of his children when they were enslaved to Egypt hears us (cf. Ex 2:23-25). He hears our fear when we receive that terrifying diagnosis. He hears us in our pain when our friends betray us. He hears us when we feel bound and captive by our sin. And the God who hears us is the God who delivered his people from bondage and led them to a Promise Land. He will be faithful to lead us as well.

God's history of faithfulness to his people is our heritage. God's promises for his people are our inheritance. He is our God.

2.) He is in Heaven.

Jesus teaches us that when we talk with God we are not communicating with a person on equal footing as ourselves. Prayer is not a fireside chat among peers. God is not a second opinion that we can consult at leisure. No, we are standing as creatures before our heavenly Creator.⁵ And this knowledge is not meant to demean us. Rather it is meant to fill us with unbelievable hope.

Because God is in heaven, we know that he is utterly transcendent, independent, and contingent upon nothing in creation. He stands over and above our circumstances and challenges. You may feel out of options, out of control, and anxious about your future. *But he is not out of options or out of control.* He is not anxious about our future because he is uncertain of what it may hold. Our God in heaven is infinitely sovereign, infinitely wise, and infinitely holy and glorious!

⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), xi.

⁵ Sproul, 15.

Our prayers, then, are not to be simplistic meditative ways of retreating further and further inward, as if the purpose of prayer were simply to get in touch with our inner selves. No, we are praying to a God of unchangeable, unlimited, and unconquerable majesty.⁶ We are praying to a Lord who is willing and able to intervene. He wants to be acknowledged as such a God in our prayers.

This is from a sixteenth century discipleship tool known as the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563): *Q. What is the kind of prayer that pleases God and that he listens to? A. First, we must pray from the heart to no other than the one true God, revealed to us in his Word, asking for everything God has commanded us to ask for. Second, we must fully recognize our need and misery, so that we humble ourselves in God's majestic presence. Third, we must rest on this unshakable foundation: even though we do not deserve it, God will surely listen to our prayer because of Christ our Lord. That is what God promised us in his Word.*⁷

Because our God is the sovereign, majestic God who dwells in heaven, *he is not only able to hear our prayers; he is able to answer them!* We should pray with that sense of expectation.

3.) He is Our Father.

Jesus wants us to know that *Christianity is not a rain dance religion where we have to provoke God into caring about us.* We are not the prophets of Baal who have to scream and cut ourselves to make God hear us. We already have God's attention because he loves us. God is our heavenly Father who knows our needs before we know them ourselves or ever think to pray them (cf. Mt 6:8).

But it goes deeper than that. The word "Father" in reference to God was a theologically loaded term with a deep biblical history.⁸ When Moses stood before Pharaoh and spoke the words of God, he said, *"Let my son go that he may serve me"* (Ex 4:23). When God made a covenant with King David about the coming messiah that would come from David's family, he said, *"I will be his Father, and he shall be my son"* (2 Sam 7:14). Thus, the title of "Father" for God was meant to evoke within his people the memory of God's redeeming power and the promise to send the messiah.

Nevertheless, by teaching us to pray to God as our Father Jesus has done something profound and unexpected. German scholar Joachim Jeremias has done a tremendous amount of research that shows that it was virtually unheard of in ancient Jewish rabbinic thought to pray to God as one's personal father. Even though Old Testament spoke of the nation of Israel as God's son (cf. Hos. 11:1), the average person would never pray to God as his or her Father.

But Jesus is different. He refers to God as his Father in almost every prayer he prays in

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Praying the Lord's Prayer*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 35.

⁷ *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*. "The Heidelberg Catechism" (1563). Question 117. (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988), 68.

⁸ Wright, 4.

the gospel accounts. This was a radical departure from tradition, and he explicitly wants his disciples to follow suit.⁹ We must understand it is an audacious and radical privilege to call upon God as our Father, your Father, my Father in our personal prayers.¹⁰

If God is our Father, there are some pretty amazing implications that should drastically affect the way we pray. If God is our Father it means we are loved as children, it means we are heirs with Christ, it means we are filled with God's Spirit, it means we are part of God's family the Church, and it means we are called to honor the name of our Father with the way we live our lives.¹¹

Because God is our father, he loves us. He provides for us. He protects us. He disciplines us because he loves us. As our heavenly father, God is merciful, truthful, and he is wise. He is the one we come from and whose image we bear. He calls us to obey him, and *when* we obey him, we flourish

Thus, when we pray, we are not to pray as a slave approaching a harsh master. We are to pray with the boldness of a child approaching his Father. He is not just a God who is high and holy. He is God who is near to us and hears us with love and mercy. He does not merely tolerate us at a distance. Rather, he invites to draw near to a throne of grace (Heb. 4:16).

And before we move on, let's take some time to consider what this all means for our personal times of prayer, bible-reading, and devotion. Perhaps some of you have made a resolution to pray and read your Bible more in the coming year. How does praying "Our Father in heaven" equip us for those rhythms?

When you read the word, ask yourself: who is Scripture revealing God to be? When you pray, remind yourself of who God is and lead your heart to worship him. Simply said, this means we should always begin prayer by saying true things about God out loud.

"Thank you, God, that you are my Father. Thank you that you are the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thank you that you are good and kind. Thank you that you hear the prayers of your people. Thank you that you are powerful and holy. Thank you that you are wise."

Prayer is not just about turning in your daily wish list. Prayer is about communion with the living God. Psalm 100 tells us we enter into God's gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise (Ps 100:4). When we begin prayer with worship, we are calling our hearts to a posture of faith. When we acknowledge and meditate on the power and goodness of our Heavenly Father, we take the first step toward not just knowing about God, but knowing, experiencing, and encountering God.

⁹ Sproul, 17-19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Packer, 28-31.

I challenge you take some time every day in the coming week to pray to God. And when you pray, begin with worship. Begin by praising God because he is ours, because he is in heaven, and because he is our Father.

Conclusion

It is one thing to recognize this truth with our minds, but it is another thing entirely when we rest in this truth with our hearts. We can only understand the amazing truth of the Fatherhood of God if we first understand that we were not children of God by nature. Scripture says that by nature, we were *“children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”* (Eph 2:3). But God, being rich in mercy loved us even when we were dead in sin, and he adopted us into his own family at great cost. In fact, God paid the most infinite price in the universe – the blood of his own son at the cross – so that we could be part of his family.

Jesus died so we could call God “our Father in heaven.”

R.C. Sproul writes this in his book on the Lord’s Prayer: *“Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer, every time we open our mouths and say, ‘Our Father,’ we should be reminded of our adoption, that we have been grafted into Christ and have been placed in this intimate relationship with God, a relationship that we did not have by nature. It is a relationship that has been won for us by the perfect obedience of the Son, who received an inheritance that was promised to Him from the foundation of the world, which inheritance He shares with His brothers and sisters who are in Him.”*¹²

Redeemer Christian Church, in response to this amazing truth of God’s adopting love, may we seek to be a people of prayer; knowing that this God is *our God*. He the glorious God of heaven, and, because of Christ, he is our Father. AMEN.

Discussion Staters for Gospel Communities:

- 1) Prior to giving “The Lord’s Prayer” as a pattern of prayer for in the Christian life (Mt. 6:9-13), Jesus teaches his disciples how not to pray (Mt 6:5-8). What are two ways of how not to pray, and how should we avoid them?
- 2) Discuss how the phrase “Our Father in heaven” (Mt 6:9) is a theological statement. How does one’s view of God/theology affect one’s view of prayer?¹³
- 3) What gives us the right to call God “our Father”?¹⁴
- 4) Using the phrase “Our Father in heaven,” write a list of true things about God’s goodness and power. When you are finished, use this list to guide you into a prayer of worship and praise to God. You can do this as a group, but also consider practicing this same discipline throughout the days of this week.

¹² Sproul, 20.

¹³ Packer, 18.

¹⁴ Packer, 32.