

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
October 17, 2021

## **Teach Us to Pray: Our Father in Heaven**

Matthew 6:9-13

Last Sunday, we began a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. During that message, we zoomed out to get a sense of the big picture. Today, we'll zoom in and begin to explore the pieces of this prayer in more detail. Each week, from now until mid-November, we'll get these words into our minds and let them work their way deeper into our hearts, so that individually and together, we can live out the vision of God's kingdom that's captured and conveyed by this prayer.

Today we'll focus on the opening address of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Or as many of us have learned it: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." Note that the first word of the prayer is "Our." So when we use this prayer, we're not only acknowledging the presence of God but also acknowledging that we're connected to the wider community of God's people. The Lord's Prayer is certainly a gift that you and I can use personally. But it's also a prayer given to whole fellowship of Jesus' followers. It's the prayer of the church. And this emphasis on the plural "our" is used throughout the Lord's prayer. From beginning to end, this prayer is about living in right relationship with God and with one another, in light of the reality of God's kingdom.

"Our Father." Though the prayer begins with an awareness of the community, it takes us and immediately focuses our attention on God. Prayer isn't primarily about who we are, what our needs are, and what we desire or hope for. Prayer is primarily about God. What's more, prayer isn't primarily language about God; It's speaking to God. Prayer is addressing God, invoking the presence of God. This is what we do when we pray. We use words to acknowledge the character and will of God. The way a prayer begins says a lot about the God being addressed.

Jesus tells us to address God as "Our Father." Some would argue that Jesus gave the world a new vision of God's identity by calling him "Father." Though there may be some truth in that, it's also true that other Greeks and Jews called God "Father." In the Old Testament, there are several references where the God of Israel uses the metaphor of fatherhood to characterize his relationship with His people. God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me'" (Exod. 4:22-23). The Jewish people looked back to their deliverance from bondage in Egypt as the experience that marked their relationship with God as their Father.

The father metaphor for God also shows up in the prophets. Isaiah writes, "You, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name" (63:16). And Jeremiah speaks of God's sorrow over his wayward people: "'How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.' I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me" (3:19).

So calling God "Father" wasn't something totally new that Jesus brought onto the religious scene. The imagery of God's fatherhood was already present, though to a limited extent, in the story of the relationship between God and His people Israel. This didn't mean that God was a white-bearded man sitting up in heaven, observing the affairs of this world and

stepping in as needed. No, God transcends gender. God the Creator can't be contained and confined by the categories that describe created humans beings. Yet God chooses the image of fatherhood to reveal His identity and purpose. And this is most fully unveiled in Jesus.

When we turn to the New Testament, the revelation of the fatherhood of God is on full display, especially in the four Gospels, where Jesus calls God "Father" over 170 times. And this is way more than just a term that Jesus uses to refer to God. Jesus calls God "Father" because he enjoys a unique relationship with God, a relationship of unprecedented intimacy. In our earlier Scripture reading from Matthew, Jesus says, "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (11:27).

The fact that Jesus discloses himself as the Son tells us that there's a Father. And the reality of the Father and the Son shows us that God is deeply and inherently relational and personal, giving and receiving, intimate and involved, rather than distant and detached. Jesus doesn't tell us, "When you pray, say, "Our life-giving force." Or "Our great cosmic principle." Or "Our infinite spiritual energy." No Jesus tells us, when you pray, say, "Our Father."

And the reason we can pray in this way is because of what Jesus has done for us through his death and resurrection. "Our Father" is more than just vocabulary that we learn in Jesus' seminar on prayer. "Our Father" is the result of Jesus giving himself on the cross to secure our forgiveness and restore us to God. By offering himself for us, and being raised by the power of God, Jesus opens the way for us to be brought into, and participate in, his relationship with the Father. No wonder the Scriptures describe believers as Christ's brothers and sisters. We're siblings of our Savior. Paul speaks of how we've been adopted into the household of God. "Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir" (Gal. 4:6-7). By the redeeming grace of God, received through faith, you become part of the family of God, and pray the family's prayer, "Our Father...."

Journalism professor John W. Fountain has written about his father's absence from his life when he was a boy, especially in an atmosphere of poverty and crime. And yet, says Fountain,

I believe in God, God the Father, embodied in his Son Jesus Christ. The God who allowed me to feel his presence—whether by the warmth that filled my belly like hot chocolate on a cold afternoon, or that voice, whenever I found myself in the tempest of life's storms, telling me (even when I was told I was "nothing") that I was something, that I was his, and that even amid the desertion of the man who gave me his name and DNA and little else, I might find in Him sustenance.

I believe in God, the God who I have come to know as father, as Abba—Daddy.

It wasn't until many years later, standing over my father's grave for a conversation long overdue, that my tears flowed. I told him about the man I had become. I told him about how much I wished he had been in my life. And I realized fully that in his absence, I had found another. Or that he—God the Father, God my Father—had found me.<sup>1</sup>

John Fountain's experience is a testimony to the brokenness of this present world, and how earthly fathers may neglect, abuse, or fail their children. The long history of patriarchy, male domination, and fatherly mistreatment, make it difficult and painful for some people to call God "Father." And yet at the same time, Fountain's experience demonstrates how wholeness and unending love can be experienced in relationship with our heavenly Father.

Jesus tells us to pray, “Our Father *in heaven*.” The addition of “in heaven” reminds us that God, while fatherly toward us, is also different from us. God is transcendent, above and beyond us. God isn’t limited by the categories of time and space that characterize human existence. One person tells the story about a five year old who asks his mother, “Is God everywhere?” “Yes,” said the mother. “Well, is he here in this room?” asks the child. “Yeah, sure he is.” “Is he here on the table?” “Well, uh, yeah, in a sense I suppose he is. I can go with that,” replied the mother. The child slowly picks up an open box and slams it shut, “Got him!”<sup>2</sup>

We can never say of God, “Got him!” God is beyond our possession, control, or manipulation. Our Father is in heaven, a realm where his will is done and his kingdom exists in its fullness. But at the same time, God is near. His kingdom, his heavenly reign, has come to us through Jesus Christ the Son. And by the work of the Spirit, we can repent and come into the reign of God, and know the life of heaven that we await when the Lord comes again. So to pray to our Father in heaven doesn’t mean that we’re addressing a God who is, as one person has put it, a “loveless dictator in the sky.”<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, as he says, “this God comes to us—comes into us!—to share with us and bring us into the life that is his.”<sup>4</sup>

“Our Father in heaven, *hallowed be your name*.” Near the beginning of the book of Exodus, God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, speaking his name, “Yahweh” (Exod. 3:13-15). Following ancient Jewish custom, English Bibles don’t print this name, but instead substitute the title “Lord,” which means “Sovereign” or “Master.” In the biblical world, a name wasn’t a mere label, but represented the reality and presence of the person. So the name of God signified both his transcendence and his immanence, his difference from the created world and at the same time his nearness and availability to the world. In fact, in his commitment to relationship with the world, God goes so far as to make himself known and to make a covenant with the people of Israel, and through Israel sends his Son to be the world’s Savior.

In John’s Gospel, as he approaches his suffering and death, this Son and Savior prays, “Father, glorify your name!” To which the Father responds, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (12:28). That’s what it means to “hallow” the name of God. It means to honor it as holy. It means to show reverence and respect toward the character and purposes of God. God’s ultimate purpose is that his sovereignty and holiness be acknowledged by all. But that majesty is combined with intimacy. As one preacher has put it, “When we say ‘Father,’ we are affirming that at the heart of the universe there is not only ultimate power, but there is ultimate love.”<sup>5</sup>

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” In the opening of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus tells us to join him in his relationship with God, through the work of the Spirit, in a way that acknowledges and honors the holy love of the Father, who is the source of our life and salvation. And with that as our starting point, we’ll turn next Sunday to the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from “The God Who Embraced Me.” *All Things Considered*. NPR website. November 28, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Begbie, “What’s Mysterious About Worship?” Lecture delivered at Regent College (Vancouver, BC) on May 26, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Reeves, “Three Is the Loveliest Number.” Christianity Today website. December 26, 2012. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/december/three-is-loveliest-number.html> (October 14, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Reeves, “Three Is the Loveliest Number.”

<sup>5</sup> Haddon Robinson, in his sermon, “The Disciple’s Prayer.” Preaching Today website. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/117.html> (October 14, 2021).