



Our Father

St. Matthew 6:9

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November 9, 2008 – Trinity 25

Last week we looked at Jesus' introduction to his teaching on prayer. And if you remember, what we saw there was that true prayer is prayer that is made in the presence of God the Father, that we enter (and can only enter) the Father's presence through his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we are taken there by the Holy Spirit who indwells each of us in fulfillment of the promise of Jesus. And yet understanding all this only gets us so far. It gets us to the point of prayer, but it doesn't tell us what we do when we enter into God's presence. And that's the real question that so many Christians ask.

Most of know some great saints who spend hours every day in prayer, and if we don't know anyone like that personally (or because of how those great prayer warriors are, you may know them, but not know about their prayer life), we've all read about some of the great saints of the past who excelled in prayer. I remember as a kid going with my mom to visit one elderly lady from our church. She was blind and didn't make it to church much at that point, but she prayed for our church, for our ministers and for our missionaries ever day. Mom would go to pray with her sometimes and I can remember as a kid having to wait downstairs in a dark and formal living room that hadn't been redecorated since 1925. I'd take a book to read, but even then I'd start to get bored and I would wonder how anyone could possibly pray for that long. I remember my youth minister who talked about spending an hour or two *every* morning to pray. At that time I thought they were crazy. I could barely fill five minutes with prayer.

But as I got older I began to appreciate more those saints who were not only *able* to pray for hours at a time, but *actually wanted to prayed for hours at a time and enjoyed it!* I read about men like John Wesley who was known for praying four hours or more a day and who questioned the Christian maturity of anyone who

spent less time than that in prayer. As someone who felt pressed for time in praying and left it out of my routine when things got busy, I read about Martin Luther who also prayed for hours a day. And when someone once asked him what he did for prayer on the days when he was busiest and had the most going on, he replied that those were the days he spent the *most* time in prayer.

Have any of you ever heard of Peter Beskindorf? Peter Beskindorf was a Wittenburg barber who also happened to have the privilege of having Martin Luther sit in his barber chair on a regular basis. Master Peter knew about Luther's prayer life, and one day he screwed up his courage and asked the great Reformer if he would be willing to teach him how to pray. And out of that request came Luther's little spiritual classic, *A Simple Way to Pray*.

But it's not only Master Peter, or even we ourselves who are so often at a loss as to *what* to pray. Even Jesus' disciples asked this question. They saw Our Lord himself at prayer, sometimes praying all night long, and they had to be asking themselves, "What does he talk about with God for so long? How does he stay focused? I run out of things to pray about after five minutes. What is it that allows him to pray for so long? How is it so easy and comfortable for him?" And so, as St. Luke records, they went to him and asked, "Lord, teach us how to pray." I think that all of us have been at that point. I think we all realise that more than anything else, this is probably our greatest need. Any other problem we might have in our spiritual lives is pretty small in comparison and, if we knew how to pray and could throw ourselves into it like Jesus did, most of those other problems would probably resolve themselves.

And so in answer to this question, Jesus gives us his model prayer. He says, "Pray then like this:"

**Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against
us.
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.**

His point wasn't to say, "Every time you pray, pray this prayer word for word." It does provide us with a common form that we pray when we gather together, but it points us beyond just reciting it. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gives us a *model* to follow, and in his model is everything we need to pray for in outline form. Luther advised Peter Beskindorf to daily pray *through* the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer – not just praying them, but praying *through* them and allowing those three texts to direct his prayers. But Luther also commented that many times, after a long day, it was all he could do to recite the Lord's Prayer before he fell into bed – and when he could do nothing more, that was enough, because it's all there.

If you want to study on your own, go onto the Internet and look up what Luther had to say about the Lord's Prayer. He wrote a lot about it. Or go to the Church Fathers. Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Cyprian all wrote at length on the Lord's Prayer and we still have their writings. Go to the Prayer Book and read what the Catechism has to say about Jesus' Prayer, or better yet, study the last nine questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

It was Luther's advice that started me off on the right track as I asked that question, "How should I pray?" But the two things that really revolutionised things for me are the Prayer Book and the Psalms. It was when I began praying the Daily Office using Morning and Evening Prayer from the Prayer Book that I suddenly came to understand what Luther was getting at and it was that form in the Prayer Book that fleshed out the model that Jesus gives us and that took the focus of my prayer off of me and put it on God himself. And it was the Prayer Book that really introduced me to the Psalms. I struggled with them for a long time and then a good friend said, "Don't *read* the Psalms; *pray* the Psalms." That was revolutionary. The Psalms are the prayers and praises of the Old Testament saints sung to God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly I came to understand what Christians have done for two thousand years in taking God's Word and praying it back to him. And again, the Prayer Book, in keeping with Christian tradition, breaks up the Psalter so that you can pray it twice each day and cover the whole thing once every month. And it was as I found these

disciplines of prayer that Christians have used since time immemorial, that I began to understand how the great saints could spend hours in prayer each day. Once the focus was on God instead of myself and my own needs it made a huge difference.

For the next few weeks I want to look at the model prayer that Jesus give us in the Sermon on the Mount, because if we can understand his model better it we can pray as he prayed. Today I want to look at how Jesus begins his prayer. Notice the first line. Jesus addresses the prayer to “Our Father in Heaven.” I hope that reminds you of what I said last week. This answers the question of who can pray.

To really understand what Jesus is saying when he tells us to address our prayers to our heavenly Father, we have to understand that no Jew in the Old Testament *ever* addressed God as “my Father.” When Jesus spoke these words to the people gathered there on the hillside that day, or even to his disciples as St. Luke records, those words would have been shocking. The Jews did understand God in an abstract sense to be the “Father of Israel,” but it wasn’t in a personal sense. David writes in Psalm 103:13, “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.” Isaiah wrote, “But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isaiah 64:8). But no Jew addressed God directly as “my Father.” In the handful of Old Testament passages that describe God as a father, the point was to show how Israel had failed to live up to the family relationship. God makes this point through Jeremiah:

I said, How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 3:19-20)

The fact is that between the time of Jeremiah and Jesus the gulf between God and his people was even wider. In that time the Jews even stopped using God’s own proper name when they prayed or talked about him.

And so Jesus stepped into that time of separation between God and man and called God his “Father.” We know that the disciples were impressed by this, because all four Gospels tell us that Jesus prayed like this and that he prayed like this all the time. The only time we’re told that Jesus didn’t address God as his Father was when he was dying on the cross and cried out, “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” That prayer was wrung from his lips at the very moment he took on himself the sins of our entire race and the moment in which that intimate relationship he had with his Father was temporarily broken. The rest of the time Jesus always and everywhere prayed boldly to his Father in Heaven and it caused the religious leaders of the day to accuse him of blasphemy.

So what does this mean for us when we pray? I mean, Jesus *was* truly the Son of God. Of course he could address him as Father. And yet in telling his disciples to pray the way he did, he’s telling them that the same relationship he has with his Father can be had by all who put their trust in him and whose sins were to be forgiven in short order by his suffering on their behalf. Jesus tells them to come to God as God’s own children and that God was their Father. Remember what Jesus said to Mary after his resurrection? He told her, “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and *your Father*, to my God and *your God*.’” (John 20:17). You see, it’s as God’s children that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ come to him.

And that’s something key we need to take away from this. There are a lot of people out there claiming God’s their Father when he’s not. Lots of people make the claim that we’re *all* sons of God. And yet Holy Scripture makes it clear that God is most certainly not the father of all men and women. He is uniquely the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Period. And he *becomes* the Father only of those who believe and trust in Jesus Christ and who are united to him in faith through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the only natural Son of God and those who believe in him become the adopted sons and daughters of God.

Jesus didn’t just imply this. Think about the Jews. If any group of people had a right to claim they were sons of God it

was they. And they did that by virtue of their circumcision and their being descendants of Abraham, and yet when a group of Jews came to Jesus thinking they were God’s sons, Jesus told them they were really children of the devil. St. John tells us (Chapter Eight) that Jesus had been teaching in Jerusalem and had made the statement, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The Jews were indignant at that and they said to him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” And Jesus said, “I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you... If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did.” And of course the Jews got angry at that and accused him of being illegitimate. Jesus responded in righteous anger and told them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. *You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.* Those are harsh words, but they serve as a warning.

You see, there are two families in this world. There’s Adam’s family and there’s God’s family. Every one of us is born into Adam’s. God’s elect are reborn into his family. St. Paul tells us that those reborn were once children of darkness, but are now children of light (Ephesians 5:8). They were dead in their sins, but are now alive to Christ (Ephesians 2:1). They were once children of wrath and of disobedience, but now they are children of love, faith, and obedience (Ephesians 2:2-3). These are God’s children and they and they alone can come to God as their Father.

But there’s another side to addressing God as our Father that we need to understand. Here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us to pray to our Father and St. Matthew uses the normal Greek word *pater*. But when we look at Jesus own prayers, he didn’t use the normal word for “father.” He used the Aramaic word *abba*. And *abba* means “papa” or “daddy.” St. Mark describes this in his telling of Christ’s prayer in the garden on the night he was taken away to be crucified. “*Abba, Father,*” he said, “all

things are possible for you” (Mark 14:36). That was Jesus way of addressing God, and yet St. Paul tells us that the early Christians followed his example. He wrote to the Romans and told them, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “*Abba!* Father!” (Romans 8:15). And he wrote to the Galatians, “Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “*Abba!* Father!” (Galatians 4:6).

Think about that. Do you know the almighty God of the universe as your “daddy?” That fact alone right there should have a significant impact on your prayer life! If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have the *privilege* of coming to God as your “daddy.” I take great comfort in that when I’m aware of my need to confess my sins. I don’t come cowering as a criminal before the throne of the Almighty Judge. I come to my daddy, confident in the knowledge that he loves me and wants to forgive me – and that because I have put my faith in his Son, he will forgive me.

And if your prayer life (or your spiritual life in general) isn’t what it should be, think about what a daddy does. Remember when you learned to ride a bike? I remember my daddy at first walking along beside me as he held the back of my seat. Then he’d run along beside me holding the bike until I was ready to take off on my own. And when I crashed and fell, my daddy was there to dust me off and put me back on the bike. Our *abba* does the same thing for us spiritually. Hosea understood this when he wrote:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.

**How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?**
(Hosea 11:3-4)

God loves us the same way. He will keep us from stumbling and he will present us faultless before the presence of his glory with great joy (Jude 24).

Is he your daddy? If he is you can have confidence knowing that he will care for you all the days of your life. Jesus asked the people listening to the Sermon on the Mount:

Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11)

If we as imperfect and sinful human parents naturally care for our children, how much more will our perfect heavenly father perfectly care for us. Jesus gives us great assurance:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:25, 28-33)

Again, is he your daddy? If he is, you can have confidence that he will always be going before you and leading you by the hand. St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” (Ephesians 5:1 NIV).

Is he your daddy? If he is, you’ll know that you belong to him forever and that he will never let anything get in the way of leading, teaching, and training you for work in his Kingdom.

Please pray with me: *Abba*, Father, through our new life in Christ, you have

adopted us as your own sons and daughters. We thank you for the gift of grace that we could never deserve as Adam’s children. Remind us as we come to you, that we come as children to their heavenly Father who loves us and desires the best for us. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.