

“The World’s Greatest Prayer—Who, Where, What?”

Today we’re starting a new series where we’re going to focus on what we often call the Lord’s Prayer. We pray it together almost every week here and a better name for it might be the disciples’ prayer, or the students’ prayer. Because this is what Jesus taught the 12 disciples one day when they came to him and said, “Jesus, teach us how to pray.”

I need this series and you probably do to, especially if you’ve been praying this prayer a while. Because after we human do anything repeatedly, we acclimate to it, we use a certain part of our brain where routines are stored, so that we don’t really have to engage it anymore. That’s true if you’re mowing your yard, or folding laundry, or praying the Lord’s Prayer. It becomes so routine that your mind can go a whole bunch of other places while you’re doing that routine, or saying that prayer.

And listen, I am guilty. I don’t know how many times I’ve led the Lord’s Prayer and been thinking about other things. In fact last year a woman from church made an appointment to talk to me about the Lord’s Prayer and how it seemed like Mark and I rushed through it, not giving anybody time to really think through what we were saying. And she was right! Slowing down a little bit helps, but that’s not enough. Sometimes it just means my mind can wander in a few more directions while we pray it. And that shouldn’t be.

It shouldn’t be that way because in this prayer, Jesus is not just teaching his disciples and an us how to pray, he’s teaching us a whole, whole, whole bunch about God, about being a follower of Jesus, about connecting to the God who made us. This prayer is rich with meaning, and teaching, and high octane stuff for living a purposeful life.

You see, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he wasn’t giving words to be recited. This was the master of life opening the door to life with God. And he gave his friends a prayer that has become one of the great treasures of God’s community. For 2,000 years, wherever people who loved Jesus gather, they prayed this prayer—John Wesley and Martin Luther and St. Francis of Assisi, the Apostle Paul, the 12 disciples who learned it from Jesus himself.

Early followers of Jesus were taught to pray this prayer 3 times a day. Morning, noon and night. When they took part in the Lord’s Supper they were to pray it. Whenever someone was baptized they were to pray it.

For 2,000 years, all over the world, in different languages, in different settings, privately, and in small groups, and gatherings of thousands, followers of Jesus have prayed this prayer. It’s not meant to be just spouted from rote memory. It is rich with meaning and depth and power. So starting today at Saint Paul’s, we’re going to tap into all that. We’re going deep to see what Jesus was getting at in this simple, yet powerful prayer.

So, before we go any further, why don’t we say the Lord’s Prayer together. But before you do, let’s look at the unwritten rules of reading out loud in church. **#1 Read in an expressionless monotone without any hint of emotion. #2 Keep your mind vacant.** (Don’t actually think about what you’re reading.) **#3 Whatever you do, don’t be the first one to start reading a new line.** (Nobody else might join you and you’ll be speaking all alone.)

That’s the way it was growing up in church. That’s how we did it. No matter how great the words were, we would leach all the excitement out of them. If an emergency announcement had flashed up on the screen, we would have read it like this: "The building is on fire. Lo, we must run for our lives."

We can do better. This prayer comes from the lips of Jesus. This is an act of worship that deserves our best. So as you pray right now be mindful of each word and speak in a way that expresses your heart because God really is listening right now. So, let’s stand together. And let’s pray as Jesus taught us to.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." As you sit down, turn to the person next to you and say, "You prayed great."

We're going to focus on this prayer for two reasons, one, so that we can become better pray-ers. I need to be challenged to pray better, to go deeper, to be more authentic. And two, because in this simple prayer Jesus is teaching us the depths of God. In these few lines, Jesus is pointing to the essence of the God who loves you, knows you, and wants to be in relationship with you. In this prayer are the basics of being a follower of Jesus Christ; the core of what it looks like to be connected to the God who made you.

If you stick with this series, if you apply what we're going to learn, if you make it a part of your daily life six weeks from now you will pray differently than you do right now. You really will. And you will know God better, and love God more. You really will.

Today we're going to look at the very first part of the Lord's Prayer, the Students' Prayer, and find that in the very opening of this prayer Jesus is answering some key questions. Who is this God we're praying to—is he angry and disappointed? Where is this God we're trying to connect with—is he far away and hard to find? And what kind of heart and attitude should we bring to in our lives, in our prayers? Who, where and what.

First of all, who we pray to. Jesus begins this prayer with the words, "**Our Father.**" Now this is a very important part of the prayer, and I'll tell you why. It's important because the word "Father" says something about a relationship. Jesus is pointing to the kind of relationship we can have with God.

Now, Jesus uses an Aramaic word "Abba" for father. It's a real tender word. Little children used it. Adults would use it too. It's not quite exactly like our word "daddy" because it was an adult word as well as a child's word, but it was a very tender word. It's a word that speaks of a closeness, a love, a trust, a bond. Whenever Jesus prayed he used this word, "Dad" not the more formal word, "Father." And the awesome thing is that he told you and me to call God "Dad" too. That's the closeness.

I only have two people on this earth that call me "dad," and that single word gets my attention probably quicker than any other. If I answer the phone and I hear that word, "Dad?" that establishes a connection between me and the one who's talking to me that is stronger than steel. And everything else they say, any requests they make, any confession they have to make, anything else they say takes place in the connection of the relationship that's expressed by that one word "dad." There's a closeness and Jesus wants us to establish that closeness with God.

When Jesus tells us to address God as Dad he's telling us that God is a personal being, not some impersonal deity. God created us because of his desire to give love away. He created us to be recipients of his love. That's why we have kids, isn't it? Because there is something in us that longs to give love away.

We have two daughters and Janet and I love them more than life itself. We would give our lives for them in a heartbeat. I love them so much that sometimes it hurts. And as they grow it's such a joy to see them grow and change. And, yes, that joy is also mixed with some heartache and some pain, and more of that is coming I'm sure—the teen years are ahead for us. But I want to offer them as much love as I can even if sometimes they push that love away.

And I think that's how God feels about us. But God not only created us to receive his love, but also to reflect it back to God. God created us to understand his love and he gave us a free will that might choose to love him back. When you pray that's when that happens. Prayer is being with God, being loved by God and reflecting that love back. That's why Jesus wants us to call God, Dad.

Now, it's Father's Day and some of you are reminded of some of the bad stuff about your dad. Maybe your dad wasn't around as much as you wanted because he worked a lot. Maybe he left at some point in your life. Maybe he was abusive to you. Some people have a hard time thinking of God as a loving father because their earthly father wasn't loving. But God's desire is for you to know that he is the ideal of love, protection, faithfulness. For some, their father's were a reflection of God, for others, their fathers were a contrast to God. Knowing the difference is important. God's love is constant, his love has no strings attached. He's truly Dad.

Notice that Jesus tells us to call him "our" Father. "Our" Father. Nowhere in this prayer are the words, "My, mine, or I." This reminds us that God is Dad to all people. Every person who prays this prayer is your

sibling in God. The people we like and the people we don't. God is Dad to those liberal Christians that make your skin crawl—they are your siblings. All those conservative Christians you run from—they are your siblings. God is Dad to Democrats and Republicans, Protestants and Catholics, Pentecostals and Episcopalians, everybody who prays this pray is a brother, a sister. As different and as irritating as they may be to you, they are family. "Our" Father means that Christianity is not an individual competition, it's a team sport. We are family. God is Dad to people who know him, and he is even Dad to those who do not, those who love him and those who reject him. He is "Our" Father.

And then the next line is about where: "**Our Father in heaven.**" Let me ask you a question. How far away is heaven? Farther than the moon? How many miles from here is heaven? Farther than Branson? About the same distance?

We have this problem that we tend to think of heaven as someplace way out there in outer space. The result of that kind of thinking is that God becomes remote, distant, and hard to access. People will sometimes say at the beginning of a worship service, "God, today as we come into your presence..." And I imagine God saying, "Where do you think you've been?" Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, to the ends of the earth." And there's no limit to that.

My father-in-law will not set foot on an airplane. Just won't do it. He quotes that passage, "I'm not going up in that airplane, Jesus said 'low I am with you always.'" There's no limit to this one. It wasn't I-o-w. "I am with you always" has no limits.

"Our Father who is in heaven." The word "heaven" here is actually in the plural form. Literally the prayer goes, "Our Father, the one in the heavens." And the word "heavens" in the New Testament has a few meanings. It's a word that used to talk about what we would call outer space, the stars, the universe. It's a word that's also used for the atmosphere—the sky and clouds. It's also used for the air—the stuff that we breathe, for what's right around us. It's that close.

That's the feel Jesus want us to get. When you say, "Our Father who is in the heavens," you're not saying, "Our Father from a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." You're saying, "Our Father who is all around me." "Our Father who is closer than the air I breathe." "Our Father who is right here, right now as well as in the vastness of the universe." God isn't just out there. God is near. And because God is so close, I'm never alone.

A man's daughter had asked her pastor to come by her house and pray with her father who was very old and dying. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The pastor assumed that the man knew he was coming and said, "I guess you were expecting me." The man said, "No, who are you?" "I'm the new pastor at your church."

The pastor said, "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the man. "I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter. But all my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head. I just stopped trying to pray. Until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair; put an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised; I'll be with you always. Then just talk to Him and listen just like you're doing with me right now.'"

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of times every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was moved by the story and encouraged the man to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and left for the day.

Two nights later, the daughter called to tell the pastor that her daddy had died that afternoon. She said, "When I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed."

This man was on to something real. You're praying to your Father who is all around you. He is closer than the air you breathe. The psalmist wrote, **"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast"** (Psalm 139:7-10, TNIV). Heaven is not some faraway place that you may or may not connect with. God is here now.

Our Father, our Dad, who is closer than the air we breathe, **"Hallowed be your name."** Let me talk about that a little bit that last part. A name in the Bible is never just a label for somebody. A name is always a reflection of the person that it expresses. It's a reflection of their character and their identity. A name carries weight. And Jesus says, "Hallowed be your name."

Now we don't use this word "Hallow" much in our day, but it means to attach appropriate value to something. Give it the honor that it's due. Recognize its worth; to treat with reverence, with holiness. To hallow something means to set it apart as something extraordinary.

So here's the tension we live between: On one hand God is Dad—loving, caring, close, personal, tender. On the other hand, God is powerful, holy, just, and to be feared. If we're too casual with God we forget his power and majesty; we forget that God is holy. If all we focus on is God's power and majesty we forget his love and tenderness. We're to hold those things in tension. But sometimes we forget to keep God's name holy.

How do we do that? One of the 10 commandments tells us to not use God's name in vain. I hear it all the time. Mild forms: "Oh my God!" Saying that just as an exclamation is using God's name in vain; it's using God's name casually, flippantly. To say, "Oh my God!" is to detach God's name from his character. It's to lose reverence for God himself. That's a mild way to use God's name in vain. Of course we all know the not-so-mild ways we use God's name in vain when we're really angry, when we want a little shock value in what we're saying.

To hallow God's name means when we say it, we connect it to his character and nature, not just toss it around when we're happy, or surprised, or angry or somebody cuts us off in traffic.

And we hallow God's name with our lives. Or we defame God's name with our lives. You see, we are a reflection of the character of God in the eyes of a watching world. To hallow God's name is to say, "I will try to live each moment of my day in such a way, God, that you'll be able to sign your name to my day."

The truth about me is that sometimes I don't do that. Sometimes my actions do not hallow God's name. Sometimes what I say and do does not reflect God to a watching world. Just last week at Annual Conference, the yearly conference of Missouri Methodist pastors and lay delegates in Springfield, I was just plain obnoxious and insensitive to a few people. I'm not like that very often, but sometimes I like to push people's buttons, especially when I'm around a bunch of pastors. And later I felt like I was not hallowing God's name in my behavior and I apologized to those people. But I really do want to live a life that hallows God's name in what I do, in what I say, in how I think. Not because God will disown me, he's my Dad, and loves me with no strings attached. But I want to hallow God's name because he loves me no strings attached. Hallowed be your name.

Well, that's just the beginning of this prayer. Our Dad who loves us so much. Who is all around us, closer than the air we breathe. Whose name and character we want to revere and make holy through our lives. Now over the next five weeks, with God's help, you and I are going to go to the depths of the greatest prayer that was ever prayed—the prayer that gives us a glimpse in the very heart and character of God. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Rev. Adam Hamilton and William Barclay for their insights into the Lord's Prayer.