

Our Father Who Is In Heaven

Let's start with a word of prayer:

Our Father, we just come to You today and thank You for the blessings of Your life for us, Your life in us. And Father, thank You for the blessing of being able to have a relationship with You and pray to You and communicate with You. Lord, as I speak today, I pray that this would be Your words only that are spoken. I pray this in Jesus 'most holy name. Amen.

So let's start by reading the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. This section came right after or during the Sermon On The Mount, which is usually considered chapter 5, but this leads directly into that. And just before this He was teaching how not to pray. Do not pray publicly, do not pray meaningless repetitions, all these things. Then He steps into how to pray, and He gave us a template for prayer. So let's read this.

"Pray then in this way:

Our Father, who is 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 lead us into temptation,

but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom

and the power and the glory forever. Amen]

How Not To Pray

Let's go back a few verses to where Christ was teaching about how not to pray in chapter 6:5: "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

So Brenda always asks me to talk about where this message came from. Well, this message come from my quiet time. I have been slowly reading through the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes, and when I got to this section on the Lord's Prayer, it was really tempting just to skip over those three verses because they are so familiar and so well known. But I felt convicted to go back and really read them, and read them in the context of what the Lord was teaching there. When I really read it, it opened up a lot of layers that I had never seen before, and that is what I want to share with you, hoping to communicate that to you today.

A Template On How To Pray

So I am starting out with a 100,000 foot view of the Lord's prayer. It is a template on how to pray. Now a template is an empty form that somebody goes back and fills in with all the content. A template is just a shape of what goes in there. And this template has two major sections. The first section is of God's concerns, and there is a second section of man's concerns. This is a good template, a good pattern to follow because it is putting God's concerns first. As we pray, as we approach Him, His concerns always come first, and then we submit our petitions. And in this particular translation there is a second part where we follow up our petitions with a reaffirmation of God's standing. That is not in all the translations. "The power and the glory" part is not in every translation, but it is in mine so I want to talk about it.

General Christian theology digs a little deeper and says, "Okay, there are six petitions in the Lord's Prayer. There is a petition that God's name be sanctified, that is "Hallowed be Thy name." There is "God's kingdom come," which is in the second verse. And there is a separate petition of "God's will be done." Now those two are important. They are separated because we know in the end when His kingdom does come, His will will not be completely done yet because there will still be rebellion against Him on earth. So these are two separate things.

Our petition is, "Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us." In this case it is to honestly forgive those who may have offended us because we do not want to be lying to God because it says, "Forgive us as we have forgiven others." We do not want to be lying to Him about that. Finally, "Lead us not into temptation."

Culturally Appropriated

So this is a 100,000 foot view which is really a very simple, very beautiful and very complete prayer. It is God's concerns, man's concerns, and when you look at it, it can be very unchallenging, not convicting. It is really easy to look at it as Ed Miller says, "La, la, la," and go on with things. That is almost what I did. But these sixty-eight very simple words have a lot of meaning packed into them, and we will talk about six of those words today. One thing about this passage is that it has really been culturally appropriated. The world knows this passage; it is one of the more famous ones in the Bible that is almost as famous as, "Do not judge." Almost as famous as the 23rd Psalm, and it has kind of gotten baked into our culture and has become not a template but a script where people will take this and just apply meaningless repetition to it. They just repeat those same words over and over again as if that will build a relationship or as if that is what God wants to hear. When I was thinking about this meaningless repetition and how it has become meaningless repetition, I thought, "Why does man do that? Why do we take something that the

Lord has given us and turn it into something rote that we repeat over and over again? I think one reason why we do that is because it does not require the sacrifice of a relationship. We can repeat those words or some other prayer, and it is very easy to do because we do not have to sacrifice anything to do that. We do not have to open ourselves and be vulnerable to God to do that. It does not require the loss of self just to repeat things. In a way, it is treating God like the unjust judge in the parable of the unjust judge. In that parable the widow has to go back repeatedly and ask the judge over and over again to do what is right. And mankind sees God so often as an unjust judge that needs to be approached over and over again that can nag him into doing what is right. But thankfully, our Father is not that way, and He does not want that meaningless repetition.

In fact just before this He talked about meaningless repetition. Don't use repetition, but here is a template that you can use but do not make it meaningless. And again a template is the shape of something that gets filled in later, and they are not just words to be repeated. So when we look at this template, we should be looking at with our eyes toward, "what do we fill it in with?" And we fill it in with our life and the life the Lord has given us.

Performative vs Relational Prayer

So also these verses ahead of the Lord's prayer call out the difference between performative and relational prayer. Performative prayer is praying as a performance. And doing performative prayer is actually pretty easy because all it requires is for you to memorize some words and to be a good actor. It does not require any sacrifice or any loss. And the rewards of performative prayer come immediately because you know that the people around you may appreciate the prayer, they may be blessed by the prayer, or have some emotional response to the prayer.

But a relational prayer is much harder because it requires us to be in a relationship. Being in a relationship requires us to be vulnerable to one another, and to be vulnerable to our God. And there is a delayed reward for relational prayer, and we may not see that reward in this life. Relational prayer leads to death to self because again it requires vulnerability, opening ourselves and being honest with someone who is holy, and we are not holy. And that will lead to us losing ourselves and becoming more like Him.

It can be discouraging to look at this and think about how it has become a mindless repetition or meaningless mantra to a lot of people that pray it. But I want to hopefully peel back another layer and make it a little more meaningful to us.

Principle: Prayer Begins With Praise

So let's look at that first verse again. "Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name." Throughout this whole prayer, there is in this whole section a presumption of belief. The Lord is not trying to convince people to believe; they already believe, and He is teaching them how to act on that belief, how to live in that belief.

Some of the principles that come from that first verse, again talking about meeting God's needs first, we acknowledge that God is on the throne, and that He is set apart. We can rejoice in those two facts because He is set apart, and He does want to hear from us which is a great thing.

Why us? Why does He want to hear from us? It is a wonderful thing. Setting Him in that right place sets the right tone before we dive into our own needs.

This is a verse that Brenda quotes to me a lot because I get anxious about things a lot: Philippians 4:6-7: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Here, just like in the Lord’s Prayer, Paul is telling us to give thanks first, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known, and that brings peace. It removes the anxiousness. So maybe putting God’s needs first in our life is the key to peace, putting Him in that first place. Again, Paul reinforces it in I Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

In this case we are to rejoice without ceasing because it says, rejoice always, pray always, and prayer begins with rejoicing. It is almost like rejoicing and prayer are synonymous. The more we pray we can rejoice knowing that we are communicating, we are communing with the God of heaven and earth. If prayer begins with praise, then we need to be praising without ceasing. Again, praising Him before we have made our petitions known and even before our petitions are answered, takes faith. It is an act of faith to say, “Okay, Lord, I am going to praise You for something that I am asking for, and You may not have granted yet; You may not have answered yet.”

What Do We Pray About?

So in this whole issue of praying without ceasing I have found that there are some things that keep me from praying without ceasing. Sometimes I set a threshold for prayer: “This really is not important enough to bother God with; it is a minor issue, and He is busy. I am not going to bother Him with this thing.” But God really cares about the details, He is never too busy. After all, He is omnipotent. He is never too busy to deal with what we see as a small problem.

Also, sometimes I reserve topics or things for prayer. This is something I can pray about or this is something I should not pray about because it is not spiritual. Everything has its spiritual component to it. One thing I learned, unfortunately not early in my career, but kind of mid-career was that Jesus is a much better software developer than I will ever be. He knows everything there is to know about software, and if I am having trouble at work or trouble solving some technical problem, I should ask Him about it because He knows what the solution is, and it is wonderful how many times even this week I was confronted with a technical problem that did not seem to have a spiritual aspect. I prayed about it, and there was the answer. And that code on the slide there is actually from the CTM site.

Our

So let’s take an even closer look at this verse. I am going to start getting in to those first six words. I tease Mac a lot about having too many words on a slide. So I am going to go in the opposite direction, maybe too far in the other direction; we will be the judge of that. We are going to go down to a single word, one word on the slide.

Let’s look at this first word, “our.” And this is the word that really jumped out at me when I was reading in my quiet time, “Our Father.” Why did He use that word, “our”? So let’s jump back

three verses, to when He was teaching them about prayer. He said, “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

He tells us to pray alone to “your” Father, to close our door, to be quiet, to be alone, to be private, and pray to your Father. But then when He gives us a template, He starts it with “Our Father.” If you are familiar with English you know that ‘your ’ is not ‘our. ’ They are two different words. ‘Your ’ is singular, and ‘our ’ is plural. So what is He saying here? What does it mean? Did He use the wrong pronouns when He started the template? Was He mistaken about what pronouns He used when He said, “Our Father, who is in heaven”? I do not think He made a mistake.

In verse 6 He tells us to pray privately, and in verse 9 He tells us to pray in the plural, “Our Father.” So what does it mean? Well, when we are alone in our prayer closet, we are a “my,” all by myself, My Father. It is just me; I am all alone. There is nothing wrong with that; God is my Father, and He is your Father. But Jesus prayed, “Our Father.” Our individual “my ’ becomes a part of a larger group “our;” it is made up of a bunch of mys. The plural of mys is ours. When we pray, “Our Father” it makes us part of the “our” group. It is no longer a private “my prayer, my Father.” It is “our” Father. When you think about this, we are never just a “me” when we are acting in faith, acting in the church or acting in our spiritual life. It is an “our;” it is an “us.”

Now there is another name for this, “our group,” and that is the church. It is not the church as our little group here, little assembly here; it is the church universal, so that group of mys, that “our” group is the church. I do not know how this works; it is a spiritual thing, but when we are alone, we are part of a larger group. We are told to pray alone, but we are told to pray as a group. So this is all part of what I Peter talks about, the house being made of living stones, precious jewels built into the house for His glory. Like all these little stones of my, of me, individuals, but we are all put together into this house, into a greater group, a plural group, a plural of stones, a plural of “mys.”

So what is the application of all this? The application is that we are never alone. We can never act without impacting others in this spiritual group that we are in, the spiritual church that we are in. It is like we are atoms all bonded together, and when one moves, it affects all those around it. Again, this is a spiritual thing, it is a mystery, the church is a mystery of how we are all interconnected, but it is a spiritual thing where we *are* all connected.

So if I obey Him, if I praise the Lord and obey Him, it affects others in the church. It is not just me acting individually; it is not just me obeying, but that blessing, that benefit goes to others in the church. If I sin, it is not just me sinning, but it impacts the church as well. When I hurt, it is not just me hurting; it is “our” hurting; the spiritual bonded-together group hurting. What happens to me privately, happens to us together. And what I do privately is done to us together.

In I Corinthians 12 Paul talks about the body, and he says that when “one member suffers, all suffer with it; when one member is honored, all members rejoice with it.” When you look at this, it did not say that when one member suffers and posts about it on Facebook, that all members suffer. There is no evidence of a public requirement for that suffering to be made known publicly.

If you suffer, then all are suffering with you. You are like one cell in a body. What happens to you is happening to the body, and what you do is done in the church.

For many years, ever since I was studying to be a doctor, which I never did become a doctor, thank goodness, I appreciated seeing the church as a body. There are so many similarities, the allegory fits so well. When you think about something like cancer; it starts with one cell that deviates from the design in the direction of the head, and that one cell starts affecting all the other cells around it. It makes copies of itself; it spreads and then the part that is not by the design of the head spreads in the body and damages and weakens the body. Likewise, healing starts with one cell that recognizes something outside of itself and starts to recover the body, and that healing often requires sacrifice, sacrifice of looking outside of itself and acting outside of itself for the good of the body.

Principles of “Our”

There are some principles from this word, “our” that we are not isolated in our actions. Our actions affect the body of Christ. When we pray, we impact the body of Christ. When we praise Him, we impact the body of Christ. When we hurt, the body hurts. When we sin, we affect the body.

When we talk about “our” and praying privately, it does not negate corporate prayer. We cannot say, “Well, I am going to pray alone at home, and because we are spiritually connected, that is corporate prayer.” Corporate prayer is different; corporate prayer, I think magnifies and amplifies that spiritual connection we have with one another when we are together physically.

When we think about being alone in our prayer closet all by ourselves, me or you, by yourself; we are not really alone; we are part of the church. We are connected in ways that we cannot see, ways that we cannot see with our physical eyes. When we praise, when we pray, when we celebrate, when we sin, or when we are hurt, we are not alone.

As we think about this simple word that starts the Lord’s prayer, “Our” remember that it shows the glory of the church; it shows an interconnectivity of us all. It shows that we are bound together, and we belong to one another. So let’s don’t let it be meaningless repetition.

What Does It Mean to Pray to Our Father

We are going to go back up to the next word: “Our Father,” and look at the word “Father.” And the meaning of this word is a bit more obvious, but I think it is also very, very special.

What does it mean to pray to our Father? Well, when the Lord started this prayer, He could have used any number of titles for Himself. He could have said, “Our God,” “Our Lord,” “Our King,” and all of those would have been completely accurate titles and addresses for the God of the universe, but those titles do not reflect relationship the way that, “Our Father” reflects a relationship. And prayer is required for that relationship. If we want to have a relationship with our Father, we need to be praying to Him, and not in mindless repetition or meaningless repetition. And when you think about it, what relationships do we have that would benefit from meaningless repetition?

Brenda and I have pet names for each other. I sometimes say, "Hey, Babe." What if that is all I said to her, walk around the house all day and said, "Hey babe; hey babe, hey babe." That is nothing you can build a relationship on. It takes more than that meaningless repetition to do that.

War on Fatherhood

One of the things I thought about as I was meditating on this word, Father, was that there is a war on fatherhood, and this war started back with Adam when he fell, and sin entered mankind. It corrupted fatherhood, and that corruption has continued. I think we all have experienced corrupt fatherhood at some point. How many of you have had a perfect father? Noah? No, okay. Definitely not Noah. We have had sin and then the industrial revolution came along.

What does the industrial revolution have to do with this? Before the industrial revolution fathers kind of worked at home. They were farmers, the kids would see and interact with their fathers all day long because the father was at home, but when the industrial revolution came along we had specialization of labor. The fathers were then leaving the house to go to the factory or go to the office, and they were separated then from their children. They would only see their children in the evenings when they were all tired and worn out.

Then in the sixties we turned it up to an eleven, where we saw the war on poverty, where we saw the paying people not being fathers, and with the sexual revolution where we started encouraging sex without the responsibility of it. All of these things have led to a corrupted view of fatherhood that many have. I would dare say that we have at times, and it is really the work of the enemy to corrupt this view of the father because God wants to be seen as a Father. But if we do not know what a father is, then we cannot really see Him in that aspect of His personality correctly.

Fathers Love and Discipline their children

A father loves their child. A father will do anything to protect their child, to improve their child, to help their child grow up, the father will give his life for his child. But that is not all that the father does.

C. S. Lewis said that we often have an avuncular of God the Father. Avuncular means like an uncle. Uncles give candy to their nieces and nephews. They just give them presents all the time. Uncles do not discipline; fathers discipline. They truly love the child, and they discipline. So the father disciplines their child.

Hebrews 12 talks about this, "And what father doesn't discipline their son?" There is a reason why fathers discipline their children. They discipline their children so the children can be a productive member of society. If they do not discipline their children, they turn into little wild things, and they are nonproductive members of society. If you discipline them, there is a good chance they will be productive members of society. Why does God discipline us? He disciplines us so that we can be productive members of His church and not be little wild things running around.

Fathers Guide Their Children

Fathers guide their children, and guiding is an explicit instruction; it is hands-on instruction. “Ok, son, this is how you tie up the oxen, this is how you plow the field, this is how you change a tire.” All these things are explicit guidance from the Father. And from our earthly father that guidance is not always correct, and it is not always done with good motives. So again, the corruption of fatherhood comes into that where we have incorrect instruction, sometimes bad motives, sometimes just mistaken motives.

I remember when I was a freshman in college. I entered in college to be a doctor, and I came home on spring break and said, “Father, I am changing my major. I am not going to be a doctor; I am going to write software.” And he was like, “Why are you doing that? That is the stupidest thing you have ever said. There is no money in software. How can you support yourself writing software?” I said, “Something will work out.” His view was corrupted; his guidance was incorrect. Our earthly fathers often do that, but thankfully our heavenly Father does not give corrupt or incorrect guidance or give guidance with bad motives.

Fathers Model Behavior

Fathers also model, and modeling is an implicit type of directional instruction. It is how children see the character of their fathers, by all that nonverbal instruction or nonverbal behavior of the father, what they do, how they treat other people. This is how children really see the character of their fathers. Oftentimes, you see children who walk like their fathers, and that comes from the modeling of the father’s behavior. And all of this modeling is multiplied exponentially by the fact that we have an omnipotent, omnipresent, and thankfully an omnipatient Father.

Child’s Relation to Their Father

So what is the child’s relationship to their father? Well, children really want to be like their father. Even if their father is not a great model, children often want to be like them. Compliments from a father are always very special. And discipline from a father has more impact. I remember sitting in my bedroom crying after the words: “Wait until your father gets home.” Because I knew that was going to be some extra special discipline that was coming. But children naturally want to be like their fathers.

Father at Work

Dana shared at the conference about seeing his father work, and that was really special. He got to see the big things that his father was doing. His father was not just the guy with a bunch of keys. His father was helping hundreds of people and impacting hundreds of lives. He saw his father much bigger than he had seen him before.

My father did not do big important things for most of his life. My father sold cookies. In fact, he sold little Debbie Cookies for many years. But I did get to go to work with him, and I saw how hard he worked to support the family. We were out the door at 4:30 in the morning to go and load the truck and begin driving all over Western North Carolina selling little Debbie snack cakes, and that was a hard, hard job.

Then later when I was in college, my father started a rescue mission, and I saw an even bigger work coming from my father. I remember one time I was visiting him on break. He was in his office and he had a big handwritten sign on the wall just saying, “Never again.” Now that is an interesting motivational poster there, “Never Again.” I asked, “What is this about? What are you never going to do again?” He said, “Well, I doubted the Lord’s ability to provide for us.” Rescue missions are always short on money, always need money, and theirs was no different. And he said they needed money to do these things so he went to the United Way and worked with them to get money. But with their money came lots and lots of ungodly strings. They were forcing him no longer to require devotions, no longer to require for them to be in the devotional times. And he learned from that, never again to doubt the ability for God to provide, for what God has told him to do.

How Does This Affect Our Prayers

So how does this view of God as our Father affect our prayers? First, we can share our heart with Him. We can be vulnerable with Him because He loves us, and He is not going to reject us. He wants to be in a relationship with us. He wants to talk to us, and He wants to guide us. He wants, believe it or not, to be with us. He wants us to ask Him. In that verse right before the Lord’s Prayer, He says that He already knows what we need even before we ask. And I thought, “Why do we even ask if He already knows?” It is because He wants us to ask so that we can have that relationship with Him, so that we can see Him respond in that relationship.

We can also pray with confidence because He is not going to reject us. He may discipline us, but there is nowhere in the Scripture that it says that a father rejects his son, but a father disciplines his son.

Also, we need to listen when we pray. That is how He guides us. Some people that are the hardest to have a relationship with are those who are always talking. If a person is always talking it is really, really difficult to be communicating and have any kind of relationship with them, because they do not stop and listen. Relationship is a two-way street.

The Father wants us to know His work and see His work. So when we are praying about His work, He wants to show it to us. He wants for us to be a part of that, and He wants to show us the amazing things that He is doing. Through this communion, through this relationship is how He conforms us to His image. Through us listening, through us being disciplined, and through us seeing His work, we are conformed into His image.

So wrapping up this part, these first two words on “our Father,” there are a couple key points to remind us. We are together even when we are alone. We are part of one body, and what you do affects every part of the body. And our Father wants to commune with us so that we can be like Him.

Who Is In Heaven

Jumping back to the verse again, “Our Father, who is in heaven.” Let’s consider that next phrase, “Who is in heaven.” So what does this tell us about Jesus and about our Father, and about how we should pray?

It told me three big things. One is that He is of a very different realm than us. He is “other” than us. He is not like our earthly fathers. He is much, much better, and He is in control. So the first thing is that He is far above us. This being in heaven is not on earth, it is very separate from us. In Isaiah it talks about His ways are not our ways. He is so far above us that we definitely start without His mind, and in this life I do not know whether we will ever fully have His mind, but He is growing us, conforming us to have His mind. Because He is so far above us I am uncomfortable with the “Bud” prayers that we hear sometimes, where somebody prays to God like He is somebody sitting next to them at a bar; very casual, very let me put my arm around You. It is very lax prayer. This kind of prayer has always bothered me because it does not acknowledge that separation, the difference there is between God the Heavenly Father, and us.

He is not like our father; He is unchanging. Being in heaven lends an eternality to this concept of the Father, the aspect of being eternal, an eternal Father. He will always be our Father, and we will always be His children. As you grow up with your earthly father, eventually at some point in your life you will exceed the capabilities of your father, and then you will start taking care of your father as if he was your child, which is tough. But that will never happen with our Heavenly Father; we will never grow to exceed Him.

I remember again another story from college. I was working for a company and over Christmas break they let me take a computer home to do some work. Now that may not seem a lot these days with lap tops, but in those days it was a big deal to be able to take a computer home. It was a massive thing that I took home. On Christmas day I was sitting down in the family room with the computer writing code. Who does not like to write good code on Christmas day? And I was sitting there typing away, and my father came and stood behind me. He stood there for several minutes as I was coding away, I think it was an accounting application, and after a few minutes he said, “You have no idea what you are doing.” And I thought he must have seen a bug; I must be doing something completely wrong in the code. And I said, “What do you mean, I don’t know what I am doing, am I making a mistake here?” And he said, “Well, I am your father, and you are my son; I do not know what you are doing, therefore you cannot know what you are doing.”

He is Not Like Our Father

Thankfully, our heavenly Father will never be that way. We will never meet or exceed His capabilities. We will always be His children. And He is in control; He knows what we need before we ask for it. He is not surprised by what we ask for. He is not surprised by what we do, and He is not struggling to answer our prayers. That all should be very comforting to us, that He is not surprised, and He is not struggling. He is asking us to ask so that we can be in a relationship with Him.

So how does this impact your prayer. Well, there needs to be a reverence or an awe as we approach our heavenly Father who is far, far above us. But it can be a confidence because He knows what we need, and we are agreeing with Him that we need those things. And we can pray with confidence because He is in control, and He is always there. He will always respond in a way that is good. So we can have peace knowing that He is good and He is in control.

So as we wrap it up here, remember that we are all in this body together as in “our Father.” We are not alone. We pray, but we are not alone. When we praise, we are not alone. And when the Spirit leads us, He is leading us all in the same direction. And we are praying to Someone who wants to be in a relationship with us. We are praying to Someone who is far, far above us. He is the Creator of the universe; He is the God of the universe, and He is there wanting to hear from us, wanting to have that relationship with us.

Let’s go to Him in prayer:

Our Father, we just thank You, Lord, for the blessings of Your Word and how much You want to be with us, and how much You have sacrificed to be with us, Lord, to make that way open that we can pray to You. Father, I just pray that as we pray, You will open our eyes to the magnificence and the impact and the wonder of what prayer really is. I just pray this in Your name. Amen.