

The School of Prayer

Part 2 – Addressing God

Matthew 6:9-13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 14, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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⁹“Pray, then, in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

may your name be revered as holy.

¹⁰ **May your kingdom come.**

May your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ **Give us today our daily bread.**

¹² **And forgive us our debts,**

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ **And do not bring us to the time of trial**

but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-

13, NRSV)

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Many of you have told me over the past week that you are excited to spend the next couple of months living into the Lord’s Prayer. That encourages me because it tells me that this is a congregation full of people serious about their commitment to following Jesus. Any serious disciple of Christ will want to not only learn more about prayer, but learn to pray like Jesus prays. To love somebody is to want to be close to somebody, to be in relationship with another. Prayer is essential to loving God. And so like those first disciples, we are here today asking Jesus to teach us how to pray like he prays, that we might know the Father like he knows the Father.

The first thing we may want Jesus to teach us is how to address God when we come before him. I will probably never have the chance to meet our President, but should the opportunity come I would want to know how to address him or her. As you may know, there is very clear etiquette for this. Jill Biden probably has a variety of ways she addresses her husband, even intimate names like most couples have for one another. I’m sure his kids call him dad. I’m guessing his siblings call him Joe. But if I met Joe Biden one day, there’s only one way I would address him: “Mr. President”. Under no circumstance would I call him Joe. I certainly wouldn’t call him dad.

Forget the President of the United States. What about God? How should we address the creator of the universe, the holy and just judge of all humankind, the sovereign King who is above all and over all, the one before whom all presidents and all kings will one day bow in humble submission? The Bible is full of names and titles for God, but Jesus teaches his disciples that when we come before God in prayer we should address him as Father. It’s as if we go before God and say, “What should we call you? Lord? King? Master? Your Majesty? The Almighty? Creator? Or maybe we shouldn’t dare call you anything at all?” And in response, God says to us, “Just call me Father.”

Remember that before this is our prayer, this is Jesus’ prayer. Jesus is not giving us a prayer here, he is giving us *his* prayer, teaching us to pray like he prays. His life embodies this prayer. And so naturally, when Jesus, the Son, addresses his Father in heaven, how does he address him? Of course he calls him Father.

Now, there are references to God as Father in the Old Testament, beginning with the time God sent Moses to Egypt to tell Pharaoh, “**Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son,**”¹ reminding Pharaoh that these people are not slaves of Egypt, but children of the one, true God. The inference, of course, is that the Lord is their Father.

But this sort of language in the Hebrew scriptures is rare. In fact, though there are nearly half a million words in the Old Testament, God is referred to as Father only fifteen times.² It’s almost as if these infrequent references are placeholders for something that was to come later. It did come later. When Jesus arrives on the scene, he refers to God as his Father all the time, over 160 instances in the Gospel accounts. Matthew 11:27 is a great example, where Jesus calls God his Father three times: “**All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**”³

¹ Exodus 4:22. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² See Isaiah 63:16 and Jeremiah 3:19 for other examples.

³ I’m indebted here to Wesley Hill, *The Lord’s Prayer: A Guide to Praying to Our Father* (Lexham Press, 2019), 9-12.

As you might imagine, this ruffled a lot of feathers. Who was Jesus to go around using such intimate, familial language for God, going as far as to suggest that he was God's Son! It's one of the reasons the religious leaders wanted him silenced. But we know now that he was just speaking the truth.⁴ As we confess in the Nicene Creed, Jesus is "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." The mystery here is unfathomable, and yet we confess that Christ did not begin his life in Bethlehem, but is eternal with the Father, one with the Father and the Spirit, in a never-ending relationship of mutual love and delight. All the Father possesses belongs to the Son as well. God the Father has never *not* been the Father. God the Son has never *not* been the Son. Their mutual love has bound them together in unbreakable love forever.

With this in mind, it's the next word in the prayer Jesus shares with us that makes this even more mind-blowing. This is not just Jesus' Father, this is *our* Father as well. I used to think that the word "our" was there to remind me that God isn't just my Father, but your Father as well. And that is part of it. But I understand now that it's there to primarily remind us that God isn't just my Father, but Jesus' Father first. And that Jesus is saying to us, "My Father is your Father as well. He's our Father! The way my Father sees me, that's the way he sees you. They way I approach my Father is the way you are to approach him also, as his beloved child." And this, my friends, changes everything.

I heard pastor Tim Keller once say that there are two basic ways to deal with others in personal relationships. You can either have a business relationship with somebody, or a family relationship with somebody. In a business relationship, I have something for you and you have something for me. The basis is performance. In family relationship, however, I *am* something to you, and you *are* something to me. The basis here is commitment, permanent commitment.

Think about living in somebody's house, and the difference between living there as a border and living there as a child. If you are renting a room from me, it's a business relationship. I provide you something, specifically a room, utilities, your privacy, a key to the place, a parking spot, and so on. And in return you provide for me rent money every month, along with a promise not to trash the place. If one of us doesn't perform, the relationship is broken. We will get along

well as long as you pay the rent and respect the property. If you don't, you will immediately be looking for another place to live. But it's different as a child. As a child you live in my house because I am your father and you are my son or daughter. Our relationship isn't conditional in ways it would be with a border. I don't stop being your father if you don't perform. There may be other consequences when you get out of line, but breaking the relationship is not one of them. You're family. You always will be.⁵

Do you understand what Jesus is teaching us here? His relationship with his Father is in no way based on performance. The love and blessing he receives from his Father is unconditional. And he is telling us here that it is the same with us. We are not in a business relationship with God, having to hold up our end to stay under his roof. In no way have we earned or deserved God's favor. It is a pure gift given of grace come to us through the sacrifice of his Son. The Bible uses the idea of adoption to express this, something I know a bit about since I was adopted myself and then later adopted two of our four children. John 1:12 declares, "**But to all who received him [i.e. Christ], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.**" Paul clarifies this in Galatians when he declares that God sent his Son to "**redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.**"⁶

Do you understand that adoption is never the result of the child's actions. My two younger children didn't choose to be adopted, or even ask to be adopted. And they didn't choose us. They didn't even know us. Neither did we choose God as our Father. He chose us, and not as servants or borders, putting on us the burden to have to perform to maintain the relationship, but as children granted the enduring relationship that all parents are meant to have with their kids. In fact, when Jesus prays for the unity of the church in John 17 he says to his Father, "**I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**"⁷ Don't miss this. Jesus prays that the Father would love you just as the Father loves him. How in the world can we ever understand this? At best, all we can do is believe it. If we do, it changes everything.

When our two younger children were adopted I did not ask them to call me "Mr. Chapman", or "Sir", or even "Father". From day one I told them to call me "dad", or "daddy." Though they were too young to articulate

⁴ The rest of the New Testament writers follow suit, and God is referred to as Father over 250 times in the New Testament.

⁵ Timothy Keller, "Basis of Prayer: 'Our Father'", *Gospel in Life*, April 23, 1995. Listen to full sermon at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqxXABgRhVo>

⁶ Galatians 4:5

⁷ John 17:23

this, there may have been something in them that became aware that I was inviting them into the same relationship with me that my two birth children had with me, which in fact I was. This is exactly what Jesus is saying to us, “My Father is inviting you to have the same relationship with him that I have with him. My Father is your Father.” In fact, the word that Jesus likely used here when he first gave this prayer to his disciples was the Aramaic word “abba”, which translates “Daddy”, or literally “Dada”. Dada is what small children say when they can’t quite pronounce “daddy”. It is a term of tremendous love, affection, and tenderness. In our culture, some children grow out of using that term, though not all. My two daughters, now grown adults, still call me daddy, which I love. In Jewish culture, however, children never grew out of the practice of calling their fathers “abba”, or “dada”.⁸ Jesus doesn’t want us to ever grow out of addressing God in this way either.

In the original Greek, the first word of the Lord’s Prayer is not “our”, but “Father”. Do you see what this means? Jesus really is teaching us to pray to God like he prays to God, and that when we come before God we are always to come before him as beloved children coming to their Father, to their daddy, who loves them as much as he loves his oldest child, our brother Jesus.

This is the best news you will ever hear. God will never forget you. God will never cease to care for you. God will never reject you. God will always be ready to hear you and welcome you home. God will share with you everything that he has to share.⁹ God does not require you to clean yourself up before you come home.¹⁰ Remember this picture of little John Jr. playing under the desk of his father, President Kennedy? Who would dare do such a thing? No other guest in the world would come into the Oval Office and start playing under the desk of the most powerful person on the planet. Who would dare go wake up the President of the United States in the middle of the night to ask for drink of water? Only a beloved son or daughter. And this is the confidence that Jesus wants you to have whenever you come before your Father in Heaven who loves you infinitely more than you will ever know or understand. Once you believe this, once you begin to pray from this place of belovedness and grace, it changes everything about the rest of what we have to say to God.

You’ve heard me say before that when you are included in a family, that inclusion carries with it both privileges

and responsibilities. All four of my children, adopted and birth children alike, receive certain privileges because of their status as my children. You might even say that all I have is theirs, my home is always their home, my time will always put them as a priority, there is a place in my heart that reserves affection for them I don’t give to just anybody. And when Esther and I are gone, most of our estate will go to them. It’s no different with us and our Heavenly Father. In Romans 8, Paul uses vivid language in reminding us that we have received from God a Spirit of adoption so that, **“when we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”**¹¹

Think about that. Everything that the Father shares with Jesus he shares with us! Sometimes you hear about some fortunate heir or heiress who inherits some massive estate from their parents. In terms of material wealth, Elon Musk is the richest person on the planet right now. Imagine if he died today and passed on his \$229 billion to his kids? Now, there are eleven of them unfortunately, so each one would have to figure out how to manage on a mere \$20 billion each. That’s a problem lots of people would be glad to deal with. And yet, that inheritance, that \$20 billion inheritance, is garbage, *literally garbage*, when compared to the inheritance you stand to receive, and are even now receiving, as a child of your Father in heaven.¹² You need to remember this every time you approach God in prayer.

Along with privileges, of course, come responsibilities. If you rent a room in my house we are not going to give you chores. You pay your rent and respect the property and we are square. But as a child, a part of the family, you are to share in the work of the family. While your place in the family was freely given, there are no freeloaders. When children are younger, chores seem like a chore. What a delight it has been to welcome our adult children home these days and find that they almost fight over who gets to do the dishes. In a loving family, you don’t contribute to the work of the family out of obligation, because you have to – this isn’t a business relationship – but you contribute because you *want to*, out of gratitude for being a part of a family.

In the ancient world of Jesus’ day, a son would apprentice his father and learn to do his work, actually join him in his work. Sons of fisherman learned the family business and became fisherman to help contribute to the household. Remember where Jesus

⁸ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 295.

⁹ Matthew 7:11 – “If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

¹⁰ Think of the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15.

¹¹ Romans 8:15-17

¹² Remember in Matthew 19:21 when Jesus said the rich, young ruler, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

first meets James and John? They are out fishing with their father. There was no career fair at Galilee High School.

This is why Jesus worked as a carpenter for most his life, because Joseph was a carpenter. It's also why Jesus made clear at one point, **"Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."**¹³ Mostly what Jesus was doing as he apprenticed his heavenly Father was bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. Remember John the Baptist first announced Jesus publicly by declaring, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near..."**¹⁴

Our adoption into God's family is a free gift of grace. But now that we have been included, we don't get to hang around as freeloaders! We too are called to join in the family business, the mission of God, which is the coming of heaven to earth, and to participate in this work by, as Jesus clarified, making disciples of all nations, loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, and showing special compassion and generosity to the least of these in this world. The second word of the prayer, "our", reminds us of this, that it's not just our daily bread we're after, or forgiveness and deliverance and protection only for ourselves, but for all others as well. Because every prayer we bring to God begins by remembering that God is our Father, everything else we pray is prayed in the confidence that we are beloved children, but also in the humility and readiness to pay attention to what we see God doing in this world, that we might then join him as willing and grateful children ready to share in the work of the family.

A couple of years ago one of my kids called me "Dude" one day. I thought I must have misheard. "Dude" sounds a lot like "Dad." So I asked, "Did you just call me 'dude'?" "Yes," I was told, "I call everybody 'dude'." Not me. I'm not your dude. Don't call me that. In a similar way, though Jesus teaches us to always approach God as our Father, even as our Daddy, he wants to make sure we don't get too casual. This is, after, all the Lord of the universe we are approaching. And so Jesus adds the words "in heaven" to his address to God. God is not our best buddy, or the man upstairs. He's certainly not our dude. When Moses meets God at the burning bush he is told to take off his shoes as he approaches because he is on holy ground. Ancient Jews were given the name of God, Yahweh, but would never speak, or even write, that name because it was considered too sacred.

In teaching us to pray, "Our Father *in heaven*", Jesus is reminding us that God is merciful, yes, but he is also holy. He is grace, but also truth. He is Savior, but also Lord. He is near to us, but also high above us. He is a loving Father, but also the Almighty God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are guarded here from praying like New Age mystics pray, saying, "Our Father who is in us", or from praying like the Gnostics and Hindus might pray, "Our Father who *is* us." Yes, our God has come close, but he is always distinct from us, always above us.

I think of that scene in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when the children meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver in Narnia and start asking them about this lion named Aslan, who is the Christ-figure in the book. One of the children, Susan, expresses that she would be terrified to meet such a lion.

Mrs. Beaver affirms her trepidation, saying, "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?", asked Lucy, the youngest of the children.

That's when Mr. Beaver cuts in: "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King I tell you."¹⁵ In essence that is what Jesus tells us when he teaches us to pray like him to our Father in heaven. We are not praying to a safe God. But he is good. These two things must always be held together. As John Calvin once put it, "[The Lord's Prayer expresses God's] fatherly love towards us and His unbounded power over us."¹⁶

That transcendence of God is further expressed when you realize that a literal translation of this phrase is, "Our Father in the heavens." The word is plural in the Greek, and it's curious to me why most translators make it singular. When prayed in the singular, as it usually is, the phrase has unfortunately come to mean, "Our Father, who is far away and coming much later..." That's what we think heaven is, a reality far away in both distance and time. But "heavens" plural has a much different meaning. Commentator Dale Bruner points out that the word can also be translated "skies". You know, the sky above us stretches about 60 miles from the eastern to the western horizon. That is our sky here in Sacramento. But there are other skies over other people and our Father in Heaven is Lord over

¹³ John 5:19

¹⁴ Mark 1:15

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Harper Trophy, 1950), 86.

¹⁶ Cited by Bruner, 297.

those skies as well.¹⁷ God is Lord over the sky in Gaza and Israel alike, though those are different skies, and right now full of violence. God is Lord over the sky in Russia, and Spain, and Ethiopia, and Thailand, just as he is Lord over the sky in America. God is even Lord over the sky in places like Afghanistan, even though there is only a very slim minority of the population there who acknowledge his Son as Lord.

It's one thing if God is the Lord of some far away place where we may one day meet him. I believe it humbles us even further, however, if the Father we pray to is Lord of all skies! As Psalm 33 puts it,

**The Lord looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.
From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—
he who fashions the hearts of them all
and observes all their deeds.**¹⁸

We pray to our Father, yes. But we pray to our Father in all the heavens.

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Before I finish, let me acknowledge one challenge here that may have been on your mind the whole time. When Jesus invites us to pray to God as our Father, he's employing an image or a metaphor that will be difficult for many of us to receive. Many people, in fact, have rejected this language for one of two reasons.

First, some people don't want to think of God as a man, especially in light of the fact that in much of history, and still in many places in our world today, patriarchal systems have given men, and men only, primary power and privilege.

And so, it's understandable that many people, especially women, hesitate to address God this way with male language. And yet, the Bible clearly teaches us that God the Father is Spirit, and therefore neither male nor female.¹⁹ In fact, when humans are created we are told that we were made in the image of God, *both male and female*.²⁰ There is something about each gender, and even the two complimentary genders together, which reflect God's image. And so in no way is Jesus teaching us here that our Father God is a man. We don't address God as Father because God is male, much less a domineering male. We address God as Father because the Bible, Jesus himself, instructs us to do so.

The second challenge many of us face here, maybe all of us to some extent, is that none of us have had perfect human fathers, my children included. Worse than that, some of us have had bad fathers, abusive fathers, absent fathers, unkind fathers, even unknown fathers. The word "father" does not conjure up good thoughts for many people. If your earthly father abused you, or totally neglected you, I doubt you still call him 'daddy'. Maybe you never did. And so it's a stretch to be told that you should now use that term for God.

I think what Jesus wants us to do, however, is to go at it from the other way. Instead of letting failed examples of human fathers discolor our view of God as a Father, we need to let the reality of God's fatherhood restore our image of what human fathers are supposed to be. And what kind of father is God? The best glimpse we have of this is Jesus, for when we look at the Son we are looking at the Father. Jesus himself declared, **"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."**²¹ So what does Jesus show us about our Father God? He shows us that our Heavenly Father is humble, and self-giving, and ever-present, always attentive, loving without condition, gracious, kind, gentle, hospitable, faithful, generous, and absolutely committed to whatever is best for us, his children.

When it comes to the fatherhood of God, we need to let scripture reinterpret our experience rather than reinterpreting scripture through our experience.²² As commentator Wesley Hill puts it, "

Any picture of God as 'Father' that leads us to think in terms of domination and cruelty rather than of humble service and unending love is not a true understanding of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'who loved [us] and gave himself for [us].' (Galatians 2:20)

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This morning I want to invite you to do with me what we all have been encouraged to do, which is to take one part of the Lord's Prayer and, like we would with an empty branch on a Christmas tree, take some time to decorate it as the Spirit leads us. Our empty branch this morning is the address Jesus gives us, "Our Father in heaven..." That's enough. There is enough here to pray for a lifetime.

We'll start by just taking a few minutes this morning. As we go to prayer let's be reminded of who it is we are addressing. This is our Father. Jesus' Father, my Father, your Father as well. He's in heaven above us,

¹⁷ Bruner, 296.

¹⁸ Psalm 33:13-15

¹⁹ In John 4:24 Jesus himself declares, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

²⁰ Genesis 1:27 declares, "So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

²¹ John 14:9

²² I'm indebted here to Wesley Hill, 16.

yes, but he is still and always our Father. And we are his dearly beloved sons and daughters. Let us approach him as such. Let us pray...

Father. Our Father who is in heaven. Our Father in the heavens. What a joy it is, an unspeakable joy, to be able to come to you as your beloved children knowing that you receive us as such, beloved sons, beloved daughters, favored, accepted, welcome into your gracious presence no matter what state we are in.

In these moments of silence, Father, help us be still and simply receive your love. Help us know that we are loved with the same love you have for Jesus. We will never understand this...help us simply receive this.

We praise you God, our Father. We praise you God, the Son. We praise you God, the Spirit who is Holy. We worship you as one God but stand in wonder at the mystery of your revelation to us as Father, Son and Spirit. We see in you love most of all, a love which has always been there, will always be there, and never diminishes. That you would adopt us into this circle of love is something we will never understand. How stunningly great is the love that you have shared with us and bestowed on us, that we would be called your children. And that is what we are! Rooted and established in this love, Father give us the power – and not only us but all your people – to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love we know through Christ, to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that we all may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

We pray for those among us who struggle to know your love, who simply cannot believe that they are loved like this, especially by a holy God who knows everything about us, the worst of the worst. Father, speak tenderly to that person in these moments of silence, in whatever way will be understood, communicate your enduring love. Assure that you will never forget, never cease to care, never reject, never fail to forgive and show mercy, never be distant, never abandon.

Father, as we receive your love, receive our praise. You are our Father, but you are our Father in the heavens, over all the skies. You are Lord over America, the only one who is sovereign over this nation, the only one who knows our future, the only one who should be worshipped, the only one who is our hope. And what is true of America is true of our whole world. Where there is blessing in this world, Lord, blessing and abundance and peace and prosperity, we know that you are the giver of these gifts and we thank you. Where there is pain in this world – profound scarcity, brutal and unending violence and hatred, deepening divisions among people who should love as they have been loved – we know that you are the only one who can and will make things right. Give us a heart for this world of ours. You are not just my Father. You are our Father.

Teach us to pray, Lord. Teach us to pray like Jesus prayed. We come to you as our Father in the heavens. Everything else we pray to you, we pray to you, our Father in the Heavens. All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 6:9-13 again. Why do you think that Jesus encourages us to begin our prayers by addressing God as Father? What changes when you realize he uses such a familial and intimate term as “Daddy”?
2. Do you think of God as your Father in Heaven? How has that been an easy or encouraging way to think of God? How has it been difficult?
3. What gives us the right to call God our Father? What is the importance of realizing our sonship or daughtership before God at the outset of our prayers?
4. When you hear that the literal translation of the prayer is “Our Father in *the heavens/the skies*” how does that change the prayer for you?
5. Go through the rest of the prayer and consider how things change when you remember you are praying to a God who is our Father in the heavens? For example, how does this change our prayers about keeping his name holy, praying for his kingdom to come, asking for daily bread, and so on?
6. J.I. Packer says, “Drab thoughts of God make prayer dull.” What do you think he means? Do you agree?
7. After considering this message, what is one way that you will pray these words differently from now on?
8. Take time to “decorate this branch” of this opening part of the Lord’s Prayer. Take at least a few minutes to expand “Our Father in heaven” in specific ways as the Spirit leads.



Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.

Is God really our Father? How can this be?