

The School of Prayer
Part 3 – The Prayer Before All Prayers
Matthew 6:9-13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 21, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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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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“Our Father in heaven, hallowed by thy name.” Who talks like that? Isn’t this one of the most confusing parts of the Lord’s Prayer? It has been for me. Other than when you pray this prayer, are there other times when you pray for God’s name, or anything frankly, to be hallowed? What are we really praying here? What does “hallowed” even mean?

The only other time we use this word, or a version of it, is on October 31. “Halloween” and “hallowed” come from the same root word. The word “Halloween” is a derivation of “Allhallows Even”. That’s an older way of talking about the evening before All Saints Day, a traditional holiday in the Christian year when the church commemorates those saints, or holy ones, who have gone on ahead of us. And here we get at the root of the word. “Hallowed” in the original Greek is the word *hagiazō*, which literally means, “to make holy”.

When something is hallowed, whether it’s a place, or a person, or a day, or a name, that thing is holy, set apart, venerated and revered, even treasured and loved above others. Holy things are not common things, but unique and extraordinary things. The word is closely associated with the Old Testament word for “glorify”, which literally means “weighty” or “heavy”.¹ You might say that something hallowed has gravitas. You don’t take it lightly.

With that in mind, notice that after teaching us how to address God in prayer - as Father, our Father, the one in the heavens - this is the very first thing Jesus tells us we should *ask from* God when we pray. You see, this next part of the Lord’s Prayer is not praise, but petition. In fact, the whole rest of the Lord’s Prayer is a list of petitions, things we are asking for God to do or give. Beyond that, notice that the first several petitions are not about us. Before we ask God for things *we* may want, for bread, forgiveness and deliverance for ourselves, we are to begin by centering our prayers on that which God wants. This is a corrective to our natural self-centeredness. God matters more than we matter, and so “Thy” is the key word in these first petitions. When we start making requests of God, we don’t begin with *my* name, *my* kingdom, *my* will, but *Thy* name, *Thy* kingdom, *Thy* will.

So as we focus today on this first petition to God, understand that Jesus is not teaching us here to *praise* God’s hallowed name, but teaching us to ask God’s name to *be made hallowed*. And by teaching us to pray like this, Jesus is suggesting that God’s name, as things stand now, is not holy, not sacred, not weighty. In heaven it is, and always has been. But not here on earth, at least not in every corner of the earth. Obviously, part of the problem is that there are many instances where God’s name is used flippantly, even as a curse word. But it’s more than that. You see, a person’s name is more than just the spoken sound of the name itself. Your name signifies your character, your reputation, your standing with others. If I tell you that my name is been tarnished, I’m not just talking about the way some people might have made insulting nicknames out of the name Chapman, which plenty of people did when I was younger. You can use your imaginations. No, when I say my name has been tarnished, I’m telling you that my character has been tarnished, my reputation damaged.

In the Hebrew world names were never just names, as they often are in our culture.² We named our older son, Noel, simply because we liked the name. The name “Noel” literally means “Christmas”. Think of *The First*

¹ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 298.

² I’m indebted to Dallas Willard here, *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper, 1997), 258-259.

Noel. So people are often confused when they find our son, Christmas, was born in February. This would never happen in ancient Israel. The name always spoke to the reality of the one who bore that name. For example, the name Adam derives from the word for “soil” or “earth”. Eve literally means “source of life”. Again, the name speaks to the reality of that person who bears it. In fact, God often changes people’s names to declare a changing reality in a person’s life. For example, the name Abram means “exalted father”. But when God calls Abram to be the father of a future nation of his chosen people, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, which means “exalted father *of multitudes*”.³ What that means is that if you failed to honor Abraham’s name, you were dismissing or degrading his very identity and purpose in life.

All this begs the obvious question. What is God’s name, which we are praying will be hallowed in this world? Well, in Exodus 3, God meets the fugitive Moses one day in the wilderness as he is tending his sheep. Many of you know the story. God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and tells Moses to go down to Egypt and command Pharaoh to set the enslaved Israelites free. Moses, as you may remember is hesitant. It’s a big ask. At this point he doesn’t really know God very well. He doesn’t even know God’s name. So naturally, he says to God, **“If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”**⁴ And it’s then and there that God first reveals his name to humanity. **“I Am Who I Am”**. That is God’s name. It can also be translated, “I Am What I Am”, or “I Will Be What I Will Be”. **“This is my name forever,”** God declares, **“and this my title for all generations.”**⁵

This is where we get the name Yahweh, which is sometimes translated Jehovah. Biblical Hebrew has no written vowels, so the name looks like YHWH, which are almost the same letters used in the name God gives to Moses. This is the most hallowed name of God, so sacred that ancient Jews would never speak it or write it. In many modern English translations we echo this reverence by inserting the name LORD in all capitals when we come to Yahweh in the Old Testament. “Lord” means “Master” or “Sovereign”. You may have noticed this in the translation we use here at Faith. Psalm 23:1 reads, **“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”** That’s the name Yahweh in the Hebrew, more hallowed than any other name.

But not only is this name of God hallowed, it is full of mystery. If a name is given to speak to the reality of the one who bears the name, how does “I Am Who I Am” speak to the reality of God? It’s a name and a non-name all at once, which means that God is likely saying to Moses, “You can know my name, but don’t think that means you will ever fully comprehend me. I am free to be who I will be. I exist and always have existed.” This name makes God known, but also keeps God beyond our human categories, always somewhat elusive and unfathomable.⁶ If nothing else, the name of God humbles us before him.

Which brings us back to the petition. Does God’s name, and the One it points us to, have this effect on the world today, this effect of humbling us all before him? In some places, yes. But in many places it does not. In many parts of our world, God’s name isn’t even known at all, and it can’t be hallowed if it isn’t known. In other places, God’s name may be known, but it has been tarnished, his reputation and character twisted and deformed. Renowned British atheist, Richard Dawkins, famously said not long ago,

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.⁷

Not everyone, of course, goes that far to smear the name and reputation of God. Many more who believe God exists often think of him as distant and inattentive to us and our needs, or harsh and condemning when we fail to meet his expectations. Some treat both God’s name and existence casually, saying that they believe in his existence, but then turning around and living their lives as if he didn’t, functional atheists who at best only turn their attention to God when trouble comes. It’s in light of all this that Jesus teaches us that the first thing we should ask from God when we come to him in prayer is that his name would not only be famous, but rightly hallowed, that this whole world would humbly revere God for who God truly is, treasured and loved above all else by all people.

Jesus puts this petition first before all the other petitions because it is the most important petition of all, not only in the Lord’s Prayer, but in life. It is the prayer before all prayers. And yet, I’m guessing that

³ See Genesis 17:5. Other great examples of this in scripture are Jacob becoming Israel, Simon becoming Peter, Saul becoming Paul.

⁴ Exodus 3:13. This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁵ Exodus 3:14,15

⁶ I’m indebted here to Wesley Hill, *The Lord’s Prayer: A Guide to Praying to Our Father* (Lexham, 2019), 22-23.

⁷ Source unknown.

before today most of us wouldn't have named this as the most important prayer request. If I'd asked you yesterday, "What is the most important thing we can ask of God?", would seeing his name hallowed have been your answer? And yet it should be, because this request touches on the deepest need in human life. As pastor and writer John Piper puts it, "This is the most important prayer to the most important person in the universe to do the most important thing in the universe."⁸

You see, we are all hallowers in this world. But many of us persist in being misguided hallowers. In other words, every human being is hard-wired to worship, to look to something to bring him or her ultimate identity, security and meaning. God is supposed to be the one to whom we always turn, but too often we turn elsewhere. We look to our own reputation, another person, material wealth, pleasure and comfort, the success of our kids. Remember that an idol is any good thing you are trying to make into an ultimate thing.⁹ Pay attention to your prayers, especially to the things you ask God to do or give. The plain fact is that most prayers by most people are prayers asking God to hallow what we want to hallow. If, for instance, most of your prayers center around the well-being of yourself and those you love, instead of beginning and centering yours prayers on the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's kingdom, and the realization of God's will, then it's likely that the well-being of yourself and those close to you is what you most cherish and revere in this life.

Ironically, this is a critical, even deadly, mistake, because our well-being actually depends on God's name being hallowed above all else in our lives. Let me show you what I mean. In his small but profound book on the Lord's Prayer, theologian J.I. Packer points out that this first petition of Jesus' prayer is asking for three things.¹⁰ First, when God's name is hallowed in this world, all people recognize that every good thing we have in creation is a good gift from God's hand. Not just the so-called religious parts of life, but Mondays as well as Sundays, beauty, sex, nature, children, arts, food, games, along with theology and church life. All of it, our very lives, is a gift from God.

Second, when God's name is hallowed in this world, all people praise God for the redemptive work he has done through his Son, Jesus Christ. God has extended salvation to all people because we could never save ourselves. We are forgiven in Christ. We are made

alive forever in Christ. God's name should be eternally hallowed for what he has done for us through Christ.

Finally, when God's name is hallowed in this world, all people will recognize that he has ordered all things in creation for our ultimate good. God not only created this world, and redeems this world, but also is the best one to manage this world. He knows how life works best in this world. When people hallow God's name in this way, they trust God, they obey his Word, they follow his leading in all things. Sadly, this has been our challenge from the beginning. God places Adam and Eve in the garden and gives them everything they need to flourish in life, mainly his constant, loving presence. He only forbids them one thing, commands them not to eat from one tree in a garden of endless trees. And when evil slithers into the garden to tempt us, what is the lie we are told? Essentially, we are told that God can't be trusted, that he's trying to keep something from us, that he doesn't really know how to manage this world. Tragically, it's a lie that has been believed ever since.

And yet, if and when you come to hallow the name of God, remembering that the name is not just the name but the person behind the name, you live in a place of constant gratitude and humility, recognizing that every good thing in life is a gift from God, and that the greatest gift is the gift of life we have in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. But it's not just gratitude. It's also obedience. To hallow God's name is to trust God and obey him even when what he is telling me to do or not do is contrary to my desires, or even makes no sense from my perspective. This is why the Bible declares, "**The fear of the Lord** [you might say, the hallowing of the Lord] **is the beginning of wisdom.**"¹¹ The two always go together. Once we revere God for who he truly is, rightly hallow his name, we become willing to trust him in all things because we believe he has ordered the world for our well-being. That makes us wise.

One of our creeds, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, is a list of 107 questions written by English and Scottish theologians in the 17th century to help the church learn and declare the truth of the Christian faith. The very first question is the most famous.

Question: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.¹²

⁸ John Piper, "The Most Important Prayer Request in the World", *Desiring God*, March 26, 2009. Read the full article at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-most-important-prayer-request-in-the-world>

⁹ I'm borrowing this definition from Tim Keller.

¹⁰ J.I. Packer, *Praying the Lord's Prayer* (Crossway, 2007), 41-46.

¹¹ Proverbs 9:10

¹² Read the full Catechism at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/wsc-english1.pdf>

Notice that we don't have *two* ends in life, to glorify God first, and then enjoy him forever as well. No, these two go together as one united purpose. As we glorify God, hallow his name, we simultaneously find that in doing so we are best able to enjoy God and the life God gives us. As Packer puts it, "God's chief end, purposed in all that he does, is his glory, and he has so made us that we find our own deepest fulfillment and highest joy in hallowing his name by praise, submission and service."¹³ God is not a sadist. He doesn't require us to hallow his name because he needs the ego boost, or likes to be the center of attention. God does so because he loves us and knows that since he is the center of all life, life will go best for us when we place our lives in his hands. It's what any good and loving Father wants for his beloved children, that things go well for them.

Again, this is why the hallowing of God's name is the first and primary petition Jesus gives us to pray. As Christian philosopher, Dallas Willard, points out, "Nothing will go right in the world until the greatness and goodness of its source and governor is adequately grasped."¹⁴ Until God's name is hallowed, the human compass will always be pointing in the wrong direction.

So whose job is this? Who is responsible for making God's name hallowed? Let's be clear that Jesus is teaching us here to petition *God* to make this happen. We are not praying, "Help us make your name hallowed", though that certainly is a prayer we might pray elsewhere. The prayer here is a humble plea for *God* to do the hallowing. If you want to use us, Lord, to make your name famous and revered, we are ready to be used, and certainly don't want to stand in the way of this. But whether or not you use us, one way or another would you see to it that your name is hallowed. Use your infinite power, your wisdom, your love to stir up billions of hearts in this world to admire you and prize you above all things.¹⁵ As the 4th century bishop, Hilary of Poitiers, once put it, "Leave to God the privilege of knowing himself; for it is he only who is able to bear witness [to] himself who knows himself by himself alone."¹⁶

I love how this paraphrase of this first petition by pastor Drew Hunter gets to the heart of this. This is one way to decorate this branch of the Christmas tree, as we have been talking about doing as we go through this prayer.

Father, would you cause yourself to be regarded as holy? Would you let people see you for who you are so that they no longer disregard you? Would you bring about an ever-increasing esteem of your great name among the nations? Would you show your great character so that people everywhere might know you and overflow with thankful hearts for all that you are and do?¹⁷

Our heart behind this prayer should of course be love. Love for God, that he would be adored and worshipped, as he ought to be adored and worshipped. But also love for others around us in this world, all others. If we truly have the heart of Christ in us, our hearts will break for those who do not hallow God's name because we know that in choosing to hallow something else in life they are chasing an empty idol that will ultimately turn on them in the end.

I came across the story this week of Cathy Boone, an Oregon woman who died in a warming shelter in January, 2020, after struggling for years with mental health issues and drug abuse. Tragically, she knew of no resources to battle her demons and save her life. Even more tragically, when her mother died in 2016 she left Cathy an inheritance of nearly \$900,000, but Cathy never had any idea that this fortune existed. Her family took out newspaper ads, even enlisted the help of a private investigator to find her, but they never could until it was too late. She died alone in poverty unaware of the tremendous resources which had been placed at her disposal.¹⁸

So many people in our world live so unaware of an infinitely greater inheritance that has been offered to them by a Father in heaven who loves each one so absolutely unconditionally that he has gone to great lengths, even the grave, to bring each one home. So many struggle in life, never sure why the things they choose to hallow never quite deliver in the end. If we have any love at all for our neighbors in this world, we will always make this our first petition to our Father in the heavens, that he would make his name hallowed in the hearts and on the lips of all people.

And by the way, as we pray this petition to God, over and over and over again, we pray with confidence because we know that God will one day answer this prayer beyond our wildest imaginations. Jesus would not teach us to ask his our Father for something that our Father is not ready to grant in his time and in his

¹³ Packer, 46.

¹⁴ Willard, 259.

¹⁵ I'm paraphrasing Piper here.

¹⁶ Cited by Bruner, 299.

¹⁷ Drew Hunter, "The Most Important Neglected Prayer", *The Gospel Coalition*, January 7, 2015. Read the whole article at

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-most-important-neglected-prayer/>

¹⁸ Jenna Romaine, "Woman Dies Homeless Unaware of \$884K Inheritance", *Changing America*, June 4, 2021. Read the article at <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/poverty/556898-woman-dies-homeless-unaware-of-884k-inheritance/>

way. That would be cruel. There will come a day when God's name will be hallowed in all the earth. Isaiah 45:22-23 captures this eventual reality as well as anywhere in scripture:

**Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn;
from my mouth has gone forth in
righteousness
a word that shall not return:
"To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear."**

Until that day, let us not grow weary in joining Jesus in his prayer that the name of our Father in the heavens be hallowed.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage from Matthew 6:9-13 again. In the past when you have prayed, "Hallowed be your name", what is it that you have imagined you are saying to God?
2. After considering the message and thinking more about this part of the prayer, in your own words describe what you now think it means to hallow God's name.
3. Why do you think Jesus makes this the very first petition (i.e. request) in the Lord's Prayer? Is this really the prayer above all other prayers?
4. Think about the prayers you normally pray. What tends to be the focus of your prayers? What does this teach you about what you 'hallow' most?
5. Do you think God's name is in good standing these days in the world? How about among the people you know? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. In what particular part of the world are you feeling especially burdened to pray for God's name to be made holy?
7. Why is it ultimately only God who can make his name hallowed?

8. What is the main thing that Jesus has been teaching you? How will that change the way you think and/or live?

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



What do we mean when we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be your name"?