

Our Father in Heaven

Matthew 6:7-9a

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Praying is, you may have noticed, difficult. And praying well is very difficult. We have already seen that Jesus warns us not to pray to be seen and applauded by others. He warns us against showy, self-aggrandizing forms of prayer – against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

Here, continuing in Matthew 6, he takes up an additional problem in prayer, and then gives us explicit direction on how to pray. This section of the SOM is a magnificent gift because it is Jesus' most direct and practical instruction to us on how to pray. And so, Lord willing, we will be taking our time, moving through it slowly. Today we will make two points: The Pagans (vv. 7 and 8), and the Preface (v. 9ab).

I. The Pagans

First, then, the pagans: V.7: and when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Hypocrites within the religious community – have already been addressed - they like to look pious to others when they pray. Pagans have another problem. They babble and heap up words thinking that will enable their prayers to be heard.

Now, before we look at what Jesus has in view, let's first say what he is NOT condemning. He is not condemning praying for a sustained period of time, for he himself did that. In Luke 6 he prays all night long. He is also not condemning *any* form of repetition, for in the Garden, he asked three times for the cup he was facing, to be removed from him. Nor is he condemning persistence and endurance in prayer. In fact, he told the parable of the persistent widow to teach us never to give up in petitioning God.

What he is critiquing is a kind of praying that reflects a pagan view of God. Nothing unveils a person's vision (doctrine) of who God is more than their prayers. And pagans babble, thinking they will be heard for their many words (much talk). That is, they heap up phrases, they engage in meaningless repetition, thinking that the length, the sheer volume of words, will move the hand of their god or gods. Their prayers are like magic mechanical incantations

(techniques) which, they think, if repeated often enough, will provoke the deity to act.

Jesus, then, is condemning the use of length, of babbling (the actual word means something like stammering) and repetition in prayer as a form of manipulation: The idea that the longer the prayer, the more effective it is. Often this involved whipping oneself up into a frenzy or seeking some sort of ecstasy. The prophets of Baal pray this way in 1 Kings 18, for hours, limping around, cutting themselves, and calling up their god. It turns prayer into magic. It engages the mouth – maybe even the body - but not the mind.

People who do this have forgotten the exhortation of the book of Ecclesiastes: God is in heaven and you are on earth, therefore let your words be few. This form of pagan praying stems from a pagan view of God: A god who is impersonal, and who cannot be addressed in a relationship of loving communion, but who is rather bizarrely impressed by our wordiness and bloviating. A god who is like mortal man, who needs to be informed and advised and pressured, who needs his arm twisted to act. We are not to be like the pagans, v.8 says, because our Father knows what we need *before we ask him*.

Notice it's not, as our corrupt minds always seem to want to say, your father knows what you need-- THEREFORE don't ask him. The logic is: You Father knows your needs before you ASK – asking is expected to occur. But having a Father who already knows our needs, not an ignorant or unsympathetic or reluctant pagan deity, takes the pressure off, precludes the need to babble, and changes the nature of prayer. Just as in a well-ordered family, a father would know what his children need, yet he delights that they ask in confidence and trust, so it is with our Father. That is pagans – don't be like them.

II. The Preface

Our second point, then, is the preface. Verse 9: Having a Father who is already inclined to you, this, then, not the pagan way, this, then, is how you should pray. We then get the Lord's Prayer – really the disciple's prayer – the prayer the Lord left for us. This an actual prayer to use – in Luke's gospel Jesus says: when you pray, say this. Say these words. And, of course, it is also a general pattern, a guide, for prayer (Scaffolding for building the edifice of prayer). Guardrails for prayer. It has a simplicity and a clarity which is the exact opposite of pagan prayer. It's compact genius has been acknowledged by the church from the beginning.

Tertullian (200 AD) called it an abridgment (summary) of the entire gospel. Cyprian (a little later) called it a compendium of heavenly doctrine. The prayer itself consists of a preface, followed by six petitions. Today, we look only at the

preface, which is: Our Father in heaven. We will make three points here: The Father, Heaven, and Our.

Father

First, we pray to our FATHER. While the idea of God as Father is present in Judaism and in the OT (it is used 14 times in the OT), the concept comes to full fruition in Jesus who calls God Father some 60 times, and always addresses God as Father when praying (exception: cry of dereliction). He even uses the Aramaic word “Abba” – a term which probably does NOT carry the casual, informal idea of the modern word “daddy” - but it is a term which denotes intimacy.

Indeed, in the hour his greatest need, in the garden, Jesus combines the terms: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me, Yet not what I will, but what you will.” And here, in our text, remarkably, we are told to address God this way. Jesus has a unique relation with God the Father as the eternal Son, and here he invites us into the circle of love and intimacy that exists between the Father and the Son. And this implies, this teaches us that we are sons, or children, in the Son (he is the natural Son of God, we are, by grace, adopted sons of God). Galatians 3: In Christ, you are all children of God through faith.

Jesus’ father – his in a unique way – is, nevertheless, now, our father. And we must never lose sight of the joy, the sheer wonder of this. Behold! Look with amazement at: What manner of love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! As Jesus tells Mary Magdalene at the resurrection: Go instead to *my brothers* and tell them, ‘I am ascending to *my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*”

And this gives us the high privilege of prayer — of calling God, Father. This title, Father, carries within it, our full assurance, it bolsters our confidence, it conveys God’s love to us, his goodness, his condescension, his pity, his protection, his tender discipline when needed.

This word alone — Father — makes Christian prayer unique, and uniquely comforting. For he is the *Father* of mercies, and the God of all comfort.

Now, to be sure, praying to the Father, is a form of shorthand. It needs to be said, and we know from the rest of Scripture, that prayer is fully Trinitarian. We pray in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. The Spirit intercedes on earth, in us, with groanings too deep for words, and the Son, our advocate, our mediator, ever lives above for us to intercede, perfecting and presenting our petitions before the face of the Father. And thus, we too, in the Spirit, through Christ, cry out with him, Abba Father! The whole Sermon on the Mount, one scholar says, could be titled “what it means to call God Father.”

J.I. Packer, in his classic book, *Knowing God*, famously said: “You sum up the whole NT teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as a revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator.”

“In the same way, you sum up the whole of the NT religion, if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one’s Holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship, and his prayers, and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

That’s Father.

Heaven

Our second point here is “heaven.” Some Christians grasp the idea that God is our Father; that Jesus calls us his friends, but when they pray, there is a kind of casualness, an over familiarity, a distinct lack of awe and reverence. In the last generation or so, this has even been seen as the sign of real intimacy or authenticity....talk to God and listen to the casual reply.

But this Father is our Father IN HEAVEN. This speaks of his transcendence, his difference from any human father, his sovereign majesty, and his unbounded power, then, to hear and answer our prayers. God is in heaven and you are on earth, THEREFORE let your words be few. God, who is everywhere to be sure, dwells uniquely in heaven, a created realm, not the atmospheric heavens, not the cosmic heavens, but heaven itself. His personal throne-room, irradiated with the presence of his glory.

Flooded with the immediate light of his face. Filled with innumerable angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, the dwelling place of the spirits of the departed righteous made perfect, the place where Jesus is, and where God our Father, the Judge of all, holds court. Our Father is IN heaven. And he is not to be trifled with. Our God is IN heaven, he does whatever He pleased. And from that height, from his heaven, his heavenly temple, the omniscient and omnipotent One reigns: And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Prayer, then, is presented HERE, before this One. In the language of the Book of Revelation: The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. In the Spirit, through the exalted Christ, we too live and dwell there.

To say: Our Father IN HEAVEN, our heavenly Father, is also to confess our heavenly mindedness, our heavenly citizenship, our heavenly treasure, our heavenly destiny, our heavenly inheritance. Praying to this one is to create people who diffuse the fragrance of heaven itself. If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Already raised in heart and mind to heaven, we pray to our Father, the King of heaven, the judge of all. The combination of “Father” and “in heaven” is wonderfully captured by our opening hymn this morning: Immortal, invisible, God Only Wise. In the third verse:

Great *Father* of Glory, pure *Father* of Light Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight; All praise we would render, O help us to see: 'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee. That is our Father – in heaven.

Our

Third, and finally, OUR-- OUR Father. There maybe religions, or forms of spirituality, which can be transacted by individuals and their gods – apart from others (out in nature, on the golf course) – but Christianity is not one of them. It is intrinsically a communal, corporate thing. There is no severing of Christ from his church. There is no merely private Christian faith. Thus, Jesus did not leave us the MY Father. He left us the OUR Father. US. WE. OUR. Together. That is the atmosphere in which we pray, and which makes this prayer especially fitting for use in corporate worship.

Notice how these pronouns persist in the plural through the prayer: Our Father, Give US OUR daily bread, forgive US OUR debts, as WE have forgiven OUR debtors, lead US not into temptation, deliver US from evil. Even if we use it as a pattern for private prayer, which we should, we should never lose sight of the community, the needs of the family of God. Even in private, we are bound by, and bound to, the communion of the saints. To pray aright is to love the church. For in the church, Jesus is creating a new, indestructible, heavenly and eschatological family. There will be no marriage, nor any biological families in the age to come. There will be the church – the OUR, the plural, the WE of which the Christian speaks. For the One who taught us the OUR Father, is the one who said: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

This is but the preface of this extraordinary prayer. John Calvin called prayer the principal exercise of faith. Thus, the Lord’s Prayer shows us how to exercise our faith. This is what faith does. This is how it acts. It prays to this Father, who is in this place, that is in heaven itself, with this community of saints spanning heaven and earth.

Let us pray, then, not as the pagans, but in terms of this divinely given – simple, elegant pattern. This, then, is beginning, the root, the foundation of how you should pray. Our Father in heaven. Amen.

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