

This morning I am beginning a sermon series on prayer called “Lord, teach us to pray.” This title comes from Luke 11:1:

Luke 11:1 - One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Evidently there was something about how Jesus prayed that piqued their curiosity and led them to ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. I’m not sure what prayer means to you. Bow your head and close your eyes? Trying to stay awake? Loud and noisy shouting? Crying out for help in times of need? Repeating familiar lines? A waste of time? A mystery? Whatever your perspective, there are not many things in this world more important or powerful than prayer, so let’s come to the Lord afresh, asking Him to teach us to pray.

In Matthew 6, Jesus tells his listeners what prayer is and how to pray. I want to study this passage over the coming weeks in order to help us learn to pray well:

Matthew 6:5-13 - “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“ ‘Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’

In Matthew 6, Jesus gives them two examples of how not to pray before telling them how to pray. He tells them not to pray to be seen by men. And he tells them to not keep on babbling like pagans. I want to focus on Jesus' introduction to the Lord's prayer and then his first line - Our Father in heaven – this morning and share three things we learn:

1) Prayer is communication with God

Matthew 6:5-6 - *“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”*

This may seem basic, but according to Jesus, it isn't as basic as you might think. Prayer is not a show for others. It is not something that is done in order to impress others. It is communication with God. That is why Jesus tells them to go into their room, close the door, and talk to God. Jesus criticizes the religious people who pray so that others might see them as holy and spiritual. Jesus calls them **hypocrites**, the Greek word for actors. He tells his disciples not to pray in a way that is play-acting, going through the motions, making an external show of piety but is not engaged with your heart. It's not to be done for an audience of people. Prayer is communication with God.

So what is your private prayer life like? Who are you when no one is looking? That is what God sees. **Not that you can't pray in public, but even your public prayers should be like someone eavesdropping on a conversation between you and God.**

Robert Murry McCheyne – “What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is – and no more.”

Tell me about your relationship with God when you are alone and I will know what your faith is really like. Prayer is communication with God.

2) Prayer is not a technique or magic formula

Matthew 6:7-9 - *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray:*

'Our Father in heaven,'

Prayer is not a technique. It is not a magic formula. Prayer is not a transactional relationship like interacting with an ATM, where you enter the magic words and God is obligated to give you something in return. It is not a magic incantation that achieves results, some sort of Law of Attraction whereby you get the universe to send things your way. Jesus tells them that they will not be heard because of their many words or vain repetitions. In other words, the power of prayer is not in the words you speak or the order in which you say them. In fact, that is the irony of the Lord's prayer, that it has been turned into something where people think it's in the power of the words. It's not about babbling many words as if it were some magical incantation. Beware of teachers and books who try to sell you strategies and formulas that supposedly unlock the power of heaven. That's magic.

"I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief—only one sentence with four parts—and tucked away in the Bible, but I believe it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God." Bruce Wilkinson – The Prayer of Jabez

It is simply communication with God, from our heart to His. It's like Brian Fearon used to say: sometimes the shortest prayer is just, "God!" Sometimes all you can do is to just say "Help!" or "Thank you," but that can be enough. Just talk to God as if He were there. You don't need to use some pious preacher voice or speak in some formulaic way. Just speak to God.

One of the most memorable prayer stories I have ever heard was one I read in the devotional book *Streams in the Desert* Aug 17:

I went to America some years ago with the captain of a steamer, who was a very devoted Christian. When off the coast of Newfoundland he said to me, "The last time I crossed here, five weeks ago, something happened which revolutionized the whole of my Christian life. We had George Mueller of Bristol on board. I had been on the bridge twenty-four hours and never left it. George Mueller came to me, and said, 'Captain I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec Saturday afternoon.' 'It is impossible,' I said. 'Very well, if your ship cannot take me, God will find some other way. I have never broken an engagement for fifty-seven years. Let us go down into the chart-room and pray.'"

"I looked at that man of God, and thought to myself, 'What lunatic asylum can that man have come from? I never heard of such a thing as this.' 'Mr. Mueller,' I said,

'do you know how dense this fog is?' 'No,' he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.'"

"He knelt down and prayed one of the most simple prayers, and when he had finished I was going to pray; but he put his hand on my shoulder, and told me not to pray. 'First, you do not believe He will answer; and second I BELIEVE HE HAS, and there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.'"

"I looked at him, and he said, 'Captain, I have known my Lord for fifty-seven years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to get audience with the King. Get up, Captain and open the door, and you will find the fog gone.' I got up, and the fog was indeed gone. On Saturday afternoon, George Mueller was in Quebec for his engagement."

The power is not in the words, but in the person of God. Speak to Him clearly and directly. I know that personally, my conversion came when I began to talk to God as if He were there, 5 minutes in the car on the way to work and back. Prayer is communication with God from our heart to His. It is not about figuring out a magic formula or technique that unlocks heaven. That doesn't mean there aren't better ways to pray – this whole series is based on the assumption that Jesus teaches us a better way to pray. But this is not about giving you magic formulas to get what you always want. God is not a heavenly ATM.

3) Prayer involves both intimacy and reverence

Matthew 6:9-10 - *This, then, is how you should pray:*

*'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come...'*

Look at the terms Jesus uses: Our **Father** in **heaven**... your **kingdom** come – According to Jesus, **God is both Father and King**.

On the one hand, God is the King of heaven, and we must approach Him with reverence. He is not our heavenly buddy. We pray for His kingdom to come, His will to be done. We are not talking to an equal. We are talking to someone who loves us but who is above us and knows what is best for us and has the power to take our life in a second. We can not demand, we can not claim things he has not promised. It is not about our will and our kingdom, but His.

But He is also our Father. We are so used to calling God Father that we may not realize how revolutionary that is. There was a German theologian named Joachim Jeremias who researched the use of Father in Judaism, and found that there were no examples of someone addressing God as Father in either the Old Testament writings or the rabbinic writings until the 10th century. Father was never used as a direct form of personal address to God. In fact, Muslims do not call God Father either, but Lord. However, in every prayer but one of Jesus', he addresses God as Father. He was radically departing from tradition. Notice:

John 5:17-18 - *Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." ¹⁸ For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*

The Pharisees understood that he was making himself equal with God (John 5:18), saying that there was a sense of intimacy as the unique son of God. And the incredible thing is that we are also invited to come to God not just as Lord and King but as Father, not just with reverence, but with intimacy as well.

What is the significance of approaching God as our Father?

1) We can relate to Him as His beloved child

Some people might believe and teach that everyone is God's child, but Biblically speaking, that is not true. We are all God's creation, but we are not all God's children. But when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are adopted into the family of God.

Ephesians 1:4-5 - *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will*

And now, we can come to Him with intimacy:

Romans 8:15-17 - *For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory*

When you come to faith in Jesus three things happen. **Justification** – you are pronounced not guilty, perfect in the sight of God (God as judge). **Regeneration** – you are given spiritual life as He puts His Holy Spirit in you and gives you a new heart (God as surgeon). And **adoption** – you are adopted as His child (God as Father). We go from enemies under His wrath to children under His love. We call him Abba – poppa. **The words that the Father spoke over the Son at his baptism in Luke 3:22 – You are my Son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased – He speaks over us now.** You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. This is only by Christ's work that we can approach God as our Father. **This is why adoption is such a Christian thing to do.**

2) We have a heavenly inheritance

***Romans 8:15-18** - For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

Galatians 4:4-7** - But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, **that we might receive the full rights of sons.** ⁶ **Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."** ⁷ **So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Everything that is the Father's is ours. The promises, the riches, it is all ours. According to Romans 8, our inheritance is to share in the future glory with Jesus. We will suffer now, but we will receive glory later.

3) We have many brothers and sisters in Christ

***Matthew 12:46-50** - While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*

We pray “Our Father.” We pray that God would give “us” our daily bread. Coming to God as an adopted child is an acknowledgement that we have many brothers and sisters to pray for and remember before our Father. This life is not just about us.

4) We bring honor to God as we imitate Him

Just like our children can reflect on us as parents and on our family, as children of God we bring honor to our Father as we imitate him.

Ephesians 5:1-2 - *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

1 Peter 1:14-16 - *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*

Matthew 5:16 - *In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

We imitate our Father in love, in holiness, and in good deeds, bringing honor to him as we do so.

Jesus teaches us that prayer is not a show for others, nor is it about using magic formulas and techniques. At its heart, it is communication with the Father. We can come to Him not because of the words we use, but because Jesus’ death has made a way for us to approach The King of the universe not as a slave or subject but as His beloved child.

Hebrews 4:14-16 - *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then **approach the throne** of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Let’s approach in prayer with confidence that He is our Father who loves us and hears us.