

The Prayer of Jesus, Part I: “Our Father... Jesus’ Gift to His Followers”

A sermon by Pastor Steve E-M for
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Scripture Reading for the Day: Matthew 6:7-13 [NRSV]

OPENING

True confessions...(*Playful question about driving the kids to school or driving to the grocery store or even to church, getting there, and having *no recollection* of the drive? Like, thank goodness the car knew the way, cuz you have no idea how you got there!*)

Similarly, how many times have you prayed through The Lord’s Prayer, either on your own or in worship, and found yourself at the end without the slightest bit of awareness of what you just said? Like you planned your dinner menu for the entire week by the time you got to “For Thine is the kingdom...”! Right?!

That’s not a reflection on the prayer or the Lord who gave it to us, and frankly, it’s not even an indication of “spiritual sloth” on your part or mine. It’s a reflection of what the late Fred Craddock – preeminent preacher, professor, and NT theologian *emeritus* at Candler School of Theology warned against: Becoming so familiar with the Biblical text and traditions of the faith that the deeper truths that

should stop us in our tracks no longer even register on our conscious mind.

This sermon series is about undoing that with regard to The Lord’s Prayer – what I’m also calling “The Prayer of Jesus”, itself a recognition that the words “The Lord’s Prayer” have become overly familiar, commonplace, and routine.

We’ll be looking at The Prayer of Jesus phrase-by-phrase, even word-by-word at times, and considering alternate formulations that help us recover a sense of intentionality when praying the familiar words. So, let’s get started...

Word-by-word / Phrase-by-phrase: “*Our Father* [who art in heaven / hallowed be Thy name...]”

- ✓ *Our* – “our”, not “my” – There are important implications in that one little word for the nature of our connection with God and, therefore, how we look at each other. Faith with *this* God is a communal thing, not an individual thing, at least according to Jesus’ teachings as we have them here. That makes us brothers and sisters in Christ, intimately connected to one another in what Pastor Pete Scazzero – who with his wife, Geri, developed the *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship* approach to growth in Christian faith – calls routinely “the new family of Jesus”. And that has privileges and responsibilities.
- ✓ *Father* – What does this mean for us? For many “Father” is a term that connotes many beautiful, live-giving, live-affirming attributes; for others, it is a term that can trigger PTSD!

I had a mentor just after high school, a Roman Catholic priest who helped me in all the best ways to discern my call to ministry at the time. During one of my rants about the all-too-human shortcomings of the Roman Catholic priesthood, he told me, “Steve, don’t go into the priesthood and let it make you what it is. Go into the priesthood and help it be all that it can be.”

Likewise, I would suggest that we take this address for God – this gift that Jesus gave us and often made more intimate by using the Aramaic term, “Abba”, for God – “Papa”, “Daddy” – and allow it to elevate our view of all that fatherhood *should be* and *can be* rather than what it too often fails to be.

When I think of the best attributes of God-as-Father, I think of things like these, a few of which describe ideal motherhood as well:

- Creating
- Providing
- Guiding or Disciplining
- Forgiving and Restoring
- Nurturing
- Loving
- And in a mysterious way, even Protecting, which I don’t even pretend to understand, but which I believe I have experienced on more than one occasion.

ILLUSTRATION

A critical aspect of this notion of our having a common Father in God has to do with “family likeness”. I want to share an illustration of this from a meaningful devotional book I have used at various seasons of my life. [R. Job and N. Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All God’s People*, pp. 217-18.]

A year ago, I had a wonderful period of uninterrupted time with my mother. She is 83 years old. Mother had a new red dress made for the occasion, spent the morning at the hairdresser, cleaned the house, had coffee...[freshly made], and was all ready for my arrival.

We sat and talked like we had not talked for years – and like we might never talk again. She got out some of the old [family] scrapbooks and albums and entrusted to me a photo that is now one of my most cherished possessions. It is a picture of my father when he was my age. Years before, she had put it away to give to me at [just] such a moment. My eyes...[scoured] the photo for marks of the heredity we shared. I traced the lines and contours in my father’s face now evident in my own....

Have you...[ever looked for and found] the... [undeniable] marks of an emerging family likeness to your own heredity? [The Apostle] Paul’s code name, “fruit”, far from being archaic, is the flash of an eloquent symbol to remind us that all the graces and characteristics of God are to be modeled in the daily life and relationships of [God’s] children.

Are we doing it? Are we giving the world a symmetrical, authentic, fully-formed image of Christ? There is...[always] time. Spiritual growth is not a matter of chronology alone. It's a matter of spirit. Of heart. Of who you are to the next person you meet. In the next crisis you face. In the next moment you live.

– From *Radiance of the Inner Splendor* by Lloyd John Ogilvie

Our Father...

✓ *...who art in heaven* –

→ Yes, but not just in heaven; here in our midst, as well! (*Expound here a bit on the nature of the both-and of this God who is both transcendent and intimately present to us*).

→ Isaiah 55:8-9 gives us a Biblical image of the transcendence of God: “⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

→ And, at the same time, we're confronted with Philippians 2 and John 1 where we find that Jesus released his claim to divinity and took on human form, so that the very Word and Wisdom of God might dwell among humanity. That is a far cry from transcendence!

→ So, how about “Who art in heaven” being the possibility of a character description of God, i.e., what the Father is like, rather than a location phrase, i.e., where the Father dwells? We could say,

“Heavenly Father...” to get closer to what I mean.

→ Looking back at the Isaiah 55 passage, this need not necessarily be a message of aloofness and abandonment, but it can also be seen as one of hope, especially on the lips of Jesus in prayer, inviting us into a life changing relationship with this One. Far from despairing distance, this offers us the potential of being lifted from what can be base earthly existence to the fullness of life God dreams for us *by being intimately connected to and living through Him!*

✓ The (aorist) imperative in “hallowed be thy name”

→ The Greek here is very difficult to translate a 3rd person imperative and capture the force behind it. It is much easier as a 1st person declaration. An attempt: “Your name is sacred and must be held sacred by all!”

→ Psalm 46:10 in the NLT conveys some of the force of the imperative – “Be silent, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world.”

CONCLUSION

Not suggesting that Jesus' words need correcting, but if I were paraphrasing just this opening phrase with the intent of breaking the mold of familiarity so that I can't plan my dinner menu while praying this, I would say:

“Our Father...” – our creating, providing, guiding, forgiving, nurturing, loving God – who art in heaven

– and not just in heaven but here in our midst, as well – even your name is holy. It must be hallowed. It must be held sacred. It will be honored throughout the world.”

Amen? Amen!