

The World's Greatest Prayer: Hallowed Be Your Name

Pastor Jonathan Swenson, St Mark Lutheran Church, 03 February 2008

Well today we are starting a new sermon series focused on PRAYER. And this is a timely topic because there are a whole lot of people who live either in New England or New York -- whose prayer lives have really kicked into gear this week. Any of you plan to watch the Super Bowl today? Well, as one of your pastors, I have to tell you that God doesn't really care who wins the Super Bowl today... after all the Vikings aren't playing! But I **do** think God cares a WHOLE lot about the players, and the coaches and everyone watching, including you and me. And I say this because God is a God of love, and God cares about the people he has created. And one of the ways that God has chosen to show his love for humanity... is by giving us an incredible gift of communicating directly with him, through the precious gift of **PRAYER**. And so, for the next seven weeks, we're going to spend some time opening up that gift.

But here's a fact about prayer that you don't often hear expressed inside the walls of the church. The fact is this: MANY Christians *struggle* with their prayer life. Many of us do. In fact, it is not uncommon for people to feel *guilty* about their prayer life -- guilty that they don't prayer often enough (or at all), or guilty that they don't really know what to say, or that they can't keep focused when they DO pray. *And then, if you ever asked to pray out-loud, in front of a group, well, **that's even worse, right?*** "What *do* I say? How do I hold my hands? How many of those fancy church phrases do I have to use to make it sound holy enough?" It can be really uncomfortable, can't it? ***And, if you can relate to that struggle, you might just identify with this... take a look...***

Video Clip: Meet the Parents -- Table Prayer Scene.

Well, I think most of us can identify with Ben Stiller's character there, in one way or another? I won't ask you to raise your hands, but I'm guessing that the vast majority of us here this morning would love to have a deeper prayer life than we do. So, ***imagine this: Imagine if you had someone who was really great at this whole prayer thing -- a "prayer expert" -- who would teach you all you need to know to feel experience God more personally and more powerfully when you pray.*** Wouldn't that be helpful? Wouldn't you want to soak up everything you could from that teacher in order to more effectively communicate with God?

Well, here's the good news today. We *have* that teacher -- the GREATEST teacher who ever lived, in fact -- in the person of Jesus Christ. And 2,000 years ago, after noticing the deeply intimate and powerful connection that Jesus had with God through prayer -- 2,000 years ago this disciple got up the ***courage to say to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."*** (Luke 1:11) And in his response, recorded both in Matthew 6 *and* in Luke 11, Jesus launched into **the greatest teaching on prayer** that the world has ever known... .. and if you had been there to see Jesus give this lesson on prayer, it, it might have looked something like this...

MATTHEW 6 VIDEO CLIP – The Visual Bible, The Lords Prayer

And so, for 2,000 years, wherever people who love Jesus gather, they have prayed this prayer – from the earliest disciples, to the Apostle Paul, to St. Francis of Assisi, to Martin Luther and John Wesley, to Mother Theresa and Billy Graham to you and me today...**when people pray this prayer, they become more intimately connected with God.**

And so, for the next seven weeks, we are going to break this prayer down into its seven parts or “petitions” in order to help us more fully understand what Jesus intended when he told his followers to pray in this way. And this morning, we’re going to get started with the very first line. So, if you would, I’d like you to look up on the screen and say this part of the Lord’s Prayer with me . Let’s say it together...**OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME.**

Now, let me ask you this. What did you think about when you said that line just now? Did you notice the depth contained in those few little words? **You know, we often say these words so quickly that we miss three of the most important things that Jesus is teaching us here about how to pray.** But if we go back and focus on each little phrase of this introduction, we will immediately begin to open up and bring more depth to our prayer life because this one little line covers **three of the most basic areas of confusion or insecurity that a lot of us have when it comes to prayer** -- namely, the questions of the **WHO**, the **WHERE** and the **WHAT of prayer**. So, this morning, we’re going to take these questions one at a time...THE WHO, THE WHERE and the WHAT of talking to God in prayer, and as we do that, I think you will immediately have a deeper sense of connecting with God when you pray. So, let’s get started with the first one...

1) THE WHO OF PRAYER – WHO are we talking to when we pray? Look at how Jesus begins his prayer: **"Our Father."** A lot of people miss the significance of this opening line because they just aren’t focused when they begin praying the prayer. After all, one of the blessings of knowing this prayer is that we know it by heart... and can say it anywhere at any time. But the downside of knowing it by heart is that we can say it in a state of mindlessness, without really thinking about what we’re saying.

Let me give you an example of this...I’m going to ask you a series of questions, and you answer out loud just real quickly right away. A set of random questions... If it’s not a Pepsi, it’s a...(Coke). Next question: The tree that grows from an acorn is called an... (Oak). The vapor that rises from fire is called? (Smoke). The sound a frog makes is called a? (Croak.) The white of an egg is called the? White of an egg? (See, that’s what I am talking about... You just proved the point.) The white of an egg is not called a YOKE! Its called an EGG WHITE! Do you see the point? *It’s easy to fall into a routine that turns off our minds and puts us into autopilot sometimes...and there are often times when we fall into that trap with the Lord’s Prayer.*

And maybe it is exactly for that reason that Jesus invites us to get focused when we pray by starting with these words, "Begin by saying, "Our Father." So, say those two words out-loud with me once again. (OUR FATHER)... And then, stop right there, and realize that this is one of the most unique opening lines in the history of prayer...

"Our Father." *When you use a name, to begin a conversation, you make a statement about the nature of the relationship you have with the other person. That's why names are so powerful.* A name expresses the relationship you have. **You acknowledge a relational context.** You state how much closeness exists. And so, in a fairly formal relationship, you say Mr. or Mrs. If it's a friend, you call them by their first name. If it's a real close friend you might have a nickname. If it's a family member there might be a pet name that expresses the fact that this is a uniquely close relationship.

But what about the name, "Father?" I only have two people on this earth that call me **"father,"** and that single word probably gets my attention quicker than any other. If I pick up the phone and the first word I hear I hear is **"Dad?"** well, that establishes a context between me and the one who's speaking to me that is stronger than iron. *And everything else they say, any requests they have...any confession they have to make, anything else they say takes place within the context of the relationship that's expressed by that one word "father."*

Now there were records in the Old Testament of people using **the image** of a father to describe God. That had happened before. But there is no record of anyone ever coming to God in prayer and addressing him as "Father" until Jesus did it. And he uses a very tender word there, the Aramaic word, "Abba" which is a very tender word, something like our word **"DADDY."** But in Aramaic it's not just a word that little children use. It is a name that adults use as well to show intimacy with their father.

So when you pray, Jesus is saying, remember that you're talking to your "Dad." And when pray to God in this way, God's heart says, *"This is my son. This is my daughter. I love it when you call me Father. I love it when you set aside time to speak with me about whatever is on your heart. Maybe what we have to say to each other will involve sorrow. Maybe it will be about joyful things. Maybe you'll want to express thanks. Maybe you'll need to confess. It doesn't really matter. Once we're face-to-face, we'll get around to everything we need to. I'll make sure about that. But I love these moments when you come to me in prayer...because I'm your Dad! And I want to spend time with you."*

And so, Jesus, the master of prayer says, **"Start with the words 'Our Father' because that's the WHO of prayer."**

2) The next part of the prayer is about the WHERE question: Sometimes, we get caught up in the **"where" problem.** *Where is God located?* Often, when people struggle with prayer, it is because we think of God as being very far away, very distant from our lives. After all, the next part of the prayer is "Our Father, who art in **HEAVEN**" and for most people, HEAVEN is somewhere very far away -- very far above us. **But here's what you need to know...**In the Greek, the word that we translate in English as the singular word "HEAVEN" (Gk = "uroanos") is actually written in the plural version of the word: Heaven**S**. And what **difference does that make?** ...

Well, the word "heavens" in the New Testament is used in a variety of ways. It's used for the atmosphere. It's used for the sky we see when we look up... **But it's also used for the air -- the stuff that we breathe, for what's right around us.** It's

that close. And so, when Jesus prays, Our Father Who art in the *Heavens*...he is not really talking about a God who is somewhere far away – He’s actually talking about a God who is right at hand. Right here, right now, in this moment, like the air you breathe.

So, do something with me for a second, if you would. Just inhale very slowly a breath of air. Now let it out. And again, inhale and let it out...do you feel how it expands and fills up your lungs? Well, that’s something like the sense of the word for HEAVENS that Jesus is using here. But the point is this: when you say, "Our Father who is in the heavens," you’re not saying, "*Our Father from a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.*" No, you’re saying, "Our Father who is all around me...and even IN me...right here, right now, closer than the air I breathe. That’s the one to whom we are speaking when we begin our prayers. That’s the answer to the **WHERE** question.

3) Which brings us to the third area of prayer that this petition of the Lord’s prayer addresses, and that’s the "WHAT" question. After we’ve dealt with the WHO and the WHERE of pray, well then we’re not always sure of what God might be interested in or what it is appropriate to ask *for*.

Now, I want to be real clear. There is no concern of yours, no matter how small, that God does not care about. But it is important to notice that the first thing that Jesus tells us to pray for is that His name would be kept HALLOWED or HOLY in our lives. **"Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be your name."**

So, what is *that* all about? Well, first we need to remember that in the Bible, a *NAME* is never just a label for somebody. **A name, in Scripture, is always a reflection of the person that it expresses. It’s a reflection of their character and their identity.** So, when Jesus begins the prayer, "Hallowed," or "Holy" be your name, it is extremely significant.

Now, we don’t use this word much in our day, but "**HALLOWED**" means to give it the honor that it’s due, to recognize its worth – **to attach appropriate value to it.** In Biblical times, the primary name for God, YAHWEH, was considered so sacred that the Israelites were not even allowed to speak that name out-loud. It was considered so sacred and holy, that to speak it out-loud would somehow cheapen, or dishonor it.

But 4,000 years later, we live in a world where his name gets spoken casually, and blasphemed and profaned, at best, millions of times every day all around the globe. Often be we Christians ourselves when we casually respond to something with the phrase, "O MY GOD" without ever realizing what we’re saying. The most modern example of this I know, we talked about this at confirmation class the other night, is when we send e-mail or text messages back and forth with the three letters, "OMG!" – "Oh, my God" and in doing that, we make God’s name a casual and often sarcastic expression rather than the most sacred, the most holy of all names.

But Jesus says, "As you begin your prayer, remember who you are talking to...and make the first request in your prayer, **'Hallowed be your name.'**"

MARTIN LUTHER had a very helpful take on this, when he wrote his explanation to this first part of the Lord's Prayer in his Small Catechism. He wrote, "*GOD'S NAME IS HOLY IN ITSELF...BUT WE ASK IN THIS PRAYER THAT IT MAY BE MADE HOLY IN US.*" – In other words, Luther says, when we pray this part of the prayer, we are saying to God, "*God, help me to live with such an awareness of your love and your presence in my life...that not only my words, but also my actions and my attitudes reflect your holiness as I interact with those around me. Hallowed by your name in my life, Lord. May I represent your name well in the world.*"

And when you think about it in that light, it is a bit sobering, isn't it? To think that, for some mysterious reason, **God has allowed the holiness of his name on this earth to be bound up with the character and conduct of his people, you and me.** We are a reflection of the character of God in the eyes of a watching world. When you pray this part of the Lord's Prayer with THAT in mind, well then you realize the great responsibility we have... and the phrase "HALLOWED BE THY NAME" takes on a whole new level of significance as we pray it.

So that's the beginning of this ultimate prayer. The **WHO** -- our Father that we dearly love and who constantly delights in us. The **WHERE** -- that he's all around us, closer than the air we breathe. And the **WHAT** -- that this whole earth would come to treasure God and honor God starting with you and me.

And during the next seven weeks we want to encourage you to make these thoughts, and the rest of the Lord's Prayer, a part of your daily life. And here's one way we would like to invite you to do that. If you take a look at the insert in your bulletin for a moment, you'll see a way that you can use the Lord's Prayer as a framework in your private prayers -- during this series and beyond! Christians have done this for 2,000 years using the prayer Jesus taught us to pray as a kind of framework. So, as you can see from that outline in your bulletin, when you say "Our Father Who Art In Heaven," take a moment to just quiet yourself and remember who you're talking to. Recall some of the things we talked about today. And then as you say, "Hallowed be your name," take some time to worship God and praise his name, and then work your way on through the rest of the prayer as you see the suggestions given on that outline.

I can guarantee that if you'll do that, if you'll take the time to practice prayer in the ways listed on that insert, and in with the kinds of things we'll be talking about throughout this series, then seven weeks from now you will pray more effectively and experience God more personally than you may have ever experienced before.

And having said that, I would like us to put some of these things into practice right away this morning. In a minute, we're going to pray the Lord's Prayer as we always do at this point in the service. But this time, let's say this prayer a little differently...*Let's be thinking more deeply about what we're praying, and why we're praying it.*

And then, as you pray, remember that this prayer comes from the lips of Jesus, and when we speak it, it is an act of worship that deserves our best. **Would you please stand?** And so, we remember...that in the night in which he was betrayed...**WORDS OF INSTITUTION, INTO LORD'S PRAYER (ON SCREEN) and COMMUNION...**

PRAYING THE LORD'S PRAYER

Quiet your thoughts and focus them on God. Pray each petition of the Lord's prayer out loud, focusing on that part of the prayer in the ways described below...

1. ***"Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name."***
Take a moment to quiet yourself and remember who you are talking to. Take a moment to acknowledge God, to thank Him, and to worship and praise His name. Ask Jesus, once again, to be the Lord and leader of your life.
2. ***"Your kingdom come, your will be done."***
Trusting in God's love, kindness and wisdom, submit yourself to Christ's leadership in your life and in the world. Whatever prayer you are bringing to God in this moment, ask that God's will be done in and through that issue, situation, person or relationship.
3. ***"Give us today our daily bread."***
Ask God to help you with your daily needs. Name your specific requests ... first for others and then for yourself. Share your heart, thoughts and feelings, fears and concerns with God as you pray.
4. ***"Forgive us our trespasses..."***
Take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to help you reflect, specifically, on any sins that you need to have forgiven. Name those sins before God, and then ask God to take away your sins, trusting in His gift of grace through Jesus Christ.
5. ***"... as we forgive those who trespass against us."***
Ask God to soften your heart, and to help you let go of any anger, bitterness, or resentment toward anyone else. If there is unresolved conflict with someone, ask for wisdom in knowing how to handle that relationship.
6. ***"Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil."***
Ask God to help you make wise moral choices. If there is a specific ethical situation, issue or relationship that you are struggling with, name it specifically before God and ask for God's wisdom, discernment and strength.
7. ***"... and deliver us from evil."***
Ask God to protect you and those you love from any harm and any powers that may threaten your safety, health or well-being. Pray for his peace to prevail in the world.
8. ***"Yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory forever."***
Declare His power in your life, and in the world -- trusting that everything is possible with God.
9. ***"Amen!"***
Conclude your prayer humbly by saying "Amen" which means, "Yes, it shall be so. May your will be done in all these matters that I have just prayed about."