



TALKING TO OUR FATHER

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 6:7-15

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One thing I will always remember about Ray Stedman is the vast collection of poems, jingles and sayings he had memorized and from which he would quote at random. One piece I remember in particular was this little poem he recited once when he was preaching on the subject of prayer:

"The proper way for a man to pray,"
Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes,
"And the only proper attitude
Is down upon the knees."

"No, I should say the way to pray,"
Said Reverend Doctor Wise,
"Is standing straight with arms outstretched
And rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no, no, no," said Elder Shaw,
"Such posture is too proud.
A man should pray with eyes fast closed
And head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be
Austerely clasped in front
With both thumbs pointing toward the ground,"
Said Reverend Doctor Blunt.

"Last year I fell in Hodgekin's well
Headfirst," said Cyrus Brown,
"With both heels a-stickin' up
And my head a-pointin' down.
And I prayed a prayer right then and there,
The best prayer I ever said,
The prayingest prayer I ever prayed,
Was standin' on my head."

That is funny, of course, but it is quite profound when you think about it, because prayer is the highest expression of our desperation and our dependence on God. Once we realize the enormity what we are called to do as Christians, we are driven to pray. Prayer springs forth from us impulsively and instinctively in the face of overwhelming necessity. When we're pushed beyond our limits, frightened out of our wits, and pressed out of our comfort zone, we resort to prayer almost out of reflex.

We have to admit that we are always needy. We're inadequate, deficient, and desperately dependent on God. Without him we can do nothing—and prayer is the highest expression of that dependence.

It is startling to think that our Lord himself was a dependent being. In the incarnation he laid aside the independent use of his deity. His humiliation included taking on human weakness and ignorance. He was wholly dependent on his Father and never acted out of his deity. He had

no wisdom, no power and no righteousness of his own. He, like us, had to rely on God every moment of every day. He continually told his disciples: "I only do what I see the Father doing. I only say what I hear the Father saying." He also said to them: "By myself, I can do nothing."

And Jesus expressed that dependency in prayer. Prayer for him was the expression of a deeply felt need. Prayer was the environment in which he lived, the very air he breathed. In the midst of continual interruption, a full schedule, and people's needs and cries, he managed to maintain his communion with God.

His disciples finally realized that this was the secret of his life. One day they came to him, and as usual he was praying. When he had finished, they asked him: "Lord teach us to pray." They didn't ask him to teach them how to study or how to preach. They knew that the secret to his life was his relationship with his Father. That is why they asked him to teach them to pray. His answer to their request is the prayer that we will look at this morning in our study in the Sermon on the Mount. That answer is given in Luke 11, but Jesus often repeated the most important things, and that is what he has done here in chapter 6 of Matthew's gospel.

The disciples realized that for Jesus, prayer was a necessity. Praying was more than an occasional practice on his part; it was a lifelong habit, an attitude of mind and heart. Everything he did sprang from a life of prayer. It can be truly said that Jesus "prayed without ceasing." The disciples must have seen that prayer for him was not only necessary, it was also perfectly natural. He did not have to struggle or drive himself. Prayer was not an act of self-discipline; nor was it ever a duty, it was always a delight.

Jesus had no sense of reluctance to pray or that prayer was a requirement he had to fulfill. He never seemed to have to drag himself away from something in order to pray. Why was that? Again, it was because his actions arose out of an overwhelming sense of need. He simply faced up to the fact that without this relationship with his Father, what he did was a waste of time. He could put in hours of activity but it would accomplish nothing. And out of that deep, urgent sense of need, that awareness that he was but an empty channel, a vessel through whom the Father worked, arose his life of prayer.

The Lord's Prayer is a primer on prayer. In it Jesus provides a model of how we should pray, not what we should pray. This prayer, which is made up of six petitions, falls into two rather obvious divisions. It is highlighted by the use of two pronouns. The first three petitions have to do with God and his glory, and for these Jesus uses the pronoun *thy*: "Thy name, thy kingdom, thy will." The second three have to do with us and our well being, and Jesus uses the pronoun *us*: "Give us, forgive us, lead us."

Jesus begins his instruction on prayer with a warning. Matthew 6:7:

“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way:

‘Our Father who art in heaven, (Matt 6:7-9)

We have already seen that when it comes to prayer, one sin we must avoid is hypocrisy. Jesus now raises another thing to avoid in prayer, and that is verbosity, vain repetition or meaningless, mechanical utterances. This is to reduce prayer from a real and personal approach to God to a mere reciting of words. In some religions, people use what they call a “prayer wheel” on which they write out their prayer and then turn the wheel as fast as they can. They think that the more revolutions the wheel makes, the more times God will hear them, and therefore they have a better chance at getting him to answer their prayer.

The phrase “meaningless repetition” describes any and every prayer that is all words and no meaning, all lips and no mind or heart—a torrent of mechanical and mindless words. That would certainly include a mindless praying of the rosary in which nothing happens but a fingering of beads and a mere reciting of words. Jesus is referring to any kind of prayer made with the mouth when the mind is not engaged.

Some people think that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard. What an foolish notion! What sort of God would be chiefly impressed by the mechanics and the statistics of prayer, and whose response is determined by the volume of words used and the number of hours spent in prayer?

The essential difference between a Pharisee’s prayer, an unbeliever’s prayer and a Christian’s prayer lies in the kind of God we pray to. That is why this pattern prayer begins with a word of relationship: “Our Father.” It is essential to know whom we are praying to. Most of our prayer times involve immediately rushing into a series of pleading petitions that have to do with our problems, our needs and irritations. But this merely serves to focus our attention upon what is already troubling us, and we often end up more depressed or more frustrated than when we began. But Jesus shows us another way. We must begin with God. We must take a slow, calm, reassuring gaze at him, at his greatness and his eagerness to give, his unwearied patience and untiring love.

Jesus tell us to address God as (literally), “our Father in the heavens.” This is very important. It implies, first, that God is personal. He is as much “he” as I am “I.” Secondly, he is loving. He himself fulfills the ideal of fatherhood in his loving care for his children. Thirdly, he is powerful. He is not only good, but great. The words “in the heavens” denote not where he lives so much as the authority and power at his command as the creator and ruler of all things. The point is, God combines fatherly love with heavenly power, and what his love directs his power is able to perform.

When Jesus encourages us to call God “our Father in heaven,” he is not teaching the correct etiquette in approaching God; rather, he wants us to come to God in the

right frame of mind. Before we pray, we need to consciously remind ourselves who he is, so that we approach our loving Father in heaven with the right attitude of humility and confidence.

The word Jesus uses for Father is not a formal term. It was the common Aramaic word “Abba,” which children used to address their father. One New Testament scholar argues convincingly that Abba was the original Aramaic word on Jesus’ lips here, as it was in all but one of his prayers in the New Testament. That was the word he would have used to address his earthly father, Joseph. Everyone used this word, but no one used it for God. “Abba” meant “Daddy.” Jesus transformed the relationship with God into an intimate bond, and he taught his disciples to pray with the same intimacy.

This is to be the foundational awareness of all our prayer. Paul tells us in Galatians: “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’” The apostle repeats this in Romans: “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.’”

That God is our Abba-Father is a truth that we must cultivate for the health of our souls. This is one of the most healing doctrines in all of Scripture.

We are to pray to a Father who has a father’s heart, a father’s love and a father’s strength. The first and truest note of prayer must be our recognition that this is the kind of Father we are praying to. We must hear him and approach him as a child, in trust and simplicity, and with all the frankness of a child, otherwise what we are doing is not praying.

I must confess my own lack in this area. I lost my father when I was less than a year old. It has only been in recent years that I began to realize how hurtful that has been to me. It has been difficult for me to trust God as my Father. In fact, for most of my life I thought I did not have a father. My wife Kathy and I attended a retreat this summer in Colorado, and the man who was leading the retreat asked me to write a letter to my father. I tried to, but I just could not write it. I began to cry. Instead of living with the fact that I had lost my father, I was living as if I had never had one. For many of us, the lack of a loving relationship with a caring father has a dramatic effect on how we view God and how we approach him.

When we have taken the time and trouble to orientate ourselves towards God, and recollect that he is our personal, loving, powerful Father, then the content of our prayers will be radically affected in two ways. First, God’s concerns will be given priority (“your name, your kingdom, your will”); and secondly, our own needs, though demoted to second place, will yet be completely committed to him (“Give us, forgive us, deliver us”).

Let us look then at the first three petitions (verse 9):

“Pray, then, in this way:

‘Our Father who art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven. (6:9-10)

These first three petitions express our concern for God’s

glory in relation to his name, rule and will. If we imagine God to be an impersonal force, then he wouldn't have any personal name or rule or will to be concerned about.

Today, names do not mean very much; they are merely labels to identify people. We are more concerned with how names sound than what they mean. But in the Ancient Near East, a name was considered to indicate character; it corresponded to the person. This is especially true when it is applied to the name of God. For the Jew, God's name referred to the reality of God. So God's "name" is who he is. He is already "holy," but we pray that he may be hallowed, "treated as holy," because we desire that the honor he deserves would be given to him: in our own lives, and in the world.

'Thy kingdom come.

God has a plan—and Jesus Christ is going to rule in that plan. That is what Psalm 2 declares:

**Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the Lord
and against his Anointed One.
"Let us break their chains," they say,
"and throw off their fetters."
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
[Because he says]
"I have installed my King
on Zion, my holy hill." (Ps 2:1-6, NIV)**

God's program and his interests must be our first concern. But we often spend the bulk of our time praying about our programs and kingdom: "Lord, bless our program."

**'Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.**

Is God's will done in heaven? Is it done on earth? In heaven, nobody objects to what God decides. The only objection heard is on earth. And it is always among human beings, never among animals or nature. Nature always conforms. No one has ever seen a squirrel get up in the morning and say, "I'm tired of collecting nuts!" The retreat that I mentioned earlier was held in the Colorado Rockies, at an elevation of 8,500 feet. The beauty of it all was breathtaking to me. It was a testimony to the glory of God.

The will of God is "good, acceptable and perfect," because it is the will of "our Father in heaven," who is infinite in knowledge, love, and power. It is foolish to resist God's will, therefore, and wise to discern, desire and do it. What Jesus wants us to pray is that life on earth may come to approximate more closely life in heaven.

And so these first requests are a prayer of surrender. We are praying: "May my life be a source of delight to you; may your name be honored; may you have your rightful place; may your will be done in my life." This is what David prayed at the end of Psalm 19: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer."

The trouble is, we know there are great areas of our life that are not hallowed, where God is not reigning, where his will is not being done. We reserve certain places to our-

selves, privileged areas which we do not wish to surrender where the name of our boss or our girl friend or some other person means more to us than the name of God.

We are constantly being pressured to conform to the self-centeredness of our culture. We become concerned about our name (seeing it embossed on note paper, or defending it when it is attacked), about our own empires (bossing other people around and manipulating them) and about our own silly little will (always wanting our own way and getting upset when it is frustrated). But Jesus reminds us that our top concern is not our name, our kingdom and will, but God's.

The second half of the prayer moves from God's affairs to our own, as the adjective shifts from "your" to "our." Having expressed our concern for God's glory, we now express our humble dependence on his grace. Verse 11:

**'Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
[For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.]'**

"For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." (6:11-15)

Prayer by its very nature is requesting. It is not insisting or clamoring. We can't make any demands of God or make deals with him. We don't have to. We are coming to a loving Father, a friend. We ask, and then we wait with patience and submission until he gives us what we request, or something more.

Since God is "our Father in heaven," and loves us with a father's love, he is concerned for our total welfare. He wants us to bring our needs (all of them!) trustingly, to him: our need for food and for forgiveness, our need to be delivered from evil.

'Give us this day our daily bread.

Notice Jesus doesn't say our "cake." Bread symbolizes everything that is necessary to sustain life: food, health, shelter—the necessities, not the luxuries of life. Jesus wants us to be conscious of a day-to-day dependence. The word "daily" can be translated either "for the current day" or "for the following day." This is a prayer for the immediate, not the distant future. As A. M. Hunter comments: "Used in the morning, this petition would ask bread for the day just beginning. Used in the evening, it would pray for tomorrow's bread." The point is, we are to live a day at a time.

'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Forgiveness is as indispensable to the life and health of the soul as food is for the body. Sin is likened to a debt, because it deserves to be punished. But when God forgives sin, he remits the penalty and drops the charge against us. This prayer can be the healing salve for a fractured relationship. Jesus is not saying: "If you forgive, then God will forgive." He is saying: "If you won't forgive, then you are not forgiven." God forgives only those who repent; and

one of the chief evidences of true repentance is a forgiving spirit. If we refuse to forgive and have no desire to do so (not whether we struggle with forgiving; we are all in the same boat as far as that is concerned), there can be but one reason, and that is that we have never understood the grace of Christ. We are unforgiven ourselves.

We are never more like God than when we forgive.

'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil [this would be better translated "deliver us from the evil one."]

It is the devil who is in view here. He is the one who tempts us to sin, and from whom we need to be rescued. This petition is more concerned with overcoming temptation than avoiding it. Perhaps we could paraphrase this request in these words: "Do not allow us so to be led into temptation that it overwhelms us, but rescue us from the evil one." Jesus is implying that the devil is too strong for us, but that our heavenly Father will deliver us if we call upon him. This is what Paul was referring to in the passage from 1 Corinthians: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

This is a reminder to us to know the areas where we are weak, therefore, we ask God not to expose us to temptation that is too great for us to cope with. It is wise to know those areas. Every Tuesday I meet with a group of men who are not afraid to share their weaknesses and to ask others to pray for them. The men I am concerned for are those who say, "Oh, that's no problem for me. I can handle that." Those are the ones who get blind-sided by Satan. Remember the Scripture that says: "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall." Where? Why, in the very area you think you are the strongest, you are most vulnerable.

These three requests which Jesus models are beautifully comprehensive. They cover all our human needs: material (daily bread), spiritual (forgiveness of sins), and moral (deliverance from evil). When we pray this prayer we are expressing our dependence upon God for every area of life.

The Lord's Prayer is our model of Christian prayer. It is thoughtful, it is God-centered, and it is based on a correct

view of God. He is our Abba Father in the heavens. We need to remind ourselves that he loves us with the most tender affection; that he sees his children even in the secret place; that he knows all our needs before we ask him; and that he acts on our behalf by his heavenly and kingly power.

Let me close with a story that illustrates for me what Jesus is saying. Two of my sons play Pop Warner football. There are strict weight guidelines in all the divisions, and yesterday was the day when all of the players from the Peninsula are weighed and certified so they can play. It is a very big day for some of the boys who are close to the limit. Already they had been practicing for a month.

As the players on my youngest son's team came out of the gym, there was a lot of cheering and congratulating going on. I noticed that one of the boys on my son's team did not come out with the others. When at last he emerged, he was crying. A month ago, he was sixteen pounds over the weight limit. He worked very hard all month to lose the weight, and he thought he had done so, but he lost only fourteen pounds; he was two pounds overweight. As I saw him come out I wondered where his parents were. I thought, "Now is when a boy needs a dad. He needs someone to hug him, someone to tell him everything is going to be all right." But there was no dad to console him, no parents in sight. Although I didn't know him, I went over to him and hugged him and held him for a few moments.

As I thought about that, I realized that is where we all find ourselves. Morally speaking, we have all missed the mark. Despite our best efforts, we have failed. We didn't make the grade. We didn't make the right choices. We didn't make the team. But then we found that God was waiting for us, his arms outstretched to enfold us and say, it's all right. He has paid the price. He has cleansed us.

That is the God we worship. He is our Daddy, our Abba Father. He wants us to come to him, sit in his lap and tell him we love him and want him to have his way in our lives, to tell him our needs. It is there we will find love and forgiveness, and everything we need.

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I am indebted to John R.W. Stott for his excellent book, *The Sermon on the Mount*. I have borrowed extensively from his lecture series.