

Praying for Reign: Our Father in Heaven

Matthew 6:7-13

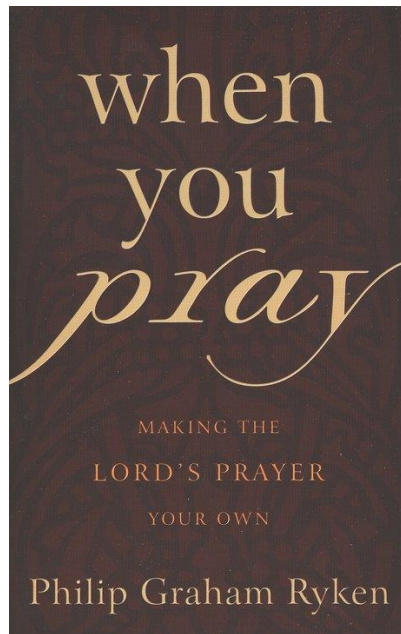
This is the first weekend of Lent -- so I want to start the season by telling you what is on my heart: I am longing for us all to grow deeper and more intimate in our daily experiences of God. As I've been meditating on this, I have become more and more convinced of one simple truth, i.e., that the key to us experiencing God more fully is prayer. We still have a lot to learn about prayer.

It's clear to me that the early followers of Jesus knew that they needed to learn to pray. So, one day, the first disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, teach us to pray (Lk 11:1)." I cannot imagine anyone who might teach us about prayer better than Jesus. Because of that, over the next six weekends of Lent 2018, we will be taking the course in prayer that Jesus provided.

Even as I say it that way, I am hit by the fact that what Jesus did was not like the kinds of courses I've taken or taught over the years. Jesus's response to the disciples' question did not contain all the requirements for passing the course that I include in a college course syllabus. Jesus didn't even tell us specifically what to pray. Instead, he said, "When you pray..., this is how you should pray." Or, "This is what prayer should be like." In doing so, Jesus provided a flexible pattern or framework for all our prayers. I love how Bishop Hugh Latimer, who was killed for his faith wrote over 450 years ago, "*Jesus's prayer is the sum and model for all other prayers. All other prayers are contained within and flow from what is found in the Lord's prayer.*"

If he is right about that – and I think he is -- then I am convinced that learning from Jesus's prayer holds the promise of being able to change your prayer life – of helping you live day by day in loving relationship to God.

When Jesus gave us this prayer, he chose his words very carefully. And, we will seek to be equally careful this Lent season to listen to Jesus's words and to learn from them. Of course, in the time we have in our services, we will not be able to deal with every matter that Jesus's prayer suggests. Because of that, let me recommend a book to you



Today, let's consider these words: *"This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven."* The foundational point I want you to grasp is that prayer is a family conversation. Let's start with the word "Father".

"Father" When we acknowledge upfront that God is our Father, we will discover that doing so changes everything about the rest of our prayer.

God was only referred to as "father" 14 times in the entire Old Testament. When it happened, the word father was used in a less personal way than we find Jesus teaching us to do. Before Jesus, God's people occasionally spoke of Jehovah as the father of the nation or the father of creation. But, nowhere in the Bible, before Jesus, do we find God called "our Father" as a part of a personal relationship to him. Jesus called God "Father" 60 times, and frequently, he did so when he prayed. It's clear that Jesus saw the personal fatherhood of God as the beginning point of Christian prayer. So, I want to start where Jesus started.

When Jesus prayed to God the Father, he was the first to use the more intimate term "Abba" when he addressed God. This was the word his first disciples picked up from him to begin their prayers. And, because it is the way Jesus taught his followers to pray, it has been the main way of entering into prayer by our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout history. Jesus alone was the "eternal, begotten son" of God as we know from John 3:16. But Jesus, through his death on our behalf, has made it possible for us to enter into God's presence as adopted children. You and I too know God as our "Abba" as Jesus did.

What Difference Does Praying to God as Father Make?

#1: Intimacy – *Know that God cares about you and loves you even more that you care about yourself. You can pour out your heart to him.*

Many religions seem to practice prayer as an impersonal way to get their deity to do what they want it to do. That's what Jesus takes on in v.7: *"When you pray, do not keep talking on and on. That is what people do when they do not know God. They think they will be heard because they talk a lot. Do not be like them (NIRV)."*

Jesus was aware that many religious people use many words or magic incantations to try to manipulate supernatural powers to give them what they want. But, to do so is to treat God as an impersonal force rather than as a person. So, Jesus taught us that you and I are to relate to God as a child does to a father. Look at his beautiful words in v.8: *Do not be like those who do not God. Your Father knows what you need even before you ask him.*

Sometimes, I think churchgoers are inclined to pray the way others do as if piling up more prayers, longer prayers, more emotional prayers might make God love us and care about us more. So, when you pray, begin by knowing that you are speaking to your Father, the one who knows you and loves you.

#2: Reverence – *Honor God’s name, seek his kingdom, and desire his will rather than your own.*

When you read the Lord’s Prayer, you quickly see that Jesus teaches us to start with God’s glory before moving to our good. In vv. 9-10, he told us to long for three ways putting God first in all things: 1) May God’s name be recognized as holy. 2) May God’s kingdom come, i.e., may he take control and bring about the peace and justice he alone can bring. 3) May God’s will be done – in our world, in Pasadena, and in our lives.

The Lord’s Prayer is not so much a prayer about getting what we want – though we surely are to speak with our Father about our needs and desires. It is much more a prayer about bending our wants toward what God wants. It is not natural for us to want someone else’s will to be done. By nature, we want our own ways.

And, let me say something here about this word Jesus called his Father, i.e., Abba. Many have spoken of how the name “Abba” denoted the relationship of a little child to its father. That’s true. However, Abba was also the word that adults used for their fathers. It’s almost certainly the word Jesus used when he spoke to his earthly father, Joseph, in the family carpenter’s shop. I called my father “Dad” both as a child and as an adult. It was a word that denoted my intimate relationship with him. But, it was and is also a word of respect for me. Indeed, it became more and more so the older I got and the more I got to know him.

I think we all have a deep longing for there to be the kind of Abba that Jesus says God is. We feel it profoundly when we feel threatened in any way. Jesus lived in this world and he knew how often people in this world feel fear or anxiety. He knew about those times in which we long to have someone who

cares, someone who knows us and loves us enough to put his arm on our shoulder and say, “Don’t worry. I am with you. I know where the dangerous places are and where the abusers lie ready to ambush. I will be with you.”

Jesus says, “I have come to introduce you to an “Abba”, one who knows you by your first name, who wants you to tell him all things that bother you, both great and small. Jesus taught us that, when we say “our Father”, we will find there is actually a caring ear hearing us and a voice ready to answer us. I think there is a deep yearning inside every human being for this to be so. Jesus tells us that this is the way God is.

We live in a world of shootings, sickness, battles and failures. Jesus is saying, “Everything you fret about is something my Father and your Father knows about. If God did not care, I would not be here among you, would I? The Father has sent me into the midst of your sin and sorrows because he loves you. He wants you to know that failure is not the end of your life. Sickness cannot rob you of anything that is eternal. He sent me so that you will know that even death has been defeated. He knows all this for he is your Abba.”

This is what we remember at Lent, i.e., that Jesus came sent by our Father and walked the path of suffering out of love for us. He suffered and died for us ultimately to remove all that causes pain and sorrow. He said, “The one who sees me sees the Father.” Jesus came to make us alive to the Father.

“Our Father” *The “our-ness” of Jesus’s prayer shouts out to us: “Give us...” “Forgive us...” Lead us not...” Jesus calls us together in this imperfect word to pray with and for one another.*

Those who have prayed and who now pray the Lord’s Prayer are very different from one another. Here at LAC, we celebrate the fact that before God is finished with his work, our global family will include all races and ethnicities, all nations and languages on earth. Indeed, the fact that God brings so many of those national origins, first languages, and people groups into our local church family is one reason why we commemorate things like “Spring Festival” in the way we do. What is important to some of us becomes important to all of us because we are a part of God’s family. In the Lord’s Prayer, we discover that, cutting across all our differences, we all are a part one single family fellowship. So, let me say it clearly to you today: We are all children of our Father in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls us together into this local church in the midst of this imperfect world for many reasons – but one of them is to pray together. We are to pray with one another and for one another. For what?

For Daily Provision – “*Give us today our daily bread.*” We’re supposed to intercede on behalf of those in our church family who are going through tough times financially. So, in prayer, we bring our own needs to God – but we also pray for others. And you should note this: I’ve found that, when we pray for others, we discover that we’re often the ones through whom God provides for the people we’re praying for.

For Daily Pardon -- “*Forgive us our sins.*” Some sins are not known by others in the church though no sin is fully private. In ways we often cannot discern, our “private sins” affect all those around us, including our church family. So, sometimes, we acknowledge that there are such hidden wrongs among us and ask for God’s forgiveness. What are ours? Greed? Prejudice? Envy?

And, as always in the Bible, Jesus says that the surest way to know we have experienced forgiveness is that forgive people always forgive others. “*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.*” Jesus’ point is that the family of God is to be a grace-filled people forgiving one another. This was so important to him that he followed his pray with these words in 6:14-15: *Forgive other people when they sin against you. If you do, your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive the sins of other people, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

For Daily Protection -- “*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*” This part of Jesus’s prayer is a plea for victory over temptation as well as for protection from the effects of the evil that permeates our world. It’s a prayer something like this: “Keep us from sin, Lord, and protect us from Satan and all the evil that he and this fallen world would seek to do to us, your children.”

So, Jesus taught us to pray together with our church family. And, as you know, now we have means that make it possible to communicate to others that we praying for them: social media, texting, even telephone! Is there a brother or sister in Christ now whom you know is struggling with a great trial – or is in the midst of temptation. Take time even now to pray for them. If you can. let them know when you are praying for them. God has brought us together into this family to pray for one another. We pray, “Our Father.”

“Our Father in Heaven” *God is not the same as earthly fathers. He is the blueprint of what a father should be.*

Now, I have to speak of some issues that come to our minds in this 21st C world when we read the Lord's Prayer. The first is that many, many who are in church today have not had good experiences with your fathers on earth. The second has to do with how we are seeing that so many men in our society abuse the authority that we often have been given, authority such as that of a father in a family. I dare not ignore the seemingly countless reports of men in power who have abused the authority roles that we often have. I cannot preach this message into our world without acknowledging that.

So, let me tell you that when Jesus tells us to speak to God as "Father", he is not saying that he expects us always to relate to God as we do to our biological fathers. There are two words in his prayer that show us that, i.e., the words "in heaven". God alone is the perfect Father and he alone is the Father of this entire family of God that we enter into when we trust Jesus as Savior. Jesus said this clearly in Mt 23:9: "*Call no one your Father on earth, for you together have one Father – the One in heaven.*"

God alone shows us what perfect fatherhood should be about. Thinking about this issue more broadly: Every part of our lives falls short of the glory of God. When I compare any part of my life to Jesus, the image of God in which I have been made, I know I still fall short. So too, as a father I fall short. All fathers do to some degree. But, when we come to Christ, we seek to grow to become conformed to God's image in which we are made. Even the best fathers have a lot of growing to do. And, many need complete repentance and remaking.

We should not be surprised when people in general – and fathers on earth in particular – fall short of the glory of our Father in heaven. What you long for in a relationship to a father is that he will love and care for you, forgive you, never give up on you, and never leave you. This is the relationship you enter into when you come alive to God through faith in Jesus as your Father, your Father in heaven.

So, it may be that, if you have a challenging relationship to your father on earth, you may have a deeper longing than others for the kind of father your Father in heaven is. It may therefore be that you will be even more grateful than others when you meet him. You will be grateful to experience that he will not abuse you but bless you. He will not shame you but show you grace. He will not abandon you but will be with you always. He will not be taken from you by

sickness or death for he is over all those evils. And he loves you with an everlasting love.

When we all fall before God as Abba in heaven, we are really saying that our ultimate allegiance is to him and him alone! We are saying that our ultimate identity is in the fact that we are his children – even above our human families and national citizenship. We call him our Abba. And because of that, we look around our church today and call one another brother or sister even when we have not met one another before.

So, Jesus taught, that's where prayer begins, i.e., with "our Father in heaven". The main thing in prayer is not that we can find a way to get what we want but that we get the very thing we most need, i.e., a personal relationship to God. In prayer, we enter into confidently and intimately into relationship with our Maker. We come to him and discover that the Creator of heaven and earth is our Father, our Father in heaven.