



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 1

Our Father in heaven . . .

Scripture Reading

Matthew 6:5–13

Introduction to the Study

Probably most of us can't remember the first time we heard the Lord's Prayer—or the Our Father, as many put it. That's because this prayer seems to be almost everyone's possession. Even in this time of so much biblical illiteracy, the Lord's Prayer is still part of the common possession of several billion people. And for many of us, not only can't we remember when we first heard this prayer, neither can we remember when we memorized it—because our memorizing was not a conscious effort; it was simply the process of hearing the words until they were part of our very persons. Not that memorizing this prayer is a great feat. It is only a few dozen words, so few that even when we speak slowly we complete the prayer in thirty seconds.

But these few words may be the most familiar collection of words on our planet. They have been translated into roughly two thousand languages and dialects, including those for probably 98 percent of the world's inhabitants. On any given weekend they will be spoken in unison in massive cathedral-like buildings and in mud huts and in open fields of worshipers. Every priest or pastor knows, as does many a nurse or hospice care specialist, that this prayer is one of the last statements made by those who are dying. All of which is to say that there is no prayer—indeed, no single collection of words—that can rightly be compared to this one.



In prayer as with all the other major issues of life, ranging from family to international affairs, the foundation issue is relationship.

And yet, with all of that, most of us don't know much about this prayer, and we're inclined to speak it without thinking. Martin Luther, with his penchant for saying things directly, described the Lord's Prayer as the greatest martyr, "for everybody tortures and abuses it." It is mostly, of course, the abuse of familiarity. Because we say it so often and because its words have the flow of poetry, we are likely to speak it without investment of either mind or heart. Jesus warned, "In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen, who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard" (Matt. 6:7 NEB). It's ironic, isn't it, that the prayer Jesus gave us is probably the most frequent instrument of violation for the warning he gave us.

So my aim in these coming weeks is for us to come to *know* this prayer that many of us have recited since before conscious memory. Some will feel this is unnecessary; after all, no prayer could be simpler, really, than this one. But of course that's just the point. It is the simplest words, scenes, and experiences that merit the deepest thought.

Others may be uneasy with the very idea of “learning” to pray. Prayer is instinctive to us, like loving; learning to pray can therefore seem an intrusion on the private places of the soul. Still, Jesus gave us this prayer as part of a time of teaching. Matthew’s Gospel includes it in the Sermon on the Mount, and Luke’s as Jesus’ answer to a disciple who asked to be taught how to pray.

In truth, if through our time of study we are caused to *think* as we speak this prayer, it may that we are loving God with our minds as well as with rote emotions. And if by our study some familiar phrase comes to have enlarged and more significant meaning, that will be a still greater gain.

Where Prayer Begins

A great many prayers begin with *give*. In the nearly forty years as a pastor that I taught confirmation classes, I always asked my seventh-grade students if they prayed, and then I asked how often they prayed. I still remember the boy who answered, “Whenever I need something.” It wasn’t the answer I wanted, but I was grateful for its honesty, and I recognized that this boy was probably describing the prayer philosophy of a majority of people.

But this isn’t where the Lord’s Prayer begins. Nor does it begin, however, where more sophisticated theologians say prayer should begin; that is, with adoration of God. I appreciate the logic of the theologian, and perhaps I am only splitting hairs as I make my point, because certainly there is adoration in the term *hallowed* that comes so early in this prayer. But there must be a source from which adoration, as well as the petition for giving, comes.

That mood, that holy context, is a *relationship*. Everything that follows in this prayer derives its understanding, its strength, its hope, and its responsibility from this relationship. In prayer as with all the other major issues of life, ranging from family to international affairs, the foundation issue is relationship.

Now let me hasten to say that the moment we address any prayer we imply some kind of relationship. And that’s just the point, because the address has so much to say about all that follows. Let me also hasten to say that it is right and proper enough to begin a prayer with “Almighty God,” or “Thou Great Creator,” and that at times such a phrase may best catch up our particular

emotions or needs of the moment. Thus I am not suggesting that every prayer should begin as Jesus began this prayer. Prayer has different forms of address for different moods and occasions, just as our pet names for a spouse, a child, or a cherished friend vary with time and occasion.

But Jesus had a word, and his word was *Father*. Jesus wanted us to know, above all else, I believe, that you and I are God’s sons and daughters. And let me underline again that the relationship with which we begin a prayer has everything to do with what follows in that prayer. What we call God indicates what God is to us. If we think of the concept by which we are addressing God, it will determine what we ask of God, whether we feel we need to repent, and what we think we can expect. This is why the relationship that is implied in our addressing of God is so crucial to the whole experience of prayer.

But of course I have to interrupt myself before going any further to confess that the term of address in this prayer—*Father*—is for some an almost insuperable barrier. I’ve known people who wait until this word is past before they join in the congregational speaking of this prayer. That great Anglican of another generation, G. A. Studdert Kennedy, used to say, “When I try to tell a small boy in the slums that God is his Father, I often wonder what he makes of it when his idea about fathers may be that they beat mothers and are generally drunk.”¹ And of course this is only one possible misshapen image. Others might speak with equal bitterness about a father who was always absent (a dreadful picture to be imposed on God) or one who indicated by his use of time that he considered work, career, sports, or adult friendships much more important than children (again, a dreadful picture to impose on God).

I wish instead that all of us could echo George MacDonald when he wrote, “What are thou Father for, but to help thy son?”² Alvin Rogness said of MacDonald that he spoke to God “as a child to his father,” because his father, though poor, always was so generous to him. I repeat; I wish all of us might have such an image when we speak the word *Father*.

Because clearly this is the picture Jesus had in mind for us when he made this term of address the relationship term for this majestic prayer. We think, of course, of Jesus’ story of a man who had two sons. The younger

asked for an early distribution of the estate so he could enjoy his inheritance—a quite unthinkable attitude in any generation but especially in the ancient world, because it was tantamount to telling a father that he couldn't wait for him to die. Nevertheless, the father generously agreed to the request. The young man soon wasted this inheritance, leaving himself absolutely penniless. Yet when he returned home to ask forgiveness, the father welcomed him with a grand celebration. The older brother found no joy in his sibling's return. He complained that his father had never done anything special for him (though of course he had received his share of the estate), and the father responded to the older brother's unpleasantness by saying, "Don't be unhappy; you can have a party anytime you want it." Jesus said that God was that kind of father, a father who gave generously and forgave extravagantly, showing an astonishing measure of patience and mercy. Obviously this is the kind of picture we're supposed to keep in mind when we pray, "Our *Father*. . ."

The apostle Paul, in teaching the first generation of Christians how to understand the nature of God, instructed them to use a familiar word in addressing God—a word both common and intimate in their world. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15–16). *Abba* is a household word in the Aramaic language; it was so in Jesus' day, and it is so still today. I remember a preschool boy running to his father in an airport waiting room in the Middle East, calling out, "Abba! Abba!" As a village preacher once said, it's the kind of word you can say even if you don't have any teeth, a word for infants or the helpless. Paul understood what Jesus was saying about God when he called him *Father*.

I say this with some measure of caution because currently we live in a culture that is low in reverence and high on chumminess. Perhaps, unlike the first-century world, we don't need encouragement to be familiar with God. But mind you, this is a loving familiarity, not a presumptuous kind. Indeed, true love ought never to be presumptuous, whether it is love for God or family member or cherished friend. But when we speak to God as *Father*, it should be with a sense of confident relationship. We are using the word Jesus urged us to use, and when we use it we should remember the picture that was in Jesus' mind when he used the word.



The immanence and the transcendence of God are equally true and equally important, each so true that their concepts must be blended in one breath.

Our Father

When we address God in this prayer, we don't say simply, *Father*. Jesus taught us to say, "Our Father." Whether we speak this prayer with a congregation of worshipers or alone in some private chamber, at this moment in the prayer—that is, at the very beginning, when we are setting the very mood of the prayer—we are not alone. We are praying as if someone—perhaps many someones—were praying with us.

I believe this is true in two ways. From a theological point of view, the *Our* in this prayer is made up of the one who is praying and the One who taught us this prayer—Jesus Christ. Each time you and I say this prayer, we can rightly sense that Jesus prays it with us. It is he who gave us this plural form of the pronoun, so when we say *Our Father*, we have reason to feel ourselves united to him in our worship and in our petitioning. This realization strengthens our prayer: we are never speaking these words alone but always with the One who gave them to us and who taught us to say them in the plural.

That is the theological mood of *Our*. But there is also a warm, embracing, demanding sense in the word as well, because it has also a social sense. Because of the plural pronoun with which this prayer begins, we dare not allow this prayer to become a selfish prayer. This prayer does not permit us to come to the place of worship alone. We are compelled to stand there with the whole of humanity, putting our arms around the entire human race. You may wonder on what logic I make the *Our* so inclusive. Might it not be that Jesus meant only those persons who believe as we do? I feel the word has to take in the whole human race because the Scriptures tell us that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16). I must conclude, therefore, that God wants the whole world to seek God. The degree to which they do so and the number who do so is not my concern; my only issue is that my embrace never be so small as to shut out anyone whom God would bring in.

When you and I pray *Our Father*, we look to one side and see the One who gave us this prayer and who even now joins us in praying it—all of which is a wonderfully reassuring thought as we pray. Then we look to the other side and see all those brothers and sisters—all the kin in the human race, the wonderfully varied throng of those who reach to the Father, however poorly or haltingly. It is both inspiring and sobering to think of the multitude that is joined with us when we say *Our Father*. Human as we are, I suspect that there are times when we prefer a smaller circle. But the prayer will not allow it. Not if we pray in the spirit of the One who first gave us this prayer, whose name we attach to it.

In Heaven, Hallowed Be Your Name

But something more must be said. This prayer does, indeed, begin with a relationship, but if we stop with *Our Father*, we haven't captured the whole of the relationship—not even when we add the affective quality that comes with *abba*. Listen: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Yes, God is to be understood as our Father, but a Father whose dwelling place is heaven. And while we call God by this family name, Father—or even *abba*, which is equivalent to our use of *Daddy*, or for some, *Papa*—this name is to be spoken with accents of awe, because this name is *hallowed*.

See then what a fascinating tension we have in this prayer. The God whom we address is so beyond us that we identify the residence as heaven, and the name is so eternity shaping that we must acknowledge it as hallowed; and yet it comes to us in the most intimate of language, the relationship of breakfast-table and bedtime stories, of fun shared, and of tears comforted.

Over the centuries theologians have argued about the immanence and the transcendence of God. Some

emphasize that God is infinitely immanent, as close as the air we breathe, while others reminds us that God is utterly transcendent, so much so as to be quite beyond our grasp. This prayer, in its opening phrases, gives us a living answer. The immanence and the transcendence of God are equally true and equally important, each so true that their concepts must be blended in one breath.

So this is where prayer begins—not only this prayer that we call “the Lord’s Prayer” but all of prayer—it begins with a relationship. And while it is a relationship that we seek to capture in a human image, we recognize also that no image can adequately contain it. And no matter how private our place of prayer, we can never speak this prayer in the singular; it is always *Our Father*, because we speak it by the grace of the Savior who gave us the prayer and who empowers it, and because the God to whom we address this prayer has a heart for all humankind; if I shut out others while I speak these words, I deny the One who gave us the prayer and the One to whom it is addressed.

This is where prayer begins. And if we begin rightly and proceed in faith, this prayer touches the ultimate power of the universe—a power that can transform our daily lives and give new hope to our very universe.

About the Writer

Ellsworth J. Kalas is interim president and faculty member of Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as a United Methodist pastor for thirty-eight years in churches in Wisconsin and Ohio and on staff of the World Methodist Council. He has authored more than thirty books, including Grace in a Tree Stump and Men Worth Knowing.

Endnotes

1. G. A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Wicket Gate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 62.
2. George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), 116.