

“Sixty-Six Words, Part 1”

Matthew 6:5-15; Revelation 11:15-19 ¹

Although prayer is at the very heart of our relationship with God, many of us are not altogether comfortable with prayer. It may be that we're uncertain about how to pray. It may be that we're not sure that prayer really accomplishes anything. It may be that we really don't want to know God as much as we want other things in life. It may be that sin we tolerate in our lives makes us uneasy in God's company.

When it comes to public prayer, we may be uncomfortable because we've been turned off by prayers that are too formal, too mechanical, and too predictable, resembling the superstitious incantation of a spell. We may have been offended by prayers that were too long and too flowery and too phony. We may have been disgusted by prayers that were no more than a public show of piety soliciting the praise of others, and not actually addressed to God at all.

While many of us can sense what prayer is not, we may have difficulty knowing what it is. Jesus' disciples were in the same situation. They were unimpressed with the prayers of their religious leaders; but as they watched Jesus, they could see that His conversations with His Father gave Him a power that they didn't have . . . and they wanted such a relationship with God.

And so it was that on one occasion when Jesus returned from prayer, the disciples asked Him, “*Lord, teach us to pray!*” (Luke 11:1). Jesus responded by giving them what we call “The Lord's Prayer” (although it might really be more accurate to call this “The Model Prayer,” or “The Disciples' Prayer”).

The Lord's Prayer addresses six topics in just sixty-six words (in the King James Version): (1) God's Name; (2) God's Kingdom; (3) God's Will; (4) Our Needs; (5) Our Cleansing; and (6) Our Protection. If this prayer were patterned after the way most of us pray, the order and the emphasis would be more or less reversed; but Jesus showed us that we need to give God God's rightful place before we ask anything for ourselves.

It is, after all, only when God is given rightful place in our lives that anything else gets in its proper place. Yesterday, 3.14.15, was “Pi Day,” and it won't recur in the same way for about a hundred years. As you probably remember from high school, Pi has to do with the circumference of a circle, and if you want to draw a circle of a certain size in a certain place, the very first thing that must be done is to get the *center* right. If you get the *center* right, the *circumference* will be right. It's the same with our lives: if we want to get life's edges right, we need to get life's Center right.

Though the Lord's Prayer is very brief and very familiar, we're unlikely to ever fully plumb its depths. Though a child can understand enough of the prayer to make it his or her own, neither the saint nor the sage can ever exhaust it. Dozens—and probably hundreds—of books have been written about the Lord's Prayer, and we certainly won't do it justice in these two sermons today and next week. Even so, we're going to give it a shot, and this morning we're going to look at the first twenty-four of the sixty-six words in this prayer, and I'm going to use the King James Version of the prayer, because that's what most of us know by heart.

Before we examine the prayer, perhaps we would do well to say it together, to get the whole thing back in our active memory:

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 15, 2015.

*Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.
Amen (Matthew 6:9-13).*

Let's begin our study with just the first word of this prayer: "**Our**." When we say "*OUR Father*," we're joining ourselves with the whole family of God across the ages. When we pray, "OUR Father," we're reminded that you and I are part of a global and an eternal family, joint heirs with all of the saints of all the ages who have been called out of darkness into God's wonderful light. This is not an "I" prayer. This is a "we" prayer. Authentic faith in God is not a private affair, but a matter of being joined to a faith *community*.² Authentic faith involves being a part of the Family of God.

But someone else is included in the "our" of "Our Father," and that person is Jesus Himself! The very first words that the Bible records from Jesus' lips were spoken when He was twelve years old, and they were these: "*You should have known that I would be in my Father's house*" (Luke 2:49). The truth of the matter is that Jesus invites you and me to join Him in calling God "Father," so that even when we pray alone, we're really saying, "Father, we—Jesus and I—are coming to talk with you."

Let's look at the next word: "**Father**." When Jesus talked with His Father, He called God "*Abba*," and Paul later told us to do this as well.³ Jesus' use of this word must have been truly shocking, because "Abba" was the intimate word Hebrew children used to speak to their own fathers, and this was not the idea people had had about God at all.

The ancients thought of God as fierce and awesome more than anything else. Do you remember what the people told Moses at Mt. Sinai? "*When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the horn, and when they saw the lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear. And they said to Moses, 'You tell us what God says, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us. If he does, we will die!'*" (Exodus 20:18-19).

That's primarily how God had been experienced in the past, and gives us a glimpse of the shock value of Jesus' invitation to call God "Abba." If we wanted to translate "Abba" accurately into contemporary language, we'd really have to say that Jesus called God "Daddy."

Jesus could have told us to say, "O God." He could have told us to say, "My Lord." He could have told us to say, "Dear Master," "My Shepherd," or "Hail, King." But Jesus didn't suggest any of those forms of address. Jesus told us to call God "Daddy."⁴

Now you and I don't usually do that, because it sounds so strange. But Jesus told us that when we're talking to God, we aren't talking to someone who is remote from us. We're talking to someone who is very near to us and who loves us very much. When we're praying to God, we don't need to feel strange at all. We can just talk to Him!

² You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "I." You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "My." Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for one another. And when you ask for daily bread, you must include your brother. For others are included in each and every plea, from the beginning to the end of it, it doesn't once say "Me" (Unknown, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 32, no. 3).

³ Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6.

⁴ Elmer Towns, *Praying the Lord's Prayer for Spiritual Breakthrough* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1997), pp. 48-49.

But while all of this is wonderfully true, God is also our Father “*in heaven*.” This is the other side of it. In addition to being the One who is close to us in intimate and beckoning love, God is also the One who is wholly righteous, the One who dwells in majesty, the One who is robed in brilliant and unapproachable light.

The God who is *Abba* is also the God of Sinai, and we do well to beware calling God “Father” cheaply or thoughtlessly. Our Heavenly Father is not an anything-goes parent who tolerantly shuts His eyes to our sins and our faults and our willful rebellion. This One whom we are invited to call “Father” is also the God to whom we are going to give an account for every deed done in the body, whether good or bad.⁵ God is “*Our Father . . . in heaven*” in whom love and holiness and power are One.

If God were only love, God might *want* to help us and yet not be *able* to do this. But because God is both Love and Power, God is able to help us as no one else can. God’s love is backed up by God’s power, and “the purpose of his power is to love us, redeem us, and restore us to the reason we were created.”⁶

As the great preacher, George Buttrick put it, “Man, the creature of an hour, and stained by selfishness, may speak to God, who summons the stars from the void and before whom the angels veil their faces, as Father!”⁷ The Bible tells us that “*to all who received [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*” (John 1:12). This is incredibly Good News!⁸ Let’s keep going

The second *phrase* in the Lord’s Prayer, and its first *petition*, is “**Hallowed be thy Name.**” We don’t use the word “hallowed” very much anymore. When we do, we’re usually thinking about the “hallowed halls” of a university campus, or perhaps a church building, and we’re thinking about a respect and a fondness that has grown in our hearts over a long time.

That’s actually not far from what we mean when we pray the Lord’s Prayer. The Greek word that means “to hallow” literally means “to regard as different.” If someone sends you a letter that misspells your name by only one letter, or by even one accent mark, that letter isn’t really addressed to you, is it? You’re a unique individual, and you can be represented only by a specific sequence of letters that is your name. It’s in that same sense that Jesus taught us to give God’s Name and God’s Person a place that is absolutely unique in our honor and in our affection.

God’s Name was revealed to Moses as “YAHWEH,” or “I am the One Who Always IS” (Exodus 3:14). The Jews revered God’s Name so much that when scribes were copying Scripture and came to THE NAME, they used a brand-new pen to write it, and then destroyed the pen so that it could never be used again.

When you and I pray the phrase, “*Hallowed be Thy Name*,” we’re saying first of all that we intend to give God the honor and respect—indeed, the *worship*—that God deserves. We’re pledging to obey God, to do only what pleases God, to make God the One who really controls our

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:10; see also Hebrews 4:12-16.

⁶ William Powell Tuck, *The Lord’s Prayer Today* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), p. 94.

⁷ George Buttrick, “Exposition on the Gospel of Matthew,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), p. 310.

⁸ Not only is God our Father in heaven, but God is also God within us. As Paul wrote, “*The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you*” (Romans 8:11). God dwells in the eternal world, but God also dwells in the world of time and space, because *God lives in us*! The doors between the worlds are open, and they are open in us! You and I are “creatures of the interface,” who alone live on the border of the worlds, at the edge of eternity!

lives. We're also pledging ourselves to help the world recognize God's uniqueness by the manner in which we ourselves bear God's Name.

The second petition in the prayer is "***Thy Kingdom come.***" As we've noted several times lately, Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God more than about any other subject. The Kingdom of God was the central theme of His preaching.

The Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future hope. Jesus came to establish God's reign in our hearts, but God's reign will also ultimately be established over all things that exist—not only in this universe, but in however many universes there eventually prove to be.

"Be careful when you pray this prayer," my friend Bill Tuck warned. "When you pray, 'thy kingdom come,' you ask God to come into your life in a radical way. . . . You need to realize that when Jesus Christ enters your life, he does turn it around. He will overthrow some things in your life. He does bring change, and he will change *you.*"⁹

My friends, the whole purpose of human existence is that you and I become God's children, and thereby members of the Kingdom of Light—an eternal Kingdom that is already breaking in upon the world, but that is yet to come in all of its glory and splendor. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for the beginning of that age in which there will no longer be any rebellion in the universe. It is a prayer for Christ's return. Can you honestly pray for that to happen today?

The third and final petition in the first part of the prayer is "***Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.***" Elmer Towns wrote that "When you pray 'Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven,' you confess that there is a great difference between the two places. In heaven, angels do not pray about God's will; they just do it. In heaven, God's will is done instantly, not later. In heaven, God's will is done enthusiastically, not halfheartedly. In heaven, God's will is done completely, not partially. In heaven, God's will is done perfectly, not as we do it on earth."¹⁰

While you may not have thought about it in these terms, the fact that God's will is done, done immediately, and done in all of its completeness, is what makes heaven heaven! And although God can and will establish this Kingdom with or without us, you and I do have our own parts to play. We get to help!

When we pray, you and I have no right to ask God to change things in our world or in our own circumstances that we ourselves have been given the power to change, but do not do. We may be praying for the salvation of a loved one, a friend, or a business associate, but what else are we doing to tell them about the Hope we have in Christ? We may ask God for freedom from physical ailments, but are we practicing healthful habits and engaging in sensible exercise to foster good health? We may pray for God to bless our church, but are we faithful in attendance, in labor, and in support?

I'm sure you can see that it's hypocritical to pray for God's will to be done in some future day if we're not interested in doing God's will in the present. Unless we ourselves are honestly doing our best to do God's will as we pray "*Thy will be done,*" we have no business praying for others to do it. Our prayer really needs to be, "Thy will be done . . . and done by me."

A Final Word: As exciting and as wonderful as all this is, I must speak plainly and remind you that not everyone is able to call God "Father." Jesus said that there are two—and only two—kinds of people in this world: those who have God as their Father as well as their Creator; and those who have God as their Creator and Satan as their father.

⁹ Tuck, p. 47.

¹⁰ Towns, pp. 93-94.

Those are hard words, but they come from Jesus Himself: “*If God were your Father*” Jesus said, “*you would love me, because I have come to you from God. . . . You are the children of your father, the Devil, and you love to do the evil things he does*” (John 8:42-44a, NLT). Pastor Craig Groeschel offered an illustration that may help us in our discernment of who our father really is . . .

“If you call me ‘Pastor Craig,’” he said, “chances are you might know a little about me. You know what I do, maybe you’ve heard me speak, and maybe you’re familiar with some of my favorite topics and my up-front personality. But your use of my title doesn’t mean that you know me personally.

“You might just call me ‘Craig,’ and I’d usually assume that you know me even better. My friends call me Craig. We’re close.

“Then there are those who possess exclusive rights to a few specialized, far more intimate forms of address. These are the six beautiful, small people, very dear to me, whom I allow to climb up in my lap. They rub their hands on my face and say things like ‘You need to shave’ and ‘You’re the best’ and ‘Can I have some candy?’ They call me ‘Daddy.’ The name reveals the intimacy. So what do you call God? Your answer may be a clue to how well you know Him. Or don’t.”¹¹

In an interview with *The New Yorker* a couple of years ago, rock legend Bruce Springsteen spoke about his broken relationship with his own father and about the fact that his heart continues to yearn for what he called “Daaaddy!” Quoting another rocker, T-Bone Burnett, Springsteen noted that “Rock and roll is all about ‘Daaaddy!’ It’s one long . . . scream of ‘Daaaddy!’”¹² I really expect that this is true for much of our music these days.

My friend, whatever your earthly father was or was not able to be for you, **you have a Father in heaven who loves you.** God tells us in the Bible, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love*” (Jeremiah 31:3). Will you allow God to love you today?

O Love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in Thee.
I give Thee back the life I owe, that in Thine ocean depths
its flow may richer, fuller be.

O Light that foll’west all my way, I yield my flick’ring torch to Thee.
My heart restores its borrowed ray, that in Thy sunshine’s blaze
its day may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to Thee.
I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain
that morn shall tearless be.¹³

¹¹ Craig Groeschel, *The Christian Atheist* (Zondervan, 2010).

¹² David Remnick, “We Are Alive: Bruce Springsteen at Sixty-Two,” *The New Yorker*, July 30, 2012.

¹³ George Matheson, “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.”