

The disciples had a simple question for Jesus, "**Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.**" What had brought them to ask such a question? They all took notice of how often Jesus prayed; how passionately He prayed. Some of them also may have remembered the lessons that John had given his disciples in prayer, and they wanted more lessons from the master Himself. I think about how often I pray with my children and how I pray with them, and it is no wonder that they have never asked me such a question. How about you? Are you ashamed to pray out loud or to have your spouse or children hear you pray? Would your children or friends ever ask you such a question?

Jesus' answer was what we now know as "the Lord's Prayer." It is the most famous prayer of all time and the most commonly prayed prayer. It goes across all denominations. It is the perfect prayer. Yet Luther called it the most sacrificed prayer in the world as well; as people say it and speak it without thinking about what it says and means. That's why it's good for us to teach it in catechism and to review it in sermon series as we are beginning to do today.

You might expect Jesus to come up with a top five things to do in prayer. We love checklists. They are easy to follow. But prayer is not a matter of checking off items from a list - like going to a grocery store and following directions as you go from one item to the next in order to have the perfect prayer. It is more personal than that.

Jesus begins by teaching HOW we ADDRESS God. What do we call Him? How do we approach Him? Do we call Him our Friend? Our brother? Our buddy? How you view God affects how you pray to Him.

The Muslims feel forced to bow to Mecca five times a day by their Allah in order to follow the law and make Allah happy. But even on the Christian scale - think about people who use God as a browbeating stick who is always ready and willing to beat you. "How can you call yourself a Christian when you . . ." The husband tells his wife, "You need to submit to me woman!" The parent tells the child, "Jesus doesn't want you to do that!" Luther feared the years and years of purgatory that he would have to suffer in as a result of so many infractions. He prayed to God in order to try and appease God. Later on he confessed that he actually hated the God he was continually being threatened with. Who can blame him? If we view God as nothing more than an angry and tight God who wants us to be depressed and whipped all of the time, who of us will want to say anything to Him, much less ask Him for anything? Even the cross can be used as a browbeating stick. "Jesus died for you, so you should"...

This address is a great and simple way to start this prayer, reminding us who our God really is. "**Our Father in heaven.**" With this phrase Jesus is trying to portray to us a kind and gentle Creator who wants to take care of us. This is clear when you look at the way "Father in heaven" is used. Take for instance Matthew 6:7-8 where Jesus said, "**When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.**"<sup>8</sup> **Do not be like them, for your**

**Father knows what you need before you ask him.**” If the Father knows what we need before we ask Him - it gives us the clear impression that He is PAYING ATTENTION to us and just WAITING for us to ask Him. He wants us to ask him for the needs we have. We don’t need to badger him or try to impress him with kneeling or whipping ourselves or repeating the prayer a hundred times. He already knows. He’s just waiting for us to ask.

In Psalm 103 the Psalmist refers to the father as a symbol of compassion. It says in verses 13–14 **As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.** The Father knows we are weak and fragile. He remembers how He created humanity in the beginning. He takes notice of that in dealing with us; and so He is GENTLE and COMPASSIONATE with us.

Isn’t it a sad thing that fathers don’t get this? They think that in order to be the man of the family they have to tell their children to toughen up; not to cry; to be almost mean and angry with their children and even their wives. That’s why many children just don’t understand this picture that the “Father” is supposed to bring. Their fathers were nothing but empty suits and angry men; the last people they would go to for anything. Fathers, it shouldn’t be that way.

Jesus speaks of the generosity of the Father and the willingness to give GOOD gifts to His children later on in Matthew 7. **“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!** As our GOOD and HEAVENLY Father - He wants to give us not what we WANT, but what is good for us. James reminds us of the same thing in James 1:5 <sup>5</sup> **If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.** Here you have throughout the Scriptures a picture of a generous and giving Father who WANTS us to ask and wants to give. He doesn’t say, “This is gonna cost you! You better appreciate this! You need to do your chores first!”

I reflect on this as a father. My children will go to my wife first when they need something. They know that she will be more apt to say “yes” than I will. A part of that is due to the way we work our finances. But another part of that is because I am not as generous as she. In trying to install a work ethic I tend to tie all money given to a chore. Yet if I truly want to reflect the generosity of my Father in heaven, there are times when I should freely give them gifts as well. So I need to be careful in the way I father our children. Am I reflecting the generosity of God the Father? Or am I only giving the picture of an angry and cheap and law enforcing father to them?

Then of course we remember how we were taught in Catechism about what “Our Father” means. We were all created by God; fearfully and wonderfully made according to Psalm 139, the verse our school chose as its theme for this year. When you see all the lifelessness on other planets and in the universe -

and then see the LIFE in ours - what a loving Father we have! More importantly, we were given spiritual life; having been rescued from Satan's grasp and adopted into God's family through baptism and made to be His dear children in Christ. Paul reminded the Galatians of this in 3:26-27, "**You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.**"<sup>27</sup> **For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**" In this baptism we were given the heavenly home to live in, as well as all of the privileges of being God's special and protected children.

No matter what age you are God never wants you to stop addressing Him as "Our Father." When it comes to our prayer life and who we are; we are to never stop being God's children. It seems awkward and strange that my parents still give me money for my birthday when I'm getting close to fifty years old. But I still appreciate it and accept it and need it. So I receive it with gratitude and thanks. So also in this prayer, by calling God "**Our Father**," we are reminded that we are always to remain children in the sight of God. You don't have to grow up. You don't have to have life all figured out and under control. He wants you to be dependent on Him and to rely on Him. He enjoys it when you do that. He commands you to do that. That's part of being a child.

The person that doesn't pray has become proud; has become "grown up" in his own eyes. He thinks that everything is under control and he doesn't need to ask God for anything. I think of when King Ahaz (of the southern kingdom of Jerusalem) was being attacked by Aram and Israel. Isaiah was sent to comfort him and let him know they wouldn't succeed. He told Ahaz he could ask for any sign. He commanded Ahaz to ask for a sign because he wanted Ahaz to rely on God. Ahaz REFUSED to ask for a sign. He said, "**I don't want to put God to the test.**" Actually, he didn't want to believe. He didn't want to give God the credit. He didn't want to be a child in God's sight. That is sometimes the attitude of those who don't pray. "I can do this myself. I'll get through this just fine!"

Some people have given up on prayer because they have convinced themselves that God either doesn't care or He doesn't hear them. This happens after great disappointment in prayer. You prayed for strength. You prayed for healing. You prayed for courage. Yet you still failed. You gave into fear. Someone still died. God said "no." So you've told yourself, "God never wanted to listen to. God doesn't care. God hates my guts. He enjoyed watching me suffer." You've convinced yourself that this "father" is not this kind and generous Father who has created and redeemed them and promised to give you what they need. Your father is an angry and ignorant jerk who doesn't want to give them anything. So, like Ahaz, you refuse to pray. You don't want to be disappointed again. So you separate yourself from the family of believers in anger and hurt over the God who has supposedly cheated you. But no matter what you've told yourself, it doesn't change who God really is. He doesn't change. Were you to open yourself up again to the God who reveals Himself in the Scriptures, you would find the joy of knowing how wrong you really were. You will see the Father for who He really is.

Notice also the pronoun "Our." Why did Jesus use that pronoun? He was expecting this prayer to be prayed together by fellow Christians who believe together in the same God. We are all a part of the same family; adopted by the same blood; black or white; poor or rich; young or old; we all are in this

thing together. Hasn't He GIVEN all of us the same forgiveness? Hasn't He already sent His Son to go through HELL for us on the cross? Don't we inherit an eternal salvation, rich or poor, healthy or sick? You don't have to be jealous of me; I don't have to be jealous of you. Even though there is difference in gifts and abilities here on earth; there is no difference in forgiveness and grace with Christ. We all come before Him as beggars no matter how powerful or weak we are. Grace is the great equalizer for all of us as a gift from OUR Father.

Jesus included Himself in this prayer, because He took on flesh and became one of us; a human. He became our brother. He also became our sin. So Jesus approaches the Father first; by dying on the cross as our substitute. When Jesus died He tore the temple curtain in two and removed the barrier of sin that separated us from God. He enabled us to come to the Father through Him alone. Jesus said in Matthew 10:32–33 **“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”** In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my life, my strength, my song.

Lord Jesus, help us to see ourselves as you have adopted us to be. Help us to see the pathway to heaven opened through your blood and righteousness. Your Father sent you to this earth to die for us. He wanted to see us in heaven just as much as you did. Help us to pray to you boldly and confidently. Forgive us for our fear and our proud silence. Forgive us for trying to act like grownups when you want us to be children. Help us to see you as you are, **“Our Father in heaven.”**

When I was playing softball my name was listed on the roster as “Joel.” One of our members said, “Who is Joel?” He only knew me as “Pastor.” It surprised him a bit to hear me called by my personal name and not my professional title. I don't cease to be a pastor on the softball field. Yet as a comrade on the field I didn't mind being called by my personal name either. Pastors are not robots. They are humans with names too. I didn't storm out of the dugout in self righteous indignation.

When Jesus was dying on the cross He called out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He was being forsaken to pay for our sins - feeling the ultimate wrath of this most powerful and holy God. He prayed to “God.” Yet after Jesus suffered that death for us, notice how Jesus prayed. He said, **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** The relationship had been restored. The payment was made.

So it is the same Jesus - in the Lord's Prayer - who calls on us to pray to **“Our Father.”** We can use that term because of Jesus' death for us. Jesus earned the right for us to call him Father. God is not offended by this familial term. He has earned it, He has taught it, and it reminds us of where we come from and who we serve. Through faith in this loving Father we are opened up to speak the petitions to come. Amen.