

## The Lord's Prayer (2)

# A Father who listens

Matthew 6:9

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Throughout scripture and church history we can see how God responded in remarkable ways when His people prayed. People were healed. Marriages were saved. Addiction was broken. Sins were forgiven. Relationships were reconciled. Spiritual awakenings swept across nations. These stories are inspiring, but how do we pray in such a way that God hears? How does prayer work?

For our answer, we must turn to Jesus. He alone has seen prayer from the perspective of both heaven and earth.

In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus presented what has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer.

*Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."*

The first phrase, *"Pray then like this"*, when translated does not mean "Pray this word for word," but "follow this model of prayer". Yes, it is fine to pray this prayer word for word at times, but Jesus is giving us this prayer as an example of how to pray.

Jesus' prayer begins with *"Our Father"*. To understand the significance of these two words we first must understand the cultural context of Jesus' day. In Jesus' day, most people believed that God was very distant and unknowable. Among the Greeks, there were two dominant beliefs concerning the gods. One was held by those known as the **Stoics**. They believed that the gods did not have the ability to feel any emotion. This came from the idea that if the gods could feel emotion, then they could be hurt, and surely the gods cannot be hurt, so they must be emotionless, apathetic and indifferent.

The second dominant belief concerning the gods was held by a group known as the **Epicureans**. They believed that the gods were most characterized by perfect peace and tranquility. The Epicureans took note that the world was chaotic and often seemed out of control. The gods would surely lose their tranquility and peace if they got involved in human affairs, so surely the gods must be distant, detached and uninvolved.

Even the Jews of Jesus' day had grown to believe that God was very distant. They had heard about the God who created the universe with a spoken word, who flooded the earth in Noah's day, who drowned the Egyptian army in Moses' day, who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day, and who exiled His own people in Jeremiah's day. They were familiar with the God who was powerful, holy and almighty. He was definitely to be feared, but they knew very little about having intimacy with God. They viewed God as being so "other" and exalted that they would not even say the name of "Yahweh", for fear that their sinfulness would somehow tarnish the holy name of God.

It is in this context that Jesus recited this prayer. Jesus began with "our Father". This is a relational title. In scripture we see that "father" is a title of one who cares, nurtures, loves and draws near. In Mark 14:36, we even hear Jesus refer to God as **"Abba, Father"**. This would be the equivalent of calling God "daddy or Papa". This type of intimacy with God would have been unheard of in Jesus' day, but Jesus knew, firsthand, the reality of God and called the people to pray to God as "our Father".

Relating to God as our heavenly Father is a foundational idea in Jesus' Prayer. Everything in the Lord's Prayer flows out of this first idea. You can find the idea of "God the Father" in many of Jesus' prayers that are recorded in scripture. For example:

- Jesus approaching the end of His ministry: ***"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, 'Father save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."*** (John 12:27-28)
- Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: ***"He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'" (Matthew 26:36-44, Mark 14:32-39, Luke 22:46)***
- Jesus' forgiveness of his killers: ***"But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'"*** (Luke 23:34)
- At Jesus' death: ***"And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit.' And having said this, He breathed His last."*** (Luke 23:46)

Jesus calls us each to come to God like a child. Approaching God the Father like a child is crucial to a growing faith. In Matthew 18:3-4, Jesus puts it in these words: ***"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."***

It could be that you are here today and this use of the word "father" to describe God is unnatural for you, just like it was for many of Jesus' listeners. It could be that when you hear the word "father" your

mind and emotions think of the father that you had or didn't have. That will be a limitation for all of us. No human father will ever be as good as our heavenly Father, but even among human fathers there are many differences.

Maybe your father was a follower of Christ who, in the midst of his imperfections, sought to follow God and lead your family in a way that stirred in you a desire to know the heavenly Father. Perhaps God used the example of your father to bring you to faith in Jesus Christ.

Or maybe your story is the opposite. Maybe you never had a father, or maybe your father was physically present but was never close to you emotionally. Maybe your father was a protector, but never came near. Or maybe your father drove you to success, but never told you that he loved you. Maybe your father was the provider, but also the disciplinarian. Or maybe your father was a source of abuse. If so, I am sorry for the pain that you have passed through, but those are the hindrances that we must somehow overcome as we seek to know God as our heavenly Father. Our earthly father will never perfectly mirror the image of our heavenly Father, but regardless of the past we can take our relationship with our earthly father and use it to drive us towards a deeper relationship with God, our Father.

If you had a godly, earthly father, then let that example lead you into faith. If your father was not a good example, then let that experience drive you to finally experience the loving relationship that you have always been looking for . . . in your heavenly Father. The psalmist even proclaims God as the *"Father to the fatherless"* (Psalm 68:5).

As we grow to understand who "God, our Father" truly is, it will change the way we relate to God and draw near to Him in prayer. We will understand His provision for us and our need for Him. We will better understand His authority and our need for submission. We will understand His faithfulness and our need to trust. We will understand His wisdom and our need for obedience. We will understand His love and our need to be loved. Jesus then continues.

*"Our Father in heaven"*: This phrase "in heaven" describes our Father. We are not praying to one who has no power. God, our Father, sits in heaven on the throne. He reigns and resides in the eternal, everlasting, all-knowing, all-seeing, sovereign place. There is none greater than He. He is the One in whom we are to place our trust.

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name"*: Hallowed means holy, consecrated, sacred, unblemished, sanctified, pure and completely trustworthy. Hallowed is His name, which in scripture means hallowed is His character. Our heavenly Father is not just almighty King, He is loving. He is not just awesome in power, He is good.

In the movie *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, four children find themselves in a fantasy world called Narnia. It is a land of permanent winter that is controlled by an evil queen. No color, no warmth and no Christmas. Animals are able to talk, and during one conversation with the children one creature is explaining how Aslan is coming. Aslan is the mighty Lion King who is coming back to restore Narnia to the way it is supposed to be.

The children ask, "Is he safe?", to which the creature responds, "No, but He is good." That is the balance of God. He is more powerful than we could ever imagine. But our confidence is in the fact that He is good.

This is our Father God, who in Zephaniah 3:17 rejoices over us and even sings over us. How unbelievable it is that God, our heavenly Father, would even know our name, much less draw near to us!

As He begins the Lord's Prayer, Jesus depended fully on the Father. This is the key to the rest of Jesus' prayer. It is focused on God and His purposes and His provisions for our lives. What does it mean for Him to be our Father and what does it mean for us to be His children? Only as we grow to understand more about His fatherhood from scripture, will we be able to pray into it. As we know Him, we will see His greatness and in contrast see our neediness. As we learn about what it means to be a child of God, we will begin to come to know its benefits: the promises, the wisdom, the fruit, the protection and provision. It is all connected to being with our Father.

If we choose to draw near to God as Father, we must understand that we must submit our lives to all that this means. We cannot just receive the Father characteristics that we like and set aside the ones that we don't. We cannot rejoice in His provision while refusing His discipline. We cannot cry out for His protection and then refuse to walk near to Him. For those who will humble themselves and fully submit to everything that is found in God the Father, they will live under the cover of His blessings. In Christ, instead of running to hide from Him like Adam and Eve, we can now run to Him as His children in our time of need and find grace and mercy.

We can either face the world by ourselves like an orphan child, or we can face the struggles of the world walking hand-in-hand with our heavenly Father. Ask the child who gets lost in the mall at Christmas. Oh, the relief of being found! Or the little girl in the street who finds herself face to face with a big, strange dog and is horrified! But then whose fear disappears when her father sweeps her up in his arms and whispers, "don't worry honey, I've got you."

That is what we are being offered. We are no longer on our own. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you (James 4:8). We are brothers and sisters who share the same Father. As we draw near to Him, we will be drawn nearer to each other as well.

If we desire to see God, the Father, as He truly is, we need to start by learning everything we can about Jesus. Jesus was the exact representation of God the Father (Hebrews 1:3). In John 14:9, Jesus' followers longed to know the Father and Jesus responded with these words, *"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father."* Jesus was God in the flesh. Learn about Jesus the Son to learn about the Father. Read the Gospels. Take note of all the character traits of Jesus. These are the traits of God the Father. As you become aware of the different traits of God the Father, pray for the faith to believe and for God to rewrite the identity of Father in your heart and mind. Also, make an effort to spend time with families that are fortunate to have godly father role models. Broaden your understanding of father beyond your home and perhaps beyond your culture. Jesus is showing us the importance of knowing God as Father. Now that we know, may we be faithful to seek Him and find Him when we seek Him with all of our hearts (Jeremiah 29:13).

Let us finish by prayerfully reading over scriptures that describe God our Father. Let this be the beginning as we seek to relate to God as our perfect Father.

*“Now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” (Isaiah 64:8)*

*“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matthew 6:26)*

*“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? . . . In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.” (Matthew 18:12-14)*

*“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)*

*“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 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!” (Matthew 7:9-11)*

*“As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.” (Psalm 103:13)*

*“My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” (Proverbs 3:11-12)*

*“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.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.” (Romans 8:15-16)*

*“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:28-30)*

*“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 1:3)*

*“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1)*

In response to these verses we are called to draw near to Our Father. Difficult situations will come and Satan will try to convince us that God does not care. Even then, will you pray into the truth of scripture that says that God our Father knows our every need and is our ever present help in time of trouble? Even when our problems seem insurmountable, will we pray to our heavenly Father, who is our Almighty King, our Savior and Ruler of all? Even when we cannot clearly see God working in our situation, will we trust He is still in heaven on His throne and is hallowed, holy and good? When we cannot see His “hand”, will we choose to trust His heart . . . and keep praying?

God, our Father, has drawn near to hear our prayers and work in and through our lives. May we trust Him, pray to Him, submit to Him and experience Him.

### Discussion questions:

1. What did you find most interesting from this verse and this sermon?
2. When you think of your father, what words would you use to describe him?
3. How do you think your image of God as Father has been affected by your experience with your earthly father?
4. How would you say Matthew 6:9 in your own words? *"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."*
5. Jesus calls us to come to Him like a child? How might a person do that?
6. What can a person do to gain a better understanding of who God the Father is?
7. What do you think you need to remember from this lesson?