

Give Us This Day: 1. This is How You Should Pray
Luke 11:1; Matthew 6:9-13
September 13, 2020
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A recent survey by the Barna organization found that 79% of Americans have prayed at least once in the past three months. Of those who pray, 4 out of 5 say they pray daily. Every faith has some form of prayer. Even atheists find ways to pray. We pray because we can't help it. Thomas Merton, said: **"Prayer is an expression of who we are... We are a living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfillment."** Prayer speaks to a basic human need. More than anything else in life, I want to know God. If I believe I am made in the image of God, that God had a part in creating me and one day I will return to God, then I want to do what I can to get acquainted with God. Prayer is that way.

But in practice, prayer is often confusing. The word, prayer, comes from the Latin word *precatio*, from which we get the word precarious. There are times when I wonder: Is God listening? With all that is happening why should God care about me? If God knows everything, what's the point of prayer? Does a person with many praying friends stand a better chance of physical healing than one who also has cancer but with only a few people praying? Does prayer change God or change me?

For the next six weeks, we will look at everything Jesus said about prayer and how he prayed. We will do that by focusing on the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and what it tells us about prayer. We may have memorized the Lord's Prayer, but do we know why Jesus taught that particular prayer?

According to Luke's gospel, one day the disciples saw Jesus get up from prayer, and they asked, "Will you teach us to pray just like John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray?" In Luke's gospel, Jesus provides an abbreviated form of the Lord's Prayer. The longer form is found in Matthew's gospel. To answer their question, Jesus says **"This, then, is how you should pray:** When I was a teenager, I began playing golf with my Dad. He had a few extra clubs that he gave me and he showed me how to swing the club, but neither one of had much technique and neither one of us was very good – so we were a good match. When I left home, I didn't take my clubs and didn't play for several years. But when I finished seminary and moved to Duluth, a few people in the church who played a lot of golf invited me to play – and it didn't go well at all. Every time I hit the ball, they would roll their eyes and wait for me at the end of each hole as my swings took the ball in all sorts of different directions. It became so frustrating for them and for me, that I finally quit. I got rid of my clubs, and for the next 30 years the extent of my golfing was confined to putt-putt courses. But then a couple years ago, I had this idea for a sermon series that would use golf as a metaphor, and I approached a friend that I know who owns a golf course and I asked if he could teach me how to play. He arranged for the golf pro at his course to work with me. He helped me get a set of clubs that were the right size for me – and for the first time, the golf ball actually went where I wanted it to go. Maybe not every time, but often enough that I fell in love with the game. To know what to do and how to do it and to be coached by someone who is good at it, made all the difference. Do I play the gamer exactly like Brett, the golf pro? It's unlikely that I will ever swing the club exactly like him, but I keep trying. My journey with golf might also be a description of your prayer life. Jesus is ready to come alongside us as he did his disciple to teach them about prayer. Jesus is not saying this is the only way we can pray, but he is providing a structure or a pattern. Pray like this.

So, let's see what we can learn about this prayer. **Our Father.** He doesn't say MY father but OUR father. God is not just our Father, but the people who go to that other church, he's their Father too. He's the Protestant Father and the Catholic Father. He's also the Jew's Father and the Muslim's Father. And the atheist and agnostic may not know it, but he's their Father too. In a world that is polarized about almost everything, God is the Father of people you disagree with. He's the Father of conservatives and progressives, of democrats and republicans, of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. It's like the song many of us learned, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Even if you don't get along with so and so, you have the same Father. In a world where it seems we are constantly being pulled apart, Jesus is saying – everybody, all together, say it: OUR Father.

It doesn't mean this is the only way to pray. We don't always have to call God Father. I received an email some time ago from someone who was asking if there was a certain name that we should use when we pray, if we expect God to hear us. I purchased a new iPhone recently and whenever I say "Hey Siri" I get an answer. She, if I can call her a she, is listening for her name and only when I she hears her name will she respond. That's not how God works. When we look through scripture, we find that all sorts of words are used for God – some are masculine, some feminine. In fact, even though the English translations say "father," Father is not even the name that Jesus used. The New Testament was written in Greek but Jesus spoke in Aramaic and the word that he used was Abba – literally, Dad. And what Jesus was saying is that the God who created the universe wants a close relationship with you. When my children speak to me, they don't call me father – and if they did, I'd want them to call me Dad – it's personal.

Your relationship with your own Dad can have an impact on your understanding of God. The theologian, Roberta Bondi, said: *"For years and years I couldn't call God Father in my prayer because my relationship with my human father was so painful. My father was so authoritarian and judgmental that to think of God as Father meant I could experience God only as judgmental, authoritarian, and contemptuous of me as female."* And so she moved to parent language to help her engage with God, and eventually she was able to come to terms with Father in reference to God. God is neither male nor female. God is so much bigger than that. If you say our parent or our mother or our God, the point is to get close to God.

Our Father WHO ART IN HEAVEN Jesus is not saying that God is located in a particular place and we must address our prayer to where God is located if we expect our prayer to reach God. In the first century, people understood the earth to be flat, and under the earth was water and above the earth was a dome that contained the air that we breathe and the clouds, the sun, moon, and stars. And above the dome was water that would rain down through windows that would open in the dome. And they thought God was up there controlling all of that. God has the whole universe in his hands. Our Father who art in heaven: there is nothing beyond God and God's reach. God is above all, beyond all and yet as close as the air that we breathe.

HALLOWED BE THY NAME What does that mean? To hallow is to make holy, to revere, to offer respect. It is also the first request in this prayer. God, hallow your name. Make your name known in all the universe. Make your name glorious and holy. With these words, we are yielding ourselves to God. Not my name but thy name. Before I came here, I thought about what I would wear this morning – and I looked in the mirror before I left the house. I want people to think good of me – and that matters whether I'm a child or an adult. I want people to like me. How we dress and talk and what we have and how we conduct ourselves communicates an image. It's your identity and how you want others to see you. I don't put photos on Facebook for my benefit. I'm communicating to you. I'm hallowing my name, but when I pray, I'm hallowing God's name. "God, may your name be hallowed instead of mine. I'm yielding to you."

James 4:10 **Humble yourself before the Lord and he will lift you up.** When I pray, I'm not changing God's mind but changing me. Psalm 115:1 **Not to us, LORD, not to us – no, but to your own name give glory.** That's what I want people to see in us when we pray. Not us, but God.

One of the reasons people say they have turned away from God is what they've observed in the people who represent God. *If so and so who claims to be a Christian acts like that and talks like that, I don't want any part of that person's God.* Amanda and I have been fascinated by British history, and recently, we've been watching a series on Netflix based on the 16th century reign of King Henry VIII. Last week, we watched a couple episodes that described the events leading up to the break from the Catholic Church so that the king could get an annulment from one wife to marry another who was pregnant with what he thought would be a son. And so he declares himself to be the supreme head of the Church. And with all of the religious power plays and hypocrisy, it is a wonder that Christianity even survived the 16th Century. That it did is proof that God is greater and sometimes God acts through us and sometimes God acts in spite of those who profess to be God's instruments. But what I want in the short time I have is to live my life in such a way that others will look back at my life and see that maybe I didn't always get it right but always I was trying to point to God. "Not to us, LORD, not to us, but to your own name give glory."

Max Lucado tells a story that I think gets to the heart of why we pray. There was a man who was hospitalized. He was dying. His daughter came everyday to visit him, and in one of her visits she noticed a chair had been placed beside the bed, and she asked, "Dad, have you had a visitor today?" And he said, "Didn't I ever tell you about the chair? A long time ago, I knew a great man of prayer, and I asked him how to pray. The man said, 'I visualize Jesus sitting next to me. I know he is with me all the time but whenever I pray I pull up a chair and sit next to it. I close my eyes and imagine Jesus sitting next to me because I know he is.' And as I lay here in this bed, I asked for a chair to be put next to me so I would know Jesus is right here and I could pray." The next day, the daughter received a call from the hospital to come quick. Her father was near death but when she arrived he had already passed away. Later she told her pastor that when she arrived there was a strange thing. "My father's head was not on the pillow. He had leaned out of his bed and his head was resting on the chair next to the bed."

What is Jesus teaching about prayer? God loves you and wants you to have a personal relationship with you. God loves even those people you find it hard to love. The God who spans the universe is as close to you as the air you breathe. So we pray, not my name but God's name be hallowed in all I say and do.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 13, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Our Father who art in heaven, thank you for the example of Jesus who made prayer the bedrock of his life and taught us to do the same. Grant us a deeper desire for prayer as we seek to follow Jesus' example. Amen.

Monday, September 14

Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-4

"When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

“When you pray, don’t pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they’ll be heard. Don’t be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask. Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it’s done in heaven. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us. And don’t lead us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.

Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” Jesus told them, “When you pray, say: ‘Father, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us. And don’t lead us into temptation.’”

Observation: The fact that Luke and Matthew reported Jesus giving the Lord’s Prayer in different settings suggests that Jesus taught this prayer to his followers often, not just one time. (Many scholars believe that was the case with most of the material we call “The Sermon on the Mount.”) Jesus didn’t mean the Lord’s Prayer to be a museum piece, framed and placed on a mantel or in a display case. It was Jesus teaching God’s people, through his disciples, how to pray. That’s why at Messiah we pray this prayer every week in worship.

Application: The Lord’s Prayer concisely covered a wide range of topics, from the lofty (“Bring in your kingdom”) to the everyday (“Give us the bread we need for today”). It was a model prayer God’s people could weave into their lives. Are there subjects or wishes you tend to avoid praying about, for fear God isn’t interested or that God might disapprove of your concern? How secure are you in talking to God in prayer about everything that matters to you?

Prayer: Dear God, help me never to be too busy, or too shy, to ask you both the big and little questions that are on my mind. Thank you for the ongoing conversation we call prayer. Amen.

Tuesday, September 15

Scripture: John 17:11, 13-21; Ephesians 4:1-6

I’m no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I’m coming to you. Holy Father, watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one.

Now I’m coming to you and I say these things while I’m in the world so that they can share completely in my joy. I gave your word to them and the world hated them, because they don’t belong to this world, just as I don’t belong to this world. I’m not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe from the evil one. They don’t belong to this world, just as I don’t belong to this world. Make them holy in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. I made myself holy on their behalf so that they also would be made holy in the truth. “I’m not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.

Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one

Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.

Observation: Jesus phrased the Lord's Prayer using plural pronouns—our Father, our daily bread, and so on. Although we pray about specific, personal concerns, by beginning the prayer with "Our Father," Jesus reminded us that, beyond our surface differences, we humans are all part of the same family. We do not make our faith journey alone, but in company with one another.

Application: Just hours before he went to the cross, John said, Jesus prayed forcefully for his followers to be one. "Holy Father, watch over them in your name...that they will be one just as we are one...I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." In a world that tends to focus on our differences, how can you better open your heart to let the Holy Spirit create the type of supernatural oneness with other believers for which Jesus prayed?

Prayer: Loving Jesus, guide your people all over the earth. Guide me. Help me to live so that words like peace, unity, humility, and love will be the main qualities others see in me. Amen.

Wednesday, September 16

Scripture: Luke 11:11-12, 13:33-35

"Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion?"

However, it's necessary for me to travel today, tomorrow, and the next day because it's impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want that. Look, your house is abandoned. I tell you, you won't see me until the time comes when you say, *Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name.*"

Observation: Jesus often called God "Father." He didn't do that to say that God is male rather than female. Jesus followed the Hebrew Scriptures in crediting God with the very best, most reliable traits of fathers AND mothers. Hosea 11:1-4 movingly pictured God as a loving father helping an infant learn to walk. Isaiah 49:14-15 said God cared for God's children even more intently than a nursing mother. Genesis 1:26-27's creation story said male and female alike bear God's image. Jesus' "father" image points toward good qualities all humans can depend on from God, not toward our gender differences.

Application: Were both of your parents equally nurturing and trustworthy? If not, which of them had more of the qualities that made you feel safe and cared for? In what ways can taking your needs, hurts and concerns to the heavenly parent to whom Jesus addressed the Lord's Prayer help you to grow beyond any painful gaps in the human parenting you received?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your prayer said I can trust God's goodness. You said God's house has plenty of room (John 14:2), that he runs to welcome me home when I stray (Luke 15:20). Thank you for showing me what a loving heavenly father I have. Amen.

Thursday, September 17

Scripture: Mark 14:35-36; Romans 8:14-17

Then he went a short distance farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if possible, he might be spared the time of suffering. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want.”

All who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons and daughters. You didn’t receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, “Abba, Father.” The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God’s children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God’s heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.

Observation: Very few of us know the Aramaic language. In prayer, both Jesus and Paul used one Aramaic word so unique that most English translations retain its Aramaic form: *abba*. *Abba* was a respectful but intimate way to address one’s father. Although a few parables in much later sources compare God with an “*abba*,” it does not appear in Jewish prayers. To our knowledge, this way of directly addressing God seems to have been unique to Jesus (until adopted by his followers; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

Application: Some Christians see highly formal speech as vital to prayer. (Of course, the King James Version’s English was not stiffly formal in its day— Shakespeare used it in his popular plays.) On the other hand, learning about *abba* leads others to move toward a type of “Hey, dude” informality in their prayers. At times that approach loses any sense of awe or respect and begins to treat God as just one of us. How can you develop an “*abba*” type of prayer closeness and trust with God that also respects God as Creator and Lord, not just a buddy?

Prayer: Dear God, you are my Creator and Lord, always worthy of awe and respect. You are also my *abba*, loving, caring—and worthy of trust because you are Creator and Lord. Teach me how to live always confident that you are always with me. Amen.

Friday, September 18

Scripture: Psalm 139:7-12; Acts 17:24-28

Where could I go to get away from your spirit? Where could I go to escape your presence? If I went up to heaven, you would be there. If I went down to the grave, you would be there too! If I could fly on the wings of dawn, stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—even there your hand would guide me; even there your strong hand would hold me tight! If I said, “The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me,” even then the darkness isn’t too dark for you! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to you!

God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn’t far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’

Observation: “Our Father who is in heaven.” This phrase of the Lord’s Prayer translated the Greek word *ouranos*. We typically think of heaven as an unspecified location, usually far, far away like the galaxy in which Star Wars claimed to have taken place. But *ouranos* also meant

“air,” or “atmosphere.” God is greater than our one little world, but God is also as close to us as the air we breathe, not separated from us by vast galactic distances.

Application: Christians don’t just believe ideas; we believe in Someone. The Hebrew psalmist and the apostle Paul, speaking to philosophers in Athens centuries later, described the kind of personal God they believed in and trusted. What helps you to place your faith and trust in God’s life-giving, loving person, not just a vague, abstract force? In what ways does God’s presence make your life better?

Prayer: O God, I believe in and trust you as a personal being who loves me and my world. Help me live and act in ways that show that your love has touched my life. Amen.

Saturday, September 19

Scripture: Exodus 3:13-15, 20:7; Psalm 115:1

But Moses said to God, “If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they are going to ask me, ‘What’s this God’s name?’ What am I supposed to say to them?” God said to Moses, “I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’” God continued, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me.

Do not use the LORD your God’s name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won’t forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

Not to us, LORD, not to us—no, but to your own name give glory because of your loyal love and faithfulness!

Observation: From a burning bush, God called to Moses, and told him to go to Egypt. Moses had grown up in Egypt, and he knew that like most ancient peoples, the Egyptians believed in many gods. So his initial question—“What’s this God’s name?”—had a “Which one of the many are you?” ring. But God’s reply (“I Am Who I Am”—Hebrew YHWH) said he was the only God, the sole reason that (as philosophers might say) there is “something instead of nothing.” The third commandment warned against using God’s holy name (especially the personal divine name revealed to Moses) in any trivial, profane or false ways. And the Hebrew poet of Psalm 115 prayed to resist the urge to seek glory for his own name or that of his people, instead wishing to bring glory to God’s great name.

Application: Are there any ways that you could alter your speech habits to avoid misusing or misrepresenting God’s name? (Note that while this question can include swearing or careless common expressions that include God’s name, it goes much deeper than that.) What about your actions—are they contributing to God’s good reputation? What are some thoughts or occasions that tempt you to glorify your own name, rather than God’s? Ask God to guide you in making changes that will enable you to more fully honor God’s name.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let me honor your name with my speech, and with my way of life. Through me, uphold the holiness of your name. Amen.