

The Lord's Prayer: A Name

Dr. Stuart Bond

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About a month ago I asked you what you wanted to focus on for the summer. I received a number of wonderful suggestions. Someone said that we should focus on the majesty of God. Not surprisingly, this suggestion came from a person who seems to make you feel good every time you speak with him. The way he lifts up others is a reflection of how he lifts up God. Someone else suggested that I do a series on election. Not, the election, but a series on who are the elect. Who will have a ticket when it comes to the Pearly Gates? I thought about it. I could call it "In or Out?" I was concerned that if we put that title on the corner sign out there people might think I was preaching on belly buttons. It is a fascinating topic that I will enjoy exploring sometime in the future. Others of you had some great ideas which I have kept.

There was one that caught my eye. One of you sent me an email that read:

I've been thinking about that and I believe we could grow immeasurably from a series on prayer. A long, lingering drink of cool, living water, a stillness during these summer months, a new beginning for some. I know that spending time with Him in prayer and in His word ushers in true belief in His beautiful, unconditional love.

There are new people in our congregation, a few from my own family. I have been praying about how to minister to them in their immediate needs. Would you be willing to guide them (and all of us) in our personal relationship with Jesus through a series on prayer and time alone with Him?

I would love to be that guide, if God would be willing to use me in that way. Let's pray that every Sunday is a chance for people to be guided into a deeper and stronger faith in Jesus. There was something about her image of a long, lingering drink that really captivated me.

Where to begin on this massive topic? My mind went to a scene we find in the eleventh chapter of Luke. They notice when Jesus goes off to pray. They notice there is something about his connection with God the Father that they long for, something they would like to have for themselves.

There is something else that is bothering them. Sometimes ministries tend to envy one another. It is not one of the gifts of the Spirit, but it happens. "Why can't we do this like Saddleback?" Or, "I went to visit a church in my hometown and they had this study that was so good you just have to teach it, pastor." Well, there was a little of this going on for the disciples.

As we know from elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus' followers were a gathering of people from all parts of society. Simon the Zealot represented a political striation. Matthew was a finance guy who understood the importance of contributions to the ministry. But there were others who, as far as we know, were not in the final twelve, but who must have had some status. They were John the Baptist's disciples. They had been standing there the day Jesus was baptized. They heard John say, "Behold, the Lamb of God" and "he must increase while I must decrease" and

they thought, “We must be on the wrong train.” So, to mix my metaphors, they came over to Jesus’ team.

But now, they were agitating in the ranks. They must have been telling Jesus’ disciples, “You know, we were really close to John. I mean, he taught us everything. He taught us how to live, how to think, even how to pray.”

That stuck in Jesus’ disciple’s craw. They wanted Jesus to teach them on prayer, just like John did. That was the background for how Luke sets up the Lord’s Prayer:

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1)

We don’t really understand how we are supposed to pray, Lord. And John taught his guys. So, please, teach us.

Prayer is no less confusing for us today, is it? We can get in philosophical arguments with ourselves—why are we asking for it if he already knows what he is going to do? We can get into practical arguments with ourselves—does this really do anything? We can wonder if we pray enough, if our prayer is said right, if we have enough faith, and on and on and on.

We come to Jesus just like the disciples, confused about how we should pray, wondering what he wants us to pray, and needing some help. “Lord, teach us to pray” is our request as well.

Jesus’ answer is what we call the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is one of those gems of Christian faith that is so remarkable that any person, from any faith or no faith, is almost forced to recognize the sheer genius of it. When Einstein sat in that patent office and kept thinking there was just something about Newtonian physics that didn’t work—the very thing I am sure many of you pondered in your younger years—he eventually came up with the famous formula. And here, in so few symbols, was one of the keys to the universe: $E = MC^2$. Energy is mass at the squared speed of light. Genius. So simple, and yet behind that calculation is a world of complexity I cannot even imagine.

The Lord’s Prayer is that kind of genius. It is astounding in its brevity and its simplicity. It is five, brief requests and a final affirmation. And yet, behind this prayer is a wisdom and insight that represents a world of religious debate and philosophy. In this little prayer are some of the most critical elements of faith. My contention and my hope is that, if we really dig in here, we are going to learn some truths from this brilliant piece that will help us in our prayer life and in our faith walk.

So we begin today with the first statement: “Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

If any of you come from a more liturgical church background, you may remember the priest introducing the Lord’s Prayer by saying, “We are bold to proclaim...” Bold? What is the need for boldness? It is so familiar, so well known and so obvious that it seems the most docile prayer possible.

It begins with what may seem like an address to a letter. To God, aka “our father”, residing in a town called “Heaven.” How are you?

If that is your thought, it is time to take another look. Let's begin with that first word: "Our." Think who is teaching us to pray. It is Jesus himself, the one who said, "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Luke 10:22)

Jesus also said, "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." (John 10: 37-8).

The disciple's failures are duly chronicled throughout the Gospels. They are certainly as confused as many others who follow Jesus. Even if their understanding is flawed, even if they are unsure, even if they doubt and struggle and lose their courage and deny and run—even with all of that, Jesus calls them part of the family.

He is saying that to you. You may not be perfect. You may have some holes in your theology and some wear and tear on your soul. You may be wrestling with all kinds of things that are tapping at the window of your life and begging to get in and you are not sure what you are going to do. All of this might be true. But you are here this morning because you think Jesus can give you a better picture of the Father. You think he knows him. You want to learn to pray from Jesus.

So he gives you that look, a look that says, "Don't pray to the God in some distant heaven. Don't pray to Jesus' Father, as if he was someone you lived next to but don't really know." Jesus looks at each of us and says, "My father is your father. He is our father." The Lord's Prayer begins by Jesus putting his arm around your shoulder. You are part of the family.

Notice, though, that he wants to keep us on a level field with one another. It is not "my" father, although Jesus prays that elsewhere. And it is true, too. You have a personal relationship with the heavenly father. But Jesus wants to remind us that we are in this one together.

We are together with him, and we are together with one another. Most of us understand the first part of that. But the second part of that is controversial. We have heard many people say that the Church is optional. "I can believe without the Church." Maybe so, but the point is that we need one another to remember the family we are in. We need one another to remember who our father is. We need one another to remember to pray and we need one another to remind us to live this faith. And, more than that, Jesus calls us to be together. This is a family meeting, and we are supposed to show up so that we can address him together, saying "our father."

So those disciples, gathered in that place where Jesus went to pray, learn to form the words together. They are the first congregation ever to say, "Our father." (Say it: Our father).

The one in heaven. Not the one below, not the father of lies, not some father who doesn't see and have authority and power over everything. Our Father who art in heaven.

(Some of you are wondering right now, "Who is Art?")

Now we come to the big ask. The first thing that Jesus teaches us to pray: Our father who art in heaven...hallowed be thy name.

Did you know that was a request? The first thing Jesus teaches us to pray is that his name would be honored, that it would be viewed as holy. From Exodus 20 we hear just how important this is to God:

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand {generations} of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

8 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

The first four commandments are: You shall have no other God's before me, You shall not make idols, you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord—that is, you shall not act as if it is common—and you shall keep the Sabbath—all of these are part of what it means to honor God, to “hallow” his name.

God is first, there are no close contenders who are on this earth, whether that idol is a carved image or a Corvette. When we speak of God it is with honor, not with cursing and not as if his name does not touch something dear to us. And we will live this out by taking time to be with God. In fact, that is how this message began, with Jesus taking some time to pray.

So when we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name” we want God to be first, to be precious to us, to be revered in our speech and to be reflected in our lives.

I have one further reference to help flesh out what it means to hallow God's name. In Numbers 20 we have the entire group of the Children of Israel arriving at the “Desert of Zin.” I'm pretty sure there is a wine joke in there...but we'll let it go. At any rate, the people are, as ever, grumbling. They want more water. God tells Moses to speak to the rock, but Moses is so sick of these people and, frankly, he is angry at God. He yells at the rock and he takes his staff and whacks it—water comes but it was clear that Moses was acting out of anger rather than faith.

With the water comes the stinging Word of God to Moses: "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." (Numbers 20: 12) Notice the words: "You did not trust (some translations say "believe") in me enough to honor me as holy (or: hallow me)."

In other words, and getting right back the heart of the commandments, to hallow God's name means to truly believe in God. The way to treat God as holy is to trust in what he says. As John Piper writes: "Instead of a peaceful confidence in the power of God to respond to a mere word, Moses was bitter and impulsive. God is not hallowed when we do not have a spirit of settled confidence and peace in his word."

In the New Testament we read the photo negative of this: "Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar..." (1 John 5:10). When you make somebody a liar, you profane that person's name. Not trusting God is the exact opposite of hallowing his name. So when we pray "hallowed be thy name" we are praying not only that we want God to be first, to be precious in value, to be revered in our speech and to be reflected in our lives—we are praying all of that and it is summarized and underlined by the final description: we want to live like we believe.

We want to believe you above every other thing and indicator and challenge we face. You are the water in the desert. We may be languishing in the Desert of Zin or the Valley of the Conejo but we know that, if you choose to, you can make water come from the rocks around us. You can find a way. By your power, your name can be honored so that others will say, "Look at what a God they have!" And while we are waiting, in this moment of prayer, the very first thing we say to you is, God, let your name be honored, let it be hallowed.

Let it be hallowed here, in our hearts. Let my life so reflect you that this rock beating in my chest, this welter of emotions and struggles will become a stream of living water. Let your name be honored, be sanctified, be hallowed right here.

I think the first petition of Jesus' prayer is intensely personal. It looks to no one else as the problem. It looks to no request for some relief or some further sustenance. It begins right here. God, let me live in faith. Let me believe you and let my life honor you.

What does this mean for us? First of all, it means that you are in this family, no matter how small your faith. Jesus puts his arm around your shoulder and he says, "Now pray like this: our father."

I have a friend who, along with his wife, had hoped to have children. It didn't happen. After not contacting him for a few years I called him last week. It turns out they are childless no more. About two months ago they adopted three sisters: twin six year olds and a three year old. Talk

about insta-family. Bam! The family went from two to five in sixty seconds. I told him he is going to get the chance to experience and practice all the fruit of the spirit like he never has before!

This last week they celebrated Father's Day and, of course, it meant a lot to him. The girls were confused about something, though: why was it his first father's day? To them, my friend had always been the father. What a touching scene. But it was not only my friend's first Father's Day. It was their first Father's Day. They are finally part of a family. They are now named with a name that stands for a group with certain values and certain ways they live.

God is saying, this is your first Father's Day. Go ahead and boldly say the word: our. Jesus' father is our father.

There are hundreds of stories of kids who repeat things and are just a bit off. I heard about two children who prayed this prayer. One thought the prayer went this way: "Our father, who art in heaven, how do you know my name?" Another child had been struggling hard to learn the Lord's Prayer, and I think he got a little closer: "Our Father who art in Heaven, I know you know my name."

Not only does he know your name, but now you know him by a much more familiar name: Father, Daddy. You are part of the family. Those girls are going to grow up and bring my friend so much joy and so many...opportunities to pray. They are precious but they are probably not perfect. Same with you. But you are named with the name. He is your father.

Now the task is to live up to that name. You are called to honor the name you have been given. The challenge is to live like a Christian: believing God, honoring God, and representing God. So in this one, brief sentence, we have both the incredible gentleness and the incredible challenge of faith. Honoring the name we have been given is no small endeavor, no simple exercise. It is the work of our lives. It is such a priority that Jesus says, "Make this your first petition, your first ask. Before anything else, ask for this: God, let your name be hallowed—let it be honored—in my life."

As we begin our journey of prayer, as we take our first long, cool drink, I want to challenge you to pray this Lord's Prayer every day during the six weeks that we are talking about it in worship. This week, focus on this first request. How is it that you are honoring God? Would someone else know that you honor God, or would that come as a surprise to them? Ask that your faith would

grow, that your belief in God's word and his promises would become even stronger. The goal is that your life would be one that underlines this simple, powerful request: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.