

Our Father in Heaven

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[0 : 00] How you speak to someone depends on your relationship with them. For example, there's a certain way that you're to greet or speak to the members of the royal family. So if you were to meet the Queen, then the correct formal address is Your Majesty.

And then for the remainder of the conversation, she would be addressed as Ma'am. And the other members of the royal family, they should be addressed as Your Royal Highness. Now, of course, the royal family will have a more affectionate way to talk to one another because they are family. And so when we talk to people, how we talk to them depends on the relationship we have with them.

And it's the same with prayer. Recent research has shown that during the COVID-19 crisis, far more people are turning to prayer. Now, it's one thing to pray, but prayer depends on a relationship. Or what's the point? In Christianity, prayer is talking to God and it depends on a relationship with Him. And that's why we've got the Lord's Prayer.

[1 : 06] Because in teaching us how to pray, Jesus wants us to know who we're praying to. And we're going to think about this today as we continue our series in the Lord's Prayer from Matthew chapter 6.

Jesus teaches us to pray our Father in heaven. Because all true prayer flows out of a relationship with God.

Prayer isn't just repeating set words. It's talking to the God that we can know as our Heavenly Father. And so let's look at the basis of prayer Jesus talks about.

And then we'll consider the practice of prayer. First of all, the basis of prayer. Secondly, the practice of prayer. Because before we ever attempt to pray, we need to understand who we're praying to. So, the basis of prayer. Jesus begins teaching us to pray with the astonishing words, Our Father in heaven. That's the basis of prayer.

[2 : 06] It's a relationship with God. Because we can't really have any meaningful conversation with someone without any basis. Just think of the awkwardness of Zoom calls.

Zoom calls aren't easy at the best of times. But they're far harder when people are unfamiliar with one another. And yet conversation between family or friends is always easier.

Whatever the medium is. And it's because there's a basis for the relationship. There's a history. There's a reason. Which means communication is far more intimate. Far more real.

And so, the basis of prayer is a relationship with God. And so Jesus tells us to address God as Father. Now, God is only referred to as Father about 15 times in the Old Testament.

But Jesus calls God Father some 60 times in the Gospels. And then throughout the rest of the New Testament, God is revealed as Father almost 250 times.

[3 : 09] Now, Jesus called God Father because he is the Eternal Son. But Jesus invites us to address God as Father just as he did.

He wants us to enjoy the same privilege. And this is radical. That we dare call the King of the universe our Father. But how is this possible?

How can we enter into a relationship with God and become his children? Now, some might be asking, but aren't we all just God's children? Well, of course, we're all created by God.

But we're not naturally a child of God. Elsewhere in the Bible, it says we are by nature children of wrath. And even children of the devil.

But the good news is that we can become one of God's children through Jesus. And so, in John chapter 1 verse 12, it says, Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

[4 : 18] So, those who receive Jesus and believe in Jesus are given the right to become God's children. In other words, we're adopted into God's family where we receive the rights and privileges of being God's child.

And that's what it means to be a Christian. It is all secured by what Jesus has done through his death and resurrection. And so, it says in Galatians chapter 4 verse 4 to 6, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

Because you are his sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts. The spirit who calls out, Abba, Father.

So, through Jesus, we are adopted as sons and daughters. And God sends his spirit into our hearts. That's how we're able to relate to God in a personal way and call him Father.

And then in John chapter 17 verse 23, Jesus prays to God the Father for all believers, that the world would know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

[5 : 40] What Jesus says is astounding. He's saying God loves his adopted children with all the love that he loves Jesus, his eternal son with.

Which means God is as committed to us, his adopted children, as he is to his own son, Jesus. It's amazing. It's amazing. The intimacy at the very heart of the Trinity between Father, Son and Spirit is what we are welcomed into.

And so we have a relationship with the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit. That's the basis of prayer. And so prayer is effective, not because of the quality of our prayers, but because of the one that we pray to.

That's why Jesus commands us to address God as our Father. Now the word for Father in Aramaic is Abba.

It was the word that children used to address their fathers. But it was also used by adults to address their fathers. And so it was a term of both intimacy and respect.

[6 : 47] And so it's best to think of it as being more intimate than father and more respectful than daddy. Dad probably captures best the warm intimacy and yet deep reverence in how we are to relate to God.

Because Jesus says he is our Father who is in heaven. And so we approach him with the confidence and intimacy of a child, but also with reverence and awe because he reigns in heaven. Jesus is saying the Lord of the universe is also our heavenly Father. And so we have the privilege of addressing the powerful God in a personal way.

Which means we don't pray to a God who is too remote and aloof to be interested. And we don't pray to a God who is too weak and unable to help.

We pray to the mighty and majestic God who is simultaneously our loving heavenly Father. And so we never pray in vain. Last week we mentioned how Google searches for prayer have skyrocketed during the coronavirus pandemic.

[8 : 01] And so Russell Brand, the comedian turned thinker, posted a video on his YouTube channel giving his take on why he thinks people are suddenly Googling prayer.

He says that people are looking for a sacred experience, a connection to something beyond what we can see. And he says the only way we can access this is through prayer.

And so in his video he shares his own prayer technique. But then he concludes by saying the real answer is always within you. Now so much of what he says is good.

But the real answer, according to Jesus, isn't within us. The real answer when it comes to prayer is knowing the one we're able to pray to as our Father in heaven.

That's the basis of prayer. And so if we don't know the reality of this relationship that we can have with God and the security of this relationship, then we're not just going to struggle with prayer.

[9 : 03] We're going to struggle with life. So firstly, the basis of prayer is knowing God as our Father in heaven. Secondly, let's consider the practice of prayer.

So we need to know the basis of prayer, our Father in heaven, before we get to the practice of prayer. That's the six petitions that Jesus gives us. So knowing that God is our Father in heaven is fundamental before we go any further in prayer.

And there's no greater motivation for prayer than this. As many of our problems with prayer stem from a failure to grasp this. And so the solution is never better practices.

It is always better theology. That's the solution. If we're going to learn how to pray, we need to be less burdened by guilt and more amazed by the grace that makes us a child of God.

The theologian J.I. Packer emphasizes how transformative this is. He says, In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's Holy Father.

[10:15] If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child and having God as his Father.

If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

So every time we pray our Father in heaven, we are reminded of our status and our identity.

Because when we consider how God was willing to sacrifice his son, Jesus, on the cross so that he could make us his children, it should transform our prayer from duty to delight.

Because Jesus isn't just giving us some kind of ritual to repeat so we can tick a box to say that we've prayed. No, he is inviting us into a relationship with God.

And he wants us to enjoy it. Because calling God Father transforms prayer from ritual to relationship. Now, I'm a dad with three children and I love spending time with each one of my children.

[11:28] They don't just talk to me as a dad when they want something because we know that's not how a relationship works. And so prayer is spending time in the presence of our Father in heaven.

And yet we can be so slow to pray. But the reality is that we always find time for what's important to us. And still we struggle to find time for prayer.

John Piper, a pastor in America, said, One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the last day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.

Ironically, he said that on Twitter. But he does make a good point. We would be far better off wasting less time on our smartphones or even talking to other people and spending more time talking to our Father in heaven who is best able to help us.

And prayer gives us immediate access to him. And so we need prayer to cope with life. It brings us peace rather than anxiety.

[12:37] I love the story told by Thomas Goodwin, the 17th century English minister, one of the Puritans. One day he saw a father and a son walking down the street together.

They were ahead of him, so he couldn't quite make out what was being said. But at one point the father turned, picked up his boy, gave him a big hug, kissed him and said, I love you.

The little boy then said back to his father, I love you too. And then the father put him down and he kept on walking. Now, the boy was the son of his father and he was loved, whether he was being hugged or not.

But what a difference to experience the reality of that love through what was said and what was done through the hug. In some sense, that's what's happening when we pray to God.

Because relationally, we are his child. We have been adopted into his family. So he always loves us. But we can experience this through prayer.

[13:43] And so as we begin prayer saying, our father in heaven, we're being reminded of God's love for us by the spirit dwelling in our hearts. So after telling us that we are adopted children of God, Jesus, our older brother, tells us what we should say to our father in prayer.

We begin in this prayer by focusing on God and his kingdom. So first there is adoration. Hallowed be your name. Then there is loyalty.

Your kingdom come. Then submission. Your will be done. Then Jesus tells us to pray about ourselves and our needs. And so we ask for provision.

Give us today our daily bread. Then pardon. Forgive us our debts or sins. And then protection. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

And so the Lord's prayer is comprehensive. So Jesus is teaching us who our father is, what he's doing, what he desires, and why he's able to meet our every need.

[14:54] And so we can trust that our father in heaven knows what's best for this world and for the lives of his children. Of course, we're not always going to understand some of what he's doing or why he's doing it.

But what child does ever understand their parent? Children have to trust that even if they don't understand everything, their parents know what's best and will take care of them because they love them.

That's why any decent parent is always ready to listen to anything their child says. So how much more can we be sure that God listens to all our prayers and even knows what we need before we ask him?

And yet some do struggle to understand God as father because of their experience of a human father. The word father doesn't necessarily have positive connotations for everyone. Because there are unknown fathers, bad fathers, abusive fathers, absent fathers, unloving fathers, distant fathers.

[16:02] But when Jesus tells us to address God as our father, we shouldn't let our own experience of human fathers reinterpret how God is revealed to us in the Bible.

God wants to be known as the father he really is. Instead of the father we imagine him to be. Because God is so unlike any other human father.

Because as human fathers, we fail again and again. When we lived in Edinburgh and our three children were young, we planned to take them swimming to Leith Waterworld.

I think it's closed now. It was a leisure pool with slides, flumes, a wave machine, rapids. It was fantastic. And yet when we got there, they wouldn't let us in.

Because the rule was that you needed one adult for every child under five. And we were two adults with three children under five. And so we thought it was ridiculous. As if two parents couldn't look after their own three children in a swimming pool.

[17:09] Nonsense. But it was the council rule. And so we left. And then we ended up going to a less exciting pool instead. But I decided not to give up on Leith Waterworld.

So I went back on a busy Saturday afternoon and took my father-in-law with me and the two boys. So we got in and we went into one of the family changing rooms.

I helped Matthew, who was two at the time, into his swimming nappy and then his swimming trunks. Still don't understand how swimming nappies work. Then Grandpa and Joshua, they were getting changed.

And so I got changed too. And then we were ready to head to the pool. So I looked around and couldn't see Matthew. He'd gone. Disappeared. What had happened was that he had slipped out underneath the changing room door.

And so I rushed around, shouting, Matthew, Matthew. But I couldn't find him. I looked all around the pool and I did eventually find him. He was at the front of a huge queue waiting to go down the big slide.

[18:12] And he'd been refused entry by the lifeguard. Now, the point is, we often fail as human parents when it comes to looking after our children. Sometimes we don't do a good job.

But it is fantastic to know that our Father in Heaven is perfect. He always loves, cares, provides, forgives, protects, listens.

He's always patient, wise, good. He's never too busy, tired, distracted, forgetful or grumpy. And he never changes.

What a great Father he is. He is the Father we need. And he is the Father we can have. And so as we close today, do you know God as your Father?

You can because of what he has done through Jesus. God accepts us and he hears us because of Jesus' death in our place for our sin on a cross.

[19:14] And so nothing matters more in life than being welcomed into God's family. In God's family, we get a new status and identity.

And it's the ultimate royal family because God is king and his kingdom rules forever. And so we can have security in the present and we can have an inheritance in the future.

And that's why we can approach God with confidence yet reverence as our Father in Heaven. So no matter what's going on in your life right now, there's no safer place to be than under his personal yet powerful care.

And that doesn't mean that we'll understand everything because we're only children after all. Yet our Father has already given everything he has in his Son and in the gift of his Spirit.

And so we can be sure that he will provide everything else we need because he wants to be our Father in Heaven.

[20:20] Let's pray together. Thank you, our Father in Heaven, for your great love for us in sending us your Son, Jesus Christ, so that we can be adopted into your family and become your sons and daughters.

How we praise you and thank you for this enormous privilege that is by grace. We don't choose it, but you offer it to us.

And so we pray that whoever we are and whatever our relationship with you is, whether we have one or not, that we would see you as you're revealed to us.

And as Jesus tells us what you are, you're a Father to those who cry out to you and come to you through Jesus Christ. And so may each of us do that and know the warmth and the welcome and the intimacy of a relationship with you right now in this life that will go on forever.

So we give our thanks today in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[21 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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