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Matthew 6:9

9 “This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hal-
lowed be your name,

Reflection

Over the last couple of days Jesus has taught us how *not* to pray. We're not to pray hypocritically like the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who love to pray loudly in public places, telling the world how

righteous they are. In them God finds no righteousness at all. We're not to babble on like the gentiles when they pray. They heap up empty words, their lips moving at a hundred miles an hour while their minds and hearts are elsewhere. We're not to pray like them. Jesus teaches in our passage today:

‘This, then, is how you should pray:’

This is ‘how’ you should pray. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus isn’t prescribing fixed words to set in stone forever. He’s showing us ‘how’ to pray. He’s offering us a model to use, a framework, a method, an outline for our prayer life. Jesus is giving us an example of how to shape our prayers. Now of course it’s OK to simply pray the words of the Lord’s Prayer but considering that Je-

sus has just warned us not to pray mindlessly and repetitively like the gentiles, we need to take caution here. The more often we pray the Lord's Prayer the more careful we need to be to rest in each and every word, turning over its significance in our minds, praying each word earnestly and with all our hearts. Because the moment it becomes a rote prayer, that's the moment when we are babbling like the pagans – and the furthest thing from Jesus' intentions in giving this prayer to us as a model for our prayer life.

Before we look at the shape of Jesus' model prayer just a quick word on its name. This prayer has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer but it would be better called the Disciple's Prayer. Jesus could never have prayed it because verse 12 is a con-

fession of sin, and Jesus was without sin. So it's only the Lord's Prayer in the sense that he gave it to us.

The prayer opens by addressing God with the words 'Our Father in heaven.' This opening address is followed by six petitions. The first three petitions express our concern for God's glory in relation to his name, rule and will. The second three petitions express our humble dependence on his grace. So the first half of the prayer is praying for God's glory and his work on earth, and the second half of the prayer is praying for his grace towards us and our needs. It's fascinating to notice a similar pattern in the 10 commandments, the first five being directed towards our relationship with God, and the second five directed towards the needs of the com-

munity of God. And this balance is also mirrored in Jesus summary of the whole of the Old Testament's teaching as love of God and love of neighbour. If we find this pattern in the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and Jesus' summary of all of the Law and the Prophets then there is something foundational here not just for our prayer life but for life itself. Focussing on prayer however, Jesus is teaching us to shape our prayers by first deliberately recalling who God is. Only when we've done that are we ready to approach God in prayer with the appropriate humility, devotion and confidence. What's more, when we've taken the time to properly remind ourselves of God's personal, loving and powerful nature then the content of our prayer will reflect his priorities. As we see in the Lords' prayer we'll pray for his

plans and purpose first, and then for his gracious provision of our needs in second place.

So that is the pattern of the Lord's Prayer, and here is Jesus' suggested beginning.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

I only have a handful of minutes. I'd love to speak to you for hours about these eight words. Here's four simple and yet profound observations.

Firstly, '*Our*,' do you notice that Jesus encourages us to begin with 'Our Father' and not 'My Father.' And the whole prayer is 'our' and 'we' – not 'me' and 'my.' When you pray says Jesus, don't pray simply for

yourself, pray for all your brothers and sisters and sons and daughters and mothers and fathers in Christ. Bring their needs before him as well, intercede on their behalf, make your prayer-for-you, also your-prayer-for-them. When you pray recall the unity you have with your brothers and sisters, recall what it means that you all share the same Father and be brought together by the precious blood of Christ. Because of him you are now one, therefore not 'My' Father but 'Our' Father.

Secondly, 'Our *Father*,' we're to address God as Father. The word here is 'Abba' which is best translated not as Father, which is quite formal in English – but as 'dad' or even 'daddy' which is probably the closest translation. Through me, says Jesus, you can now address the God of

the universe as ‘daddy.’ You’ll remember that the Jews in Jesus day found it difficult to even pronounce the word ‘God’ – in Matthew’s Gospel he uses ‘kingdom of Heaven’ instead of ‘kingdom of God’ for exactly this reason’ – Jews would call God ‘The Most High’ or ‘Lord’ but to utter his name was practically blasphemy because it was considered so holy. Because of Jesus we now have a previously unspeakable, unthinkable intimacy with God. ‘Our *Father*,’ God is our affectionate father, intimately devoted to us, and responsible for us through an unbreakable family bond – he’s our dad.

And yet thirdly, ‘Our *Father in heaven*’ is an almost impossible juxtaposition, our dad is in heaven, he is utterly other, sovereign, almighty, perfectly holy, omniscient,

omnipotent and utterly transcendent. Our intimate father is the most majestic being in all of the universe, unfathomable in his magnitude, his power, his wisdom and his glory.

Finally, ‘Our Father in heaven, *hallowed be your name.*’ What does this mean? It’s our desire that God’s name might be made holy among all people and in all nations. It is praying that every single person on earth, starting with ourselves, might see God for who he is and praise and adore him as the one, true living God of the whole universe.

Think

Just a handful of words offered to us by Jesus as a framework for the beginning

of our prayers and already we can see the limitless potential of these concepts. Martin Luther used the Lord's Prayer every day as his model of prayer and found he never had need of praying the same words twice. Take some time now to meditate over these four sets of eight words 'Our' 'Father' 'in heaven' 'hallowed be your name.'

Pray

And then try them out in prayer. Don't babble like the pagans. Pray slowly, start with 'Our.' Turn over the implications with God in your heart of what it means he is *our* God. Then expand upon this considering the full weight of what it means that he is *our Father*, so intimate and yet dwelling in unapproachable light in heaven, unap-

proachable for now perhaps, but when *his kingdom comes*, Oh Lord let it come, so that *your name would be hallowed*, glorified through all the earth' ... you see where I'm headed. Pray like this right now, and you'll be praying like Jesus taught us.

And he'll continue teaching us tomorrow. I hope you can join me.