

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, June 19, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 6:9

9 “This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,”

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #19
THE LORD’S PRAYER: OUR FATHER

Among the number of items that my parents brought with them from Chicago last weekend was a box of old photographs. They were mostly photographs of my growing up years and the early years of Cyndi’s and my marriage. I love looking at old photographs, and found this box to be one of the greatest gifts that my parents have ever given to me.

One of the old photographs is a picture of my younger brother Kevin and I fishing when we were just young boys. I’m not sure, but I’m pretty positive the picture was taken by my father. I remember the hikes through the woods that surrounded our home. At least twice a week during the summer months, my father would hike twenty minutes with his boys to an old abandoned rock quarry that abutted the property that surrounded ours. In that quarry were a number of small ponds, each containing a different variety of fish. The Schulenburg boys took turns naming the different ponds. There was blue gill lake, where all you had to do was cast your line in and within seconds you were pulling up a blue gill. There was bass pond, hidden in the woods and where the best anglers caught some huge bass. And, there was Twin Lakes, one of the two lakes where this photograph was taken, where a wide variety of fish were located. There were plenty of stories told about the huge northern that got away, or the giant snapping turtle that devoured our lines.

One of my favorite memories about these little hikes was that we had our dad’s undivided attention. He was a busy man. My dad owned his own business, served on the church board, the Chamber of Commerce, and a variety of other social service organizations. It was special to have time to talk with him with no one else around. Just like we saw in today’s video, we need our dads. Those of you who have lost a father, know the irreplaceable value of a father’s listening ear.

On this Father’s Day, I want you to take a few moments to focus on your Heavenly Father. How is your communication line with God?

I began my article in the May Church Newsletter this way:

Let me ask you one of those questions that we sometimes don’t like to have asked of us. If you had to rate your prayer life on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being terrible and 10 being better than you could have ever imagined, what rating would you give yourself?

Prayer is one of those areas in our spiritual life that almost every one of us could use some improvement in. Here are some of the common excuses that I have heard over the years for why people don't pray.

"I just don't know what to say."

"No one ever taught me to pray."

"It feels so strange talking to a God that I cannot see."

"I'm too busy to pray."

"I just don't feel like praying."

"Why would God really care about my petty issues?"

"I try praying . . . but it puts me to sleep."

"I've never seen prayer make a difference. It just feels like a waste of time."

I suppose that to those who give these excuses, they may feel very valid. But, the bottom line is that God does work through prayer, and He desires for His children to reach out to Him in prayer.

Listen to these quotes from great Christians over the years about prayer.

"Don't pray when you feel like it. Have an appointment with the Lord and keep it. A man is powerful on his knees." – Corrie ten Boom

"Satan trembles when he sees the weakest Christian on his knees." –William Cowper

"There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God." – Brother Lawrence

"I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach." – Charles Spurgeon

"The man who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to world evangelization in history." – Andrew Murray

"God shapes the world by prayer. The more prayer there is in the world the better the world will be, the mightier the forces of against evil ..." E.M. Bounds

"The most important thing a born again Christian can do is to pray." – Chuck Smith

“Satan does not care how many people read about prayer if only he can keep them from praying.” – Paul E. Billheimer¹

Prayer has always been one of the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of the follower of God. Our adversary is well aware of this, and he will try anything he can to keep Christians from praying. Unfortunately, for many of us, he doesn't have to try too hard. For far too many Christians, prayer is the last thing that that we spend our time doing. We utter a prayer when we are in church, or when we find ourselves in some sort of trouble. We'll throw a prayer up to God before a meal, or with our kids before bed. But for far too many of us, prayer is something we do far too little of.

Some of you might say, “But, prayer is so difficult for me. I don't even know where to start.”

If that's you, I've got good news. The disciples felt the same way. In Luke 11:1, one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. And in Luke 11, just as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave His disciples a pattern for prayer, which over the centuries has become known as The Lord's Prayer.

J.I. Packer once wrote, “This prayer is a pattern for all Christian praying. Jesus is teaching that prayer will be acceptable when, and only when, the attitudes, thoughts, and desires expressed fit the pattern, That is to say: every prayer of ours should be a praying of the Lord's Prayer in some shape or form. We never get beyond this prayer; not only is it the Lord's first lesson in praying, it is all the other lessons too.”²

Kent Hughes writes, “Jesus provided it (the Lord's Prayer) for them as a pattern for prayer. Strictly speaking, it is a prayer that the sinless Christ could never pray in its entirety because the last part includes a petition for the forgiveness of sins: ‘Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.’ But the prayer's six petitions are absolutely perfect for every man or woman who has ever lived. Its initial focus is upward, with its first three requests having to do with God's glory. The remaining three requests are for our well-being. God first, man second – that is the ideal order of prayer. His glory before our wants. This is parallel to the Ten Commandments, the first four of which have to do with God's glory and the last six with man's well-being. This prayer is the perfect prayer. Of its perfection Bonhoeffer said, ‘The Lord's Prayer is not merely the pattern prayer, it is the way Christians must pray . . . The Lord's Prayer is the quintessence of prayer.’

It is the perfect pattern for the followers of Christ, and its depth cannot be exhausted by exposition. No matter how one advances in the matter of prayer, it remains the model and the challenge.”³

¹ <http://www.christian-prayer-quotes.christian-attorney.net>

² <http://livingprayerbook.web.officelive.com/AbouttheLordsPrayer.aspx>

³ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), pp. 153-154.

So, how familiar are you with this prayer? It may be that you attended a church at one time or another where you repeated the Lord's Prayer each week. Maybe you've said it thousands of times in your life. Maybe the Lord's Prayer has become all too familiar to you. If so, my prayer is that by taking the time to do an in depth analysis of this prayer, we will discover it again for the first time. For when Jesus' first disciples heard our Savior pray this prayer, they would have been astonished at how He began.

The words are simple enough. "Our Father, in heaven . . ." It is the way many of us begin our prayers today in one form or another. How many of us say, "Dear Heavenly Father," at the beginning of our prayers? We are used to talking to our Heavenly Father. But, Jesus' introduction of the Fatherhood of God was something new for His disciples. The entire Old Testament only refers to God as Father fourteen times. Kent Hughes points out, "In those fourteen occurrences of Father the term was always used with reference to the nation, not to individuals. You can search from Genesis to Malachi, and you will not find one individual speaking of God as Father. Moreover in Jesus' day, his contemporaries had so focused on the sovereignty and transcendence of God that they were careful never to repeat his covenant name – Yahweh. So they invented the word Jehovah, a combination of two separate names of God. Thus the distance from God was well guarded.

But when Jesus came on the scene, he addressed God only as Father. He never used anything else! All his prayers address God as Father. The Gospels (just four books) record his using Father more than sixty times in reference to God. So striking is this that there are scholars who maintain that this word Father dramatically summarizes the difference between the Old and New Testaments. No one had ever in the entire history of Israel spoken and prayed like Jesus. No one!"⁴

Think about that for a moment. Jesus changed the way that people forever have prayed to God the Father. He changed our understanding of what it means to be a child of God. There are some of you who will forever have difficulty on this holiday. Father's Day is not filled with warm memories of fishing or playing ball or having great conversations with your Dad. Instead it is filled with the pain of a Dad who wasn't there, or worse yet, was there and was abusive and petty and mean.

That isn't God. Our God is the perfect Father. But, there is more to this name than just "Father." When Jesus addressed His Father in prayer, he addressed him with the word *Abba*. In our language, we might call it the word, *Daddy*. That's how Jesus taught His disciples to address the Father! He, who was referred to only fourteen times in the entire Old Testament as "Father," and then it was never personally, only on behalf of the nation, was now being addressed as "Daddy," in the way that a trusting child might address his or her father.

Hughes writes that the best rendering of *Abba* is "Dearest Father."⁵ There is a reverence in which God is addressed, but also the trust that a child has for his dad.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

I'll never forget the first time I jumped off the diving board. My Dad was treading water in the deep end of a hotel pool. Encouraging his son, who had just finished his first round of swim lessons, my Dad tried his best to coax me off that diving board. "Come on, Brian. It'll be okay. I'm here. I'll catch you." I remember being petrified, but my Dad was below me. If Daddy said he would catch me, my Daddy would catch me. My Daddy didn't lie to me about such things. It wasn't my "Father," who was in that pool, it was my "Daddy." It was my "Dearest Father," who I could trust with my life.

Maybe that's why we are so quick to pray to God when we find ourselves in trouble. We trust Him when it feels like we are out of control, or in over our heads. That's good, but it's better to trust Him and call to Him at all times of life. Our Daddy can not only handle it, but desires it. Some of you, like me, are unable to spend Father's Day with your earthly father. So, you'll find some time this afternoon, or maybe you already have this morning, to give your dad a call. Make sure that you spend time talking with your Heavenly Father too. Maybe it's been awhile since you and God have had a heart to heart. It's okay, God can handle it. But take some time to talk with Him today.

Did you know that recognizing God as your Abba Father is a mark of the authenticity of your faith? True Christians recognize that God is your Dearest Father. Galatians 4:6 says, 6 Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

Similarly, Romans 8:15-16 says, 15 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." 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

You may ask, "What gives me the right to refer to the God of the universe as my Father?"

Jesus answered that question in John 1:12. "12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -"

If you have received God's gift of salvation today, you have the right to approach his throne as his child. Think about that for a moment. Some of you have spent time near one or more of the Presidents of the United States. There is a formality that comes when you are near the President. When President Obama enters a room, people stand out of respect. When he walks into the House of Representatives to address the nation during his State of the Union address, both sides of congress stand to applaud him out of respect. But when Sasha and Malia see their Dad, he rises to greet them, arms out front with hugs ready to go. That's what dads do. Does God deserve our honor and respect? Yes! When we see him we will fall to our knees in worship. And he will lift us up.

J.I. Packer writes, "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. For

everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God."⁶

Do you know Him as your Father? Do you know that you know that you know, on this Father's Day? You can. Some of you need to take a leap of faith this Father's Day. You need to jump into the waiting arms of your Abba Father. God is waiting for you. He longs for you. He desires for you to know Him with the intimacy that is deeper than the best of earthly daddies has with his child.

There are some, in the Christian faith, who have trivialized the word "Father." Hughes writes, "The problem among some evangelical Christians today is (the opposite -) that they have sentimentalized God's fatherhood so much that they have little concept of his holiness. Many Christians are flippantly sentimental about God, as if he is a celestial teddy bear. Such flip familiarity outwardly suggests super-intimacy with God but actually hides a defective knowledge of God.

Jesus provides the remedy for both errors with his opening words, 'Our Father in heaven.' 'Father' stresses his immanence – that is, that he is involved with our lives and is to be intimately approached as *Abba*. 'In heaven' stresses God's transcendence. Sovereign and reigning, he surpasses all that is human. He is our Father and our King! We can affectionately call him 'Abba,' 'Dearest Father,' but we do it with a deep sense of wonder and reverence."⁷

Our God is both a tender Father and all powerful. There is no one like our God. As I close today, I want you to think about that word, "our." We are part of a bigger family. Those of us who are Christians are brothers and sisters in God. We have a common Father. And as such, God has called us to love one another. We can't truly pray the Lord's Prayer without thinking about identity in Christ.

So, as you pray, approach God with confidence. He is your loving Father, who cares deeply for you. You may have never had an earthly father who communicated love to you. That is not God. From the foundations of the earth, God's love has been on display for all to see. We need to take the time to look. Pray to him as your Abba Father, as your loving daddy.

I began the sermon by showing you a picture of my brother and I fishing when I was a boy. We have a gift for all the dads today. As you leave church, you will receive a fishing lure. If you are a fisherman, I want to encourage you to use the lure. But, when you are on the lake, take some time pray, remembering that this lure represents God's desire for quality time for you. If you are not a fisherman, put this lure in a spot that you'll regularly see it, and when you do remember that God wants to spend quality time with you.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 182.

⁷ Hughes, p. 158.

Would you join me in praying the Lord's Prayer now?

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.