

Matthew 6:9
July 5, 2009

Hampton Baptist
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Sermon Series on The Lord's Prayer

“A Close, Yet Transcendent God”

Our church joins perhaps billions of Christians around the globe every Sunday reciting what is easily the most popular prayer ever spoken or written. The version we recite is from Matthew; Luke provides a briefer prayer, while Mark and John do not include this prayer at all.

Note that the verse atop our worship page “Pray then in this way,” is Matthew’s quote from Jesus directly before what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” Jesus was actually *teaching* his disciples how to pray. Matthew incorporates the words from this renowned prayer in Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount.

Three weeks ago, I preached from John 17, which was a prayer Jesus offered from the Upper Room on the night before he died; some call it “Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer.” It was an actual communication between Jesus and God. The focus of this sermon series will be on a *way* to pray, rather than on an actual prayer offered by our Lord.

Nevertheless, we recite the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday, and if we are honest, we can admit that we sometimes fail to think about what we are saying. For some, the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in worship has no more meaning than a rote declaration of a Social Security Number. But as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, words are powerful, and these words truly have power.

As I mentioned, Jesus was using this prayer as a *model*. We know that he wasn’t *praying* because the prayer asks for forgiveness of sins; as the only sinless person, Jesus did not have to offer *that* prayer. The prayer probably was named *The Lord’s Prayer*, because Jesus was the source.

Because we say the prayer so often, perhaps we do not consider the first word of this great prayer. The word “our” reflects the fact that this is a prayer to be offered in community, with other people. Jesus chose to teach his disciples to pray in the second person plural. Using “our” does not indicate that we *own* God. We belong to God; we are God’s children. When children or grandchildren are together, they may reference an adult to someone else by saying “our father,” or “our grandfather.” When siblings are together and they speak to me of their parents, they would say, “our father” or “our mother.” The intent is not to indicate an ownership of God.

Jesus spoke Aramaic, the language of the locals. “Our Father” in Aramaic is the term “Abba,” which is literally translated “Daddy.” Can you imagine the stir this must have caused among the orthodox of the day? They were prevented from ever voicing God’s name, yet here was a new rabble-rouser who encouraged people to call God “Daddy.” For the people of Israel, God was viewed as being distant and removed, even unreachable. The word “God” could only be read silently and not spoken for fear of tainting it.

In our society, we have drawn distinctions between Fathers and Daddys. *Fathers* generally refer to the biological parent; *Daddys* speak more of a relationship. For Jesus to call God “Daddy,” *we* have been freed to have a close, intimate relationship with God.

I like the father figure described by the Hall of Fame baseball player, Harmon Killebrew, in his autobiography about growing up in a home with four boys. He shares that on one occasion his dad was out in the front yard playing baseball with the boys and a neighbor walked by and shouted, “Mr. Killebrew, if you keep playing baseball out on your front lawn, you will not have any grass left.”

Mr. Killebrew said, “Dear sir, I am not raising grass, I am raising four children.” Our Father, the one called upon Jesus in what we call The Lord’s Prayer is a Daddy who loves everyone, no matter a person’s gender, race, status, or nationality. And our Daddy loves us all the same, so much so, that

God wants to spend time with you and me. Our Father, our Daddy is a God that is as close as our breath.

But Jesus' salutation included another phrase, "Our Father, who art in heaven." The descriptive phrase was a Jewish phrase which denoted the *separateness* of God. The phrase has little to do with *geography*; Jesus was not referring to God's *postal* address. Instead, Jesus was reminding those who were learning how to pray that our God is *holy*, which actually means "separate." This holy, infinite mystery called God also demands our reverence, as well as our love.

The prayer provides quite a paradox of the Christian understanding of God. We believe that the One who created heaven and earth also has intimate concern for all of us--knows us by name; numbers the hairs on our heads; hears our individual prayers; knew us before we were born. Our Father, our Daddy who art in heaven, is a close, yet transcendent God who is always to be approached in awe and reverence.

Jesus seldom addressed God as Father, only six times in Mark, which was the earliest gospel written, and never outside the company of his disciples. (William Barclay. Commentary on Matthew vol. 1. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975. p. 204) We must never use the label "Father" cheaply or haphazardly; God is so much more than "the man upstairs." God is not an easy-going, permissive parent who allows us to do whatever we want. The prayer instructs us to remember that God remains worthy of our awe, adoration, and reverence.

The Christian Century printed an amusing account of a high school football team in the San Fernando Valley of California that is defying the ban on prescribed prayer in public schools. Bob Francola, coach of the Kennedy High School Cougars, said that his team has modified the practice to remove any religious references from its prayers. "I am still allowed to have a quiet moment with our team," he said, "so instead I just ask the Big Cougar in the sky to help us out."

Our Daddy who art in heaven is more than some cosmic bellhop whom we ask to fulfill our requests each time we need something. With God, there is love and holiness combined, but the bottom line is that our Daddy who art in heaven wants a relationship with each of us. That is why Jesus came into the world. Today, during Communion, we celebrate the great love of God as manifested in the One called Jesus of Nazareth, who willingly gave his life for you and for me. Come celebrate the love of our Daddy who art in heaven.