

"Our Father in Heaven"

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Happy New Year to you all. It's good to see you. This morning, we are going to return to our series in the Sermon on the Mount.

If you remember, if you were here in the fall, and if you're new, then we're glad you're here and know that this has been our practice to preach through the Scriptures sequentially, and so we have been preaching through a section in the Gospel of Matthew called the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 through 7. And if you remember, this section overall is Jesus' first teaching section in the Gospel where He teaches about what life in His kingdom would look like.

And if you remember, we broke down. We had the Beatitudes at the beginning talking about the character, the heart qualities of those in God's kingdom. Then we had six different particular topics where Jesus instructed, this is how we ought to live in God's kingdom that's distinct from the world around us. And then when we got to chapter 6, we saw there was a series of spiritual disciplines, that is, practices that God gave us as gifts so that we might know how to cultivate the kind of hearts, things that we can do to cultivate the kind of hearts that are the hearts of those who live in God's kingdom. Those three disciplines are those of giving and of prayer and of fasting.

And so what we're going to do, and we promised this in November, we're going to go back to the Lord's prayer, which was a part of that section on prayer, and we're going to be walking through it phrase by phrase. We're going to be looking at it carefully to see what it is that, as Jesus gave us this model of prayer, what it is that Jesus has given us so that we might develop a rich and meaningful prayer life and experience the life in the kingdom that Jesus is calling us to through this. So that's where we're going. This is a big picture as we start back in the end of January. We're going to be doing this, and then we'll continue to finish through the end of this section, the Sermon on the Mount, through to about the end of March leading up into Easter season. So if you're the kind of person who wants to know where the schedule is, that's where we're going. A question that I want to begin with this morning as we look at the Lord's prayer is this. Why do we struggle in our prayer lives?

[2 : 50] Now, when I preached on this in November, I said, this is one of those really embarrassing questions. It's kind of like, how's your workout regimen going, or how's your diet? The things that we all feel guilty about, because it's never good enough, right? It's never what we want it to be. But let's examine that question for a minute. What is it that makes it hard? Sometimes we're just so busy. As soon as I get up, there's a little face in my face going, daddy, daddy, daddy. And it just begins, it starts the whole day. And by the end of the day, we think, I didn't have a moment of time to myself. We live very busy lives. Sometimes I think we live lives of distraction. When we do have times to slow down, we have, I left my phone down there, but we have these things in our pockets that constantly distract us.

And we feel like we're always on. And we're so distracted that it's hard for us to sit and to be and to pray. Sometimes we may struggle with prayer because we sit down to pray and we think, I have no idea what I'm doing. And we just, out of lack of knowledge or instruction on how to do we end up feeling frustrated and confused. And it's incredibly demotivating for us to pray.

Sometimes, maybe, you've just felt the weird sense of, I just feel like I'm talking to myself. Well, as Jesus teaches us how to pray in the Sermon on the Mount, the beginning of the Lord's Prayer reveals to us perhaps the greatest reason why we might struggle.

And that is not these external circumstances or the internal dynamics of our heart, but it's because we don't actually see God clearly enough. We don't actually see Him as we ought to when we pray. And I believe that as Jesus launches this model prayer, He launches it with a phrase that will, if we allow it, transform our prayer life and give us great joy and freedom in it.

So, with that, if you have your Bibles, you can turn with me. If not, it will be up on the screen. I'm going to read Matthew 6, the whole section. I'm just going to read the context of it in Jesus' teaching on prayer, starting at verse 5 through verse 13, and we will be focusing on verse 9.

[5 : 35] So, let's read God's Word together, and then we will pray for and ask for God's help, and then dive in. Jesus says this, And when you pray, And when you pray, And when you pray, And when you pray, And when you pray, And when you pray, And when you pray, And when you pray, Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Do not be like them, For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray then like this, Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. Let's pray together. Amen. O God, our Father, We come to you this morning and ask for your help.

As we look at your word this morning, I pray that you would be our help. Lord, we long to know you rightly, And we long to live a life, Lord, Of joy and freedom in prayer, As well as service and devotion.

[7 : 24] Lord, we need your help to do that. Lord, I ask for your help this morning, That you would help me to speak the words that I ought, That I would speak your word faithfully and truthfully.

And Lord, I pray for all of us, That we would sit under your word this morning. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. In Jesus' kingdom, we have great freedom to pray to God, As our Father in heaven. This is the great news. This is the centerpiece of all that we're going to be talking about today. And I want to explore it in three sections.

So, if you're a note-taker, here's your outline. We're going to explore first, The roots of our struggle to know God as Father in heaven. The second point we're going to look at is the transforming privilege, Of knowing God as our Father in heaven.

And third, the implications for our practice of prayer, To God, our Father in heaven. So, first, the roots. The roots. The roots of our struggle to know God as Father in heaven.

[8 : 38] You know, this passage doesn't exist. Although the church picked up the Lord's Prayer and made it a creed, Something that was repeated often in the practice, It wasn't given in a vacuum.

It was given in context. And in Jesus' day, there were certain views of God And understandings of prayer that He was trying to counteract. So, this is what we see in verses 5 through 8.

The first thing that Jesus tried to address was a more, Well, there are two things. There was a mechanical view and a hypocritical view. And Jesus said, this is not how we are to come to God.

The first is the hypocrites. This is what we see in verses 5 and 6. The hypocrites who come to pray, not to connect with God, but to make themselves look better.

Prayer becomes a means not to connect with God, but to exalt yourself, So that others would see what you're doing. And what does this say about the view of God of those who would do this?

[9 : 49] God is not the end. God is not the goal of prayer in this context. But in these hypocrites, we're seeing God as a tool.

God is something to be used in order to be seen by others as great. And so, we would exalt ourselves in this hypocritical prayer practice.

And God diminishes and becomes small in our mind. And Jesus says, this is not the way to pray. And then secondly, in verses 7 and 8, you see the Gentiles, right?

If the first one were, was more the religious people who ended up exalting themselves in pride and making God look small. The second one are the Gentiles, that is those who didn't know God, the God of the Bible at least, and didn't pray to them.

They practiced a more mechanistic kind of prayer pattern. They would repeat, wrote empty phrases again and again so that they might be heard for their many words.

[11 : 01] What is God in this view? Well, God is something to be manipulated by rite and ritual. He is like a divine vending machine.

And if you put in the right coins, the right practices, the right things, then you unlock and you can hit E5 and get your Snickers bar, right? This is what, this is the view of if we just do the things the right way, then God will hear, right?

This is a God who needs to be pleased, who needs to be somehow appeased in just the appropriate ways. And of course, we know this is true in the first century. We had to offer sacrifices and pray in certain ways. Jesus says both of these practices of prayer are rooted in faulty views of God.

And friends, are we really that different today? We can be so self-centered in our prayers. Maybe today it takes a slightly different version.

[12:10] I think many of us struggle with seeing God as the celestial benevolent grandfather. You know, the one who always gives what we want, the one who always lets us have what we need.

We don't come to Him as a sovereign God of the universe. We come to Him as someone that we can get things from and the things that we want from.

And it's really about us. And can we get what we want from Him or not? And the reason why we see this is because then when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want Him to, or when we face unexpected trials or suffering, we think, where is God?

He's abandoned us. Where is my grandfather who's going to make everything right and make everything easy and give me what I want?

It makes God someone who exists for us and for our good, not for Himself and for His glory. Of course, we can also fall into a more mechanistic view where we think, if I just pray the right prayers, if I pray in just the right way, if I pray enough, hard enough, fervently enough, long enough, God's going to somehow hear me more than if I just said it simply and haltingly and stutteringly once.

[13:43] And God's going to answer me. And God's going to answer me because I do all these things. And I think in our world today, it's so easy for us to think. It's not just our prayer life, but our whole lives.

Well, if I do enough good things, then God's going to answer my prayers. If I can go to church enough. If I can give enough. If I can help the poor enough. And look, all these things are good, but if we're doing them in order to feel like we're meeting God's requirements so that He will answer our prayer, then He becomes again like a vending machine.

Right? Sometimes we even bargain with God. God, I've lived a terrible life. But if you will do this now, I'm going to give you everything. And look, God has used those turning points in people's lives.

But that's not a proper view of God either. All of these, I think, are reasons why we struggle. Because we actually deep in our hearts think that God is like this.

And when we see God in these ways, our prayer life becomes filled with these warped practices.

[15:04] But to all of these, Jesus says, when you pray, pray to God as our Father in heaven. And this is the centerpiece of His teaching and the centerpiece of what we're going to look at today.

For in it we see that there is a transforming privilege that comes from knowing God as our Father. Now look, I need to start by saying this is because the church allowed, took this prayer and practiced it regularly.

Many of us know it. Some of us grew up in church and we could recite this in our sleep. We probably have King James versions, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come. Right, we have King James language in our heads for those of us who are older because that's what was common back then.

But maybe that familiarity means that we've lost our view of its potency. Because what Jesus says about God in this very short phrase, our God, our Father in heaven, is a God who is beyond our imagination.

He takes two terms, our Father in heaven, and He puts them together in a way that if we see it afresh, it will transform our prayer life.

[16:23] First, He says, God is our Father. We know this is a familiar term, that of a father and children. In the 21st century when we think of fathers, we usually think of a father as warm, kind, someone who provides.

In the 21st century, and maybe today, hopefully, it would also connote things like authority and provision and different things. The Bible pictures all of these things that God's Fatherhood is expressed by His love for His people, His provision for His people, His authority to rule and command His people, His protection of His people, and His kind and gracious heart for us, His children.

This is the idea of fatherhood that God wants us to get. Now, some of us in this room may struggle. Because some of us in this room may not have had a father like that in our earthly fathers.

In fact, some have even said, well, there's no way we can know God that way. We should stop calling Him Father if that's been your experience. But you know, I think that's a mistake.

J.I. Packer, I'm going to quote him a lot because he has a chapter in here called Sons of God. This is one of those books, if you've never read it, it's called Knowing God. It's a 20th century classic Christian life book.

[17 : 54] And if you haven't read it, you should read it. So, I'm going to be quoting him a bit today because he writes so potently of this. He says this, Listen to this.

Listen to this. Whether we come to it by saying, I had a wonderful father and I see that God is like that only more so. Or by saying, my father disappointed me here and here and here.

But God, praise His name, will be very different. Or even, I have never known what it is to have a father on earth. But thank God, I now have one in heaven.

So friends, whatever your experience of your earthly father is, God can use that, whether in still more, greater, or whether in contrast to those experiences.

To see and to let the Bible define what fatherhood should be and can be and is in God, our heavenly Father.

[19 : 23] So that's the fatherhood of God. But then, he is a father who is in heaven. Literally, who is in the heavens.

And I spent time thinking about this. Why does he call him our Father in heaven? Couldn't he have just said our Father? Wouldn't that be enough? But I think it's because of this juxtaposition.

Jonathan Pennington, who is a guy I actually got to work with a little bit. He's a professor at Southern Seminary, a New Testament scholar on Matthew, has spent a lot of time looking at the way that Matthew, the Gospel writer, uses the heaven and earth imagery to clarify and to bring richness to our understanding of who God is and what He's doing.

And he would say that here, the use of Father in heaven, which by the way is a phrase that Matthew uses like 13 times. And it's only used in one other place in the entire Scripture.

So it's a Matthew theme that he wants us to get. That He is a Father in heaven because the place of His rule and reign is an invisible and divine realm that overlays the earth but is distinct from it.

[20 : 37] And that to be a Father in heaven means that His realm is distinct from the earthly realm that we live in. That is, it is different. It is different morally.

It is different spiritually. It is different. And this is a part of a theme that we've seen in the Sermon on the Mount, that when God calls us to live in His kingdom, He calls us to be distinct from the world around us.

Right? He calls us to be different because we know God. And that results in our character. It results in our actions. It results in our attitudes.

And the whole Sermon on the Mount is shaping us to help us understand what life in His kingdom is meant to be in contrast to the ways that the world that doesn't know God would live.

And so, this is what He's saying is that our Father, this intimate picture of one who loves us and is with us, is also a Father who rules over a kingdom that we are moving towards and out of the earthly kingdoms into the kingdom of His Son.

[21 : 48] This means that He is both transcendent above the heavens and imminent close to us. He is near. He is personal and close. And yet, He is also high above the heavens.

He is intimate and kind. Yet, He rules with authority. He has warmth and power. But He also judges and rules.

And our God is great enough to embrace all of these characteristics. He is richer than we can even imagine. And this is what Jesus wants us to see.

And as we look through the rest of the New Testament, we see this image developed even more. There are so many places I could go because it's in a lot of places, but I want to go to two places.

The first is in Luke 15. You all know this. This is the series of parables that Jesus was teaching about the nature of the kingdom. It's about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

[22 : 51] But the last one is about a lost son. Right? And it's about this father who had two sons and one son. The younger one came and said, Give me my inheritance now. And he took that inheritance and he went off and he squandered it.

And he spent it all. And he found himself in dire need. He was eating the pig slop, which was unthinkable for a good Jewish boy to be doing.

So far from his father. And he thought, My father's house would receive me back. I don't deserve that.

I've rejected all of my familiar relationships. I've said to my father, You're as good as dead to me. But, but maybe my father would take me back at least as a servant in this household.

I don't deserve anything more than that. Right? And then he had another son who lived at home and dutifully did everything that he was supposed to do. And then at the end of the parable, right?

[23 : 54] As the younger son comes home, the father sees him. And he runs to him. And he braces him. And he gives them all the symbols of being welcomed.

Not as a servant. Not as a pariah who's returned. But embraced as a son. He gives him a robe and a ring and sandals to say, You are fully welcomed back in.

And he throws a banquet to him, for him. And the embrace is unbelievable. And this is the nature of the father that we see here. But it's not just to the younger son that he's a father, but to the older son.

The older son who's been dutifully serving all this time. And when his father throws his great banquet, he stays outside because he's angry. Because he's bitter. Because he says, God, I deserve, or Father, I deserve this.

You should have done this for me. Because I've been so good. And I have earned this. And the father goes out to that son as well.

[24 : 59] And he says, haven't I always provided for you? Haven't I always loved you? Come in. Come in to the celebration. And to the joy of being a part of my family.

Do you see the father's love for him? The father's love for his children is never based on merit or desert.

Neither of the sons deserved his love and grace. Neither of them deserved the banquet. But in his gracious, overflowing love, he did this.

And some of us are the dutiful child who thinks, God, if I'm faithful enough, you're going to take care of me and do what I want. And some of us have been the wayward child.

And we know that there's no way. There's no way we deserve anything from God. And we wonder, could he ever even accept me? And the fatherhood of God says, come.

[26 : 04] Come to me. Come to me. Your alienation because of your sin and rebellion, whether it be self-righteousness or just plain unrighteousness.

The alienation that you experience because of that has been taken away because of Jesus. Because Jesus came and lived the faithful son role.

And he offered himself for us so that we could be called back into his life. We could be reconciled with the father as our sin is taken away. We would be embraced as his sons and daughters.

And this then leads us to the second great truth in the New Testament that is pointed out to us. And we could see it in a couple of different places. In Galatians 4, Paul teaches us that we who are alienated because of sin have been adopted into his family.

This is a great doctrine of our salvation, that we have been adopted. That is, we were outside of the family of God and because of our sin. And yet he, through Christ, invites us to come and by faith in Jesus, we are then brought back into the family of God.

[27 : 28] And it gives us a new identity. We are able to call our God, Abba, Father. And this new identity, he refers to it in Ephesians chapter 3 where he says, This is the father under whom every name in heaven and earth have been named.

This is a defining move that God does in us. God chooses us to become a part of his family and calls us child, son, daughter.

And look, we need to make sure that we don't confuse this because certainly in the 20th century, there has been talk in some theological circles about the fatherhood of God to all humanity.

And this is in some ways true if what we mean by that is God is a creator and there is nothing that has been created outside of his creative power. So in that way, he is a creator overseeing all of humanity.

But what we're seeing here is something very distinct. This is the adoption of rebels by a loving and gracious God. Again, Packer talks about this.

[28 : 48] He says in the first century, adoption actually was done mostly by well-to-do families. And it wasn't for infants. They wouldn't be taking in infants typically.

They would take in young men primarily who had proven themselves worthy of carrying on their family name.

And that was the idea of adoption according to Packer in the first century. He goes on and he says this. In our case, however, God adopts us out of free love, not because our character and record shows us worthy to bear his name, but despite the fact that they show the very opposite.

We are not fit for a place in God's family. The idea of his loving and exalting us sinners as he loves and has exalted the Lord Jesus sounds ludicrous and wild.

Yet that and nothing less than that is what our adoption means. The act of adoption is an act of grace.

[30 : 00] We have a few families in our church who have taken on fostering, and a few have moved towards adoption. And you know what grace it is because it's not a duty.

It's not something that you have to do. It is something you choose to do. And when you do, you do it freely and wholeheartedly and willingly.

And this is what God has done for us. He didn't have to do this. What we deserve is condemnation and judgment for our sin. What we deserve is eternal alienation from God.

But what he gives us instead is this call. This call to be a part of his family. And friends, if you have put your faith in Christ, remember this, that it's not just entering into the family that's a part of his love and grace for us.

But again, I'm going to read Packer because he says, throughout our life in this world and to all eternity beyond, he will constantly be showing us in one way or another more and more of his love, thereby increasing our love to him continually.

[31 : 24] The prospect before the adopted child of God is an eternity of love. And friends, one of the reasons why we gather here every Sunday is because this adoption is not merely individual, but it is corporate.

Did you notice that when he said, when the prayer started, it is not my father in heaven, but our father. Jesus invites us in with him to call God father.

And he calls us into a community. This is what his church is, the family of God. Those who, because they've put their faith in Christ, are in that family, living this distinct calling, because we know who we are.

Above all things, we are a child of God. Can you see how, when we see God this way, how it might transform our prayer lives?

This is my third point. That practicing, that as we look at it, it will change the way we pray to God when we see God as our Father in heaven.

[32 : 50] We could spend a lot of time on this, but I'll give a few thoughts. It means that we can come to God with confidence that he loves us and he hears us.

Sometimes we wonder, as we pray quietly in our room, am I just talking to myself or does God actually hear me? But Jesus has promised us, your Father who is in secret, hears you when you pray in secret.

He does know. He does care. And listen, his commitment to our good is greater than our own commitment to our good.

His Fatherly care invites us to bring every care to him. His love means that we never have to fear rejection or condemnation or ridicule.

There is nothing that God will laugh at when you pray to him about. Because he loves you. Because he loves you.

[34 : 02] Because he's a Father. And we should not only have this confidence that he loves us, but we should expect that he hears us, and that he delights to do so.

And that he will do good in response to our prayers. Secondly, when we pray to God our Father, we will pray with humble patience.

Because when we pray to God as our Father, we trust that his timing is as good as his heart is.

This can be one of the hard parts of prayer, isn't it? But listen, if your father and your eight-year-old comes to you and says, Dad, I need an iPhone.

Right? The answer may be, okay, son, daughter, I hear your desire. I hear your request. But maybe not now.

[35 : 02] Maybe we need to wait a little bit. Maybe you need to be old enough to know what you're getting yourself into and showing the responsibility to handle it well.

Why? Because that father knows better than their child what they really need and what is really good for them.

So we come to God with great confidence that he loves us, but we come humbly being willing to submit our request to him, trusting that his fatherly care for us means he does know our need. Did you see that in the passage? Our Heavenly Father knows every need that we have even before we ask him. And so we come to him with freedom knowing we're not telling him something he doesn't know, but we're coming in relationship to him and say, God, this is what's on my heart. This is what I'm longing for. This is what I'm struggling with. This is what I need. And knowing that he always responds.

[36 : 09] Though we need to say it clearly. Sometimes he responds with a yes and we see God provide in wonderful and amazing ways. Sometimes we say God saying, not yet, not now.

And then we're called to wait with hope and expectation for these things. And sometimes God says, no, I have better things for you. I have other things for you. But trust me that I know what is good for you.

And what I will give you is exactly what you actually need. This is the heart. This is the heart of those who know God as their father.

They trust him. They submit to him. We don't always understand. And it's hard sometimes. But friends, if you've ever been a parent, you know you've seen your child walk through something hard.

You know you've seen them suffer. And sometimes they say, dad, can't you just fix this and make it go away? And we don't. Because we know there's something better for them working through this.

[37 : 21] And if we who are totally imperfect parents, we who fail to understand everything, if we can do this, how much more will our loving Heavenly Father do so for us?

So we come with confidence. So we come with confidence. We come with patience. And finally, we come with freedom. Friends, prayer is a spiritual discipline.

It is something that we sometimes need to work at. But at the end of the day, prayer is not a duty.

Prayer is a call to delightful communion with God.

It is an invitation to freely come to him and to see it as a privilege.

If you know people who believe in other religions, how many religions of the world that are actually theistic? Is God distant and far away and scary to approach?

[38 : 27] But we have a Father in heaven who says, come to us. And we can come to him because Jesus has made this way for us. And as we come to him in this freedom, it means that we come in joy to celebrate, rejoice, and give thanks for all the good things.

It means we come to him in sorrow to weep and to grieve and to find comfort. It means we come to him in our times of need to express our desires and to ask for help.

And our heavenly Father, who loves us so much, hears and delights in all of these prayers.

And friends, this then, I believe, is what Jesus is teaching us in this first line of this prayer. Is that as we come to prayer, the greatest fuel, the greatest energy that we will find to actually have a good prayer life, is to meditate on and deepen our appropriation of God as our Father, that we are sons and daughters of the living God.

And when we see him like that, why wouldn't we pray to him all the time? Why wouldn't we joyfully go to him, whether in the prayer closet or in the warp and woof of life?

[40 : 00] We can practice prayer all the time because it's a part of our communion and our relationship with God, our Father in heaven.

Let's pray. Lord, we confess that we don't see you rightly as we ought.

And Lord, we ask for your help this morning. Lord, may we see you more and more clearly as our Father in heaven.

Lord, we pray that you would help us. Lord, help us in our prayer life.

Lord, we repent of the things that we do to try to manipulate you or to try to make ourselves look better. Lord, we repent of our false views of you where we see you as a distant or a stingy, Lord, or a Father who is hard to please.

[41 : 13] Lord, we pray this morning that instead we would know your love and grace more fully. And in doing so, Lord, we would find a renewed joy and desire to be praying to you.

We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.