

## The Lord's Prayer

Everett Fullam was on a mission to a remote and primitive tribe of people in central Nigeria. This group was so removed from the modern world that when Everett told the chief that two men had been walking on the moon, the chief shot back, "There's nobody up there! Besides, it is not big enough for two people to stand on." He had no idea about the distance between the earth and the moon and no concept of the moon's actual size. But here in the midst of a primitive people, Fullam had an experience that made him realize in a new way what it means to have God as our Father. He baptized three people who had come to know the love of God and he describes it this way:

*There were two men and one woman. We stood on the banks of a muddy river, wet and happy. I had never seen three more joyful people. "What is the best thing about this experience?" I asked. All three continued to smile, the glistening water emphasizing the brightness of their dark-skinned faces; but only one spoke, in clear, deliberate English: 'Behind this universe stands one God, not a great number of warring spirits, as we had always believed, but one God. And that God loves me.'*

As radical as that concept was to this tribal man who had never even heard the word "Africa" before, so would Jesus' words have sounded to those who were listening to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:9):

*This then, is how you should pray:  
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.*

"Our Father"? Did the Jews of Jesus' day refer to Yahweh as their Father? In the 39 books of the Old Testament, God is referred to as "Father" only fourteen times, and even then in an impersonal sort of way. He was the Father in the sense of being the Creator of the cosmos and those fourteen uses describe Him as the Father of the nation, not of any individual people. There is not one reference in the entire 39 books where someone addressed God as Father; not David in the Psalms, not Abraham or Moses, none of the prophets. And here is Jesus, telling us how to pray, and He says, "Pray like this: our Father in heaven".

Of course, Jesus' way of addressing God was always as "Father". In just the four Gospels, we see Jesus using the word "Father" to address God more than sixty times - and that's in just four books.

In our language, "father" is sort of formal. Whenever one of my children refers to me as "father" I know they're being witty or putting on an act for some reason. The word that Jesus used for His Father was more intimate than that. The Greek word *abba* was the word on Jesus' lips when he taught the Lord's Prayer and it means something like "dad", but with a reverent or respectful touch that would come out better in a phrase like "dearest father".

In Luke's version of the Lord's prayer, Jesus responds to a request from His disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples", and Jesus responded by

saying, “When you pray, say, ‘Father’.” Jesus is saying this in a context where the Jews had stopped even speaking the name of God, stopped using Yahweh in addressing God, because they felt that the Name was too holy to be spoken out loud by sinful human beings. And Jesus speaks to these people and says, “When you pray, start with ‘Father’.” Nobody had done that before, let alone teaching others to speak to God in this way.

That’s the first thing we need to learn about prayer - that behind the universe stands a God, not a great number of warring spirits, but one God. And that God loves you, and calls you sisters and brothers of the Son He loves. He invites you into His family and makes you an heir of His Kingdom, His glorious “home”, if we can call it that. He counts all your sins as paid for and clothes you in the righteousness of Christ. And He is so determined to show you that He loves you that He says, “Call Me Dearest Father”, and I’ll call you My precious child.

A respected New Testament scholar, Joachim Jeremias, puts it this way:

*In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus authorizes His disciples to repeat the word abba after Him. He gives them a share in His sonship and empowers them, as His disciples, to speak with their heavenly Father in just such a familiar, trusting way as a child would with his father.*

Or how about this declaration from J.I. Packer:

*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.*

Now, notice what else Jesus tells us about how we are to address God: “Our Father ... in heaven.” In case we might be inclined to buddy up to God and treat Him like an old uncle that we’re particularly fond of, Jesus reminds us of where He is; in heaven. God is gloriously greater than we are, exalted in majesty and holiness, perfect in wisdom and power. He invites us to draw near, but only on the basis of what He has done for us - never on the basis of what we have done for Him.

So, in beginning our prayers “Our Father in heaven” we are acknowledging that He has adopted us as His very own children, that we have been brought into His eternal family by His grace ... and, we are acknowledging that He is awesome and holy and worthy of our adoration and our obedience. We don’t come into the presence of the Almighty as foreigners begging for asylum, but as children coming into our inheritance. Nor do we come as self-satisfied Pharisees, confident of our own goodness, but as humble recipients of grace who are very aware of the incredible gift that has been given to us

and very aware of the glory and wonder of the God who has chosen to show us His grace.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed, honoured, revered, be Your Name.” In Hebrew culture, the name stood for much more than what you called a person. The name represented the person’s whole being, their character, their reputation. That’s why, when God changed somebody’s name in the Bible, this was something very significant - He was changing the person’s whole life, in a sense.

One of the best examples is with Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. The name “Jacob” means deceiver, usurper and it represents someone who is always at odds with people, always striving against someone to gain an advantage in life. And we see that in Jacob’s dealings with his brother, Esau, from whom he gained the birthright which belonged to Esau and his father’s blessing. We also see him at odds with his uncle Laban, who was also a shrewd and deceptive sort of guy. And then one night, while Jacob was running away from Laban and towards his brother Esau, he wrestled with God’s messenger until dawn and that messenger changed his name from Jacob to Israel. Israel means, “one who struggles with God”. From that time on, the whole of Jacob’s, now Israel’s, life was reoriented from wrestling with every human being who stood in his way, to struggling in his relationship with the Almighty. Having lived his whole life defined by his relationships with other people, he would now live his life in relationship to His Creator.

So when we come to the name of God, we should want to know who He is, what He stands for, what He represents to us, through His name. And Jesus, in teaching us how to pray, says that God’s name is to be hallowed or honoured. This is a holy name, because it represents to us the holy God.

When we pray this, we are asking God to act in such a way as to bring honour to His Name, to magnify His Name in all the earth, to do glorious and mighty works that increase His fame, His reputation, among the people of the earth and among all spiritual beings - angelic and demonic - throughout the cosmos. This is the first request of the Lord’s prayer.

How does God typically answer this kind of prayer? What does He do that brings honour to His name?

One way to answer that question is to say that, in most cases, He will do something or show the world something, through us.

Gregory was the bishop of Nyssa, in central Turkey, until his death in 394. He once wrote this:

*May I become through Your help blameless, just and pious; may I abstain from every evil, speak the truth, and do justice. May I walk in the straight path, shining with temperance, adorned with incorruption, beautiful through wisdom and prudence . . . For a man can glorify God in no other way save by his virtue which bears witness that the Divine Power is the cause of his goodness.*

In other words, when we let the light of Jesus Christ shine through us to the world outside, they can see that this goodness and grace didn't happen by some stroke of good luck, but has grown in us through God's action. When those words were written, even though Christianity was now tolerated by Rome, there was still much opposition and persecution. Their main method of witnessing in a hostile culture was to live holy lives that somehow demonstrated the love of the Father towards all people. And the church grew, slowly but steadily, as lives transformed by the presence and power of God made their influence felt throughout the Roman world.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name ... Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. The second and third requests of the Lord's prayer: Your Kingdom come, Your will be done.

I don't know about you, but my prayer life doesn't usually start with those three requests. I'm usually much more focused on my world - my needs, my regrets, my cares. But Jesus is telling us something really important here. If we say, and really believe, that God is the centre of our lives, that He gives life, that He is our hope, then we should take some time to pray for the things that are most important, the things that are at the centre of His heart: "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done - right here on the earth, in the same way as it is being done in heaven."

What does it mean to pray that God's Kingdom will come? A Kingdom includes whatever is under the authority, the dominion of a king. It's his territory, his people, the assets within his lands. Wherever and over whatever a king rules is his kingdom. So when we pray for God's Kingdom to come we are asking Him to advance His rule and reign over a greater and greater realm. We are asking Him to be ruling in the hearts and minds of more people, to be influencing the decisions of more governments, to be exercising His authority over more individual hearts and world events. "God, rule. Your Kingdom come!"

The phrase that Jesus links to it, "Your will be done", is an expression of what happens when the Kingdom is advancing. Where God reigns, His will is being done. Where His Kingdom is in place, people are seeking His direction, following the leading of His Spirit, and seeking His glory by doing the things that honour Him. There is no reason to separate these two elements - they help to explain each other. As the Kingdom comes in greater and greater measure, God's will is being done more completely than ever.

So, here's a question for you to consider today. Do you have any difficulty at all praying and asking God to bring His Kingdom? Does this reflect the desire of your heart - that God's reign would spread to the lives of more and more people around this globe? If it does, then you'll be encouraged to hear what the great 18th century American preacher and revivalist Jonathan Edwards taught about this prayer. He said that one thing Satan can never do is give you the desire to ask God, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It's the opposite of what he really wants and he could never inspire you to ask God for something he is so opposed to.

So if you can easily, gladly make this request a part of your prayer life, you can be sure that the Spirit of God is leading you in prayer, that He lives within, that He has changed the desire of your heart and put you in tune with God's desires. I think that's cool.

Of course, when we pray, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done", we are volunteering to help make that happen. In response to prayer, God raises people up to make a difference, to bring the Kingdom - people like William Wilberforce, or Elizabeth Fry or Florence Nightingale, Christians who allowed God to use them to advance His Kingdom. I read a story written by Charles Colson, the American special advisor to former President Richard Nixon who served seven months in prison in connection with the Watergate scandal in the early 1970's. He became a Christian during that time and later founded Prison Fellowship and wrote more than 30 books. After a visit to London he wrote the following:

*I asked a friend to take me to Clapham, the village where William Wilberforce lived almost two centuries ago. Wilberforce was the Christian member of Parliament who led the twenty-year fight, ultimately victorious, against the slave trade. He is one of my great heroes.*

*Wilberforce was joined by a small band of likeminded Christians who lived, worked and prayed together in the Clapham home of Henry Thornton. We drove one night through London's crowded streets past block after block of Victorian row houses. A few miles from downtown we came upon a hill, then around the bend. "There it is," my host exclaimed. "That's where Henry Thornton's home used to be!"*

*"Used to be?" I replied in disbelief. "Surely it has been preserved as an historic site."*

*"No," my friend responded. Levelled long ago."*

Colson experienced similar disappointment when he visited the church where Wilberforce had once preached and where a little booklet about him was available for 50 pence. He found himself wondering why so little had been done to remember this man.

*Suddenly I stopped and stared across the soft grass. In my mind's eye I could see row upon row of men and women, freed from the laden slave ships; I could even hear the clanging chains falling from their arms and legs. Of course, of course, I thought. Clapham is just what Wilberforce and his colleagues would want. No spires of granite or marble, no cold statues and lifeless buildings. Rather, the monument to Wilberforce is the legacy of countless millions, once enslaved, who today live in freedom.*

Wilberforce, and many others who have shared like convictions through the years, have both prayed for God's Kingdom to come and acted with urgency to facilitate God's priorities, God's values, God's love and mercy for all people, here on the earth.

Let's wrap it up with four simple applications:

1. Pray to your Father in heaven, who has not only created the cosmos, who has not only given you and me life and the capacity to find joy in it, but who loves us,

continually, and who reaches out to us to meet our deep needs and to reconcile us to Himself.

2. Pray that He will make His name known in all the earth, honoured and adored by countless millions of people who still don't know Him.
3. Pray that His Kingdom will come, in the country we call home, in the city where we live, in the neighbourhood where we walk and talk with our neighbours. Pray that His will will be done in these places where we live and work and relate with people, just like it's being done in heaven.
4. And pray fervently to your Father in heaven, that His Kingdom will come and His will will be done, on earth, by you, through you, in your thoughts and your words and your actions, so that God will get glory from your life and so that people whose lives touch your life will see His goodness and see His grace in you.

Pray full of faith, convinced that this is a prayer that God will answer in full measure.