

The Lord's Prayer: "Our Father" and "Hallowed Be Thy Name"

Introductory Comments

1. The very first words of the Lord's Prayer are literally "Father of Us" in the Greek of Matthew 6:9. It is simply "Father" in Luke 11:2. A question many have asked through the years is: "How can the greatest and most famous prayer open with a male-oriented title and patriarchal mode of address? Why give God a humanlike and male-only name? In our session today we will consider the role that metaphor plays in our name(s) for God? Why is it important to specify a name/title for the Divine? We will also consider the question, why "Father"? What was meant by that term in Jesus' day?
2. For Ancient Israel, the hallowing of God's name first emerged through the story of Moses and the Burning Bush (Exodus 3). This story is a powerful metaphor that helps orient our understanding of the phrase "hallowed be thy name." Moreover, the famous purity code from Leviticus 19 also deepens our understanding of what God's holiness looks like: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2).
3. There is a parallel literary structure in the Lord's Prayer that we may miss when we simply recite it. It breaks down into two halves, each with three points:

GOD
(in the heavens)

1. YOUR name be hallowed
2. YOUR Kingdom come
3. YOUR will be done (as in heaven)

HUMANITY
(so on earth)

1. Give us this day OUR daily bread
2. And forgive us OUR debts, as we forgive OUR debtors
3. Do not lead US into temptation, but rescue US from the evil one

This parallel structure relates God's action in the heavens to humanity's action on earth, and invites us into further reflection on how the two interact. When we look closely at the parallelism, we can see how each phrase is a way of saying the same thing, or of asserting the same challenge. As you consider the above, can what is said of God happen without us? Can what is said of us happen without God? Can either half of the Lord's Prayer stand alone?

Questions, then review today's lines from Lord's Prayer

Questions for Discussion

1. When you pray the Lord's Prayer, have you ever felt tripped up by the male-oriented language? Why or why not? How might the word "Father" be considered an inclusive term?

When considering various biblical examples (i.e. Prov 23:24-25, 30:17; Sir 3:8-9, 7:27; Acts 1:14-15) that employ male-oriented terms like "father" or "brethren" a couple things stand out. First is that, despite its male-oriented prejudice, the biblical term "father" is often simply shorthand for "father and mother." In these cases, terms like "father" and "brethren" were not intended to be exclusive. Second, the model for a family unit in Ancient Israel was not simply "parents and children" like modern nuclear families, but a much broader, multigenerational household that included brothers and sisters, unmarried sisters and married brothers, clients and dependents, male and female slaves, animals, and lands. It is a much broader association. To be connected to a "father" in the greater family of humanity means that we are a part of God as God is a part of us. And as Paul writes in Galatians, when we call on "'Abba, Father!' we are no longer slaves but children – and if a child, then also an heir, through God" (Gal 4:6-7).

2. Why do you think the prayer starts with "Our Father..." rather than "My Father..."?

Our relationship to God goes back much further than our individual perceptions of that relationship. To pray this prayer is not about "me," but about the broader collective of humanity and all creation that God has created. When we say "our", we are not being possessive. This God to whom we pray is not our property. To say "our" is a powerful recognition that this God who created the universe and all that is has chosen us – and that before we reached out to God, God reached out to us and claimed us, promised to be our God, and promised to make us God's people. While praying this prayer is certainly "personal," it is "personal-in-community" rather than "personal-in-privacy." We may pray it alone, but we are never alone when we pray it.

3. Some scholars argue that the most helpful way to understand the phrase "Our Father in heaven" is as "Householder of the Earth" – the One who takes care of the earth and everything on it. How does this impact your conception of God? Does it change the role you understand God to have in the world?

Throughout the Bible, and particularly in the Prophets, there are many references to God's primary concern for the poor and marginalized, and that all will be cared/provided for when the earth functions as the household God intends (cf. Deut 24:14, 17; Isa 10:1-2; Sir 4:10; James 1:27). As the great "Householder", God watches over and includes the ones whom society overlooks/discards. The most common categories are "the poor and needy" (who tend to suffer in a rich society), the "widows and orphans" (who tend to suffer in a patriarchal society), and "resident aliens" (who tend to suffer in a tribal society). The injustice that these groups face in society is an affront to God and it destroys the integrity of the greater household – which, in turn, dishonors the Householder. God as the Householder of all is honored when we – as members of the house and collaborators in it – model our world after God's intentions.

4. In our study of Mark's Gospel, we saw that the power of Jesus reaches its fullness through a collaborative relationship between him and anyone who sought to follow him. Healing and wholeness were never a one-way street, but were only discovered through a mutual connection between "seed" (Jesus' words and example) and "soil" (the faith within each one of us). The Lord's Prayer seems to articulate a similar truth. How so? And how do you feel about this? Is it presumptuous or empowering to say that God can't, or won't effect change without us?

5. Read Leviticus 19. According to this passage, how is God's holiness revealed? As you read the passage, what are the things that God seems to care most about? How does this passage change our understanding of how we might "make holy" God's name? *This passage reviews (in highly ritualized, priestly language) the basic idea that all that we do – all that we are – belongs to God. The chapter outlines many examples of what we must do to be holy, but, because as the opening verse says "God is our model for holiness", they also indicate how God is holy. To practice according to God's ways and desires – to embody justice and fairness by delivering the endangered, freeing the oppressed, and protecting the impoverished – is how we "hallow" God's name.*

6. The story of the Burning Bush gives us great insight into the naming of God. Read Exodus 3:13-15 from that story. What does the naming of God tell us about God? *To name God at all is a paradox – essentially, God tells Moses "My name is the Unnamable One." It both gives, and does not give, a name – just like the bush that both burns and does not burn. In other words, it is a warning to Moses and to us that we cannot ever fully or completely name the Holy One. Despite that warning, however, God does provide a "nameable name". That secondary or operational name is the God of past, present, and future. God is the one who saves God's people from the bondage, misery, and suffering imposed on them. God is the God of the ancestors, of present liberation, and of the future promise. There remains a tension, however, between the primary "Unnamable Name" and all the other secondary names given to God.*

7. What else do we mean when we talk about God's "name"? *"Name" is about face, countenance, honor, and public reputation. It's not simply a title. In the biblical world, reputation was one's deep identity rather than a surface image. God's name is God's character and identity as publicly acknowledged in the world. Throughout the biblical narrative, the holy name and the divine reputation of God is concerned with distributive justice and restorative righteousness as the markers of God's "Holy name." If we are to be holy, it will be through our participation in that divine character, identity, and name.*

****For next session, we will cover "Your Kingdom Come" and "Your Will Be Done on Earth"*