

Our Father in Heaven

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Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Matthew 6:7-9

I have been involved in a series here on prayer that I have titled "Lord, Teach Us to Pray." Let me begin by asking you a question. Have you ever heard someone pray badly, just a crazy prayer that you thought to yourself, that's not the way to pray? In Matthew 6, beginning in verse 7, Jesus says:

"When you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven..."

If you want to know why, fundamentally, the most basic reason why we pray crazy prayers, babbling on and on with empty phrases, saying things to God that we should never say, the most basic problem that people have in praying is that they don't know who God is. We don't know who God is.

You see, what you think about God determines how you pray. And, friends, I will tell you something; you can immediately tell what a person thinks about God by the way they pray. Have you ever listened to someone spend five minutes informing God about a situation as if God didn't already know all of the details?

"O, Lord, I want to pray about this problem that I am having with Suzie. I know, God, that Suzie had a difficult childhood growing up, what with her father dying at age 13, and then being shunted around from relative to relative. And I know God this recent job loss of Suzie's has created quite a bit of pressure on her as well as the fact that she has put on some weight. I believe it has been about 15-20 pounds. Although, God, she really can't help that because she is hypoglycemic..."

God doesn't require an infomercial. What exactly are you praying with this informational purpose and who is it that you are praying to? There is nothing more basic in prayer than you know who God is, who you are addressing. Jesus says don't go on talking, babbling and informing God like the pagans do who don't know God at all. Here is what you should think about God: your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

God does not need all of the details of how the person broke their leg before he is able to heal that person. He doesn't need all the ins and outs of your analysis of a relationship before he can act or all of your analysis of your finances and the economy and the world's economy before he can get you a job.

Or how about this: Have you ever heard someone pray not for informational purposes, but by way of attempting to persuade God that this would be a very good prayer to answer?

"I mean, there are lots of prayers, God, that are really neither here nor there, but God this particular prayer makes a great deal of sense for you to answer and let me share with you why..."

Have you ever prayed that way?

"Because if you answered this one, it would have a big effect on my mother and father. They would be so impressed and I just know that they would open their hearts to you, God, and decide to become your followers. You will look so good if you answer this prayer."

Or, maybe the persuasion comes by way of flattery. I will spend 10-15 minutes buttering God up telling him how great he is and how much I love him and how much he means to me before I get to the real point of what I am after in this prayer and that is that I would really like a new job. Or I would really like to get married. Or I would really like a few more clients for my business.

Now, there is nothing wrong with saying to God that you love him or how great he has been so long as your motive is not to try to persuade him to try to do anything, but because you feel sincerely that you love him and that he has been great to you. Jesus says don't heap up empty words like the pagans do who don't know God. You don't have to inform God in your prayer about a whole list of facts that he would, otherwise, be unaware of except that you give him your version. You don't have to persuade him about the reason why he should answer the prayer or manipulate him. In fact, when you try to manipulate God through words, you dishonor him. Because you are saying to God that he is somehow so much less than he really is. That he won't give you what you need unless you finagle and weed it out of him.

A third bad way to pray is to bargain with God. "God, if you give me X, I promise I will never drink again or swear again." I'm not saying God never answers prayers like these. He sometimes does. I'm saying they betray a faulty view of who the prayer is talking to. God doesn't need your bargain to be gracious to you. God provided his own sacrifice, the death of his own son Jesus. If the blood of Christ won't persuade God to grant your request, cigarettes or TV programs won't convince him either.

The starting point of understanding prayer is always good theology. And theology is nothing other than a proper view of God. It is what you think about God, what you believe about God and definitely how you pray and whether you pray. A faulty view of God will make you pray in a faulty way.

So, if knowing God and thinking rightly about God is the starting point of prayer, who is God? And the first thing that Jesus tells us about God is he is your Father. Don't be like people who don't know God, for your Father knows what you need. God is your Father. Every time you approach God, this thought should be in your mind: I am approaching my Father. That is why the Lord's Prayer begins: Our Father in heaven...

You know, we don't realize how radical, how absolutely unprecedented and outrageous it is for us to call God "my Father" or to think of him as "Father." New Testament scholars tell us that in the entire history of ancient Judaism, we have no example of anyone looking up to the sky and saying to God, "My Father," until Jesus came along. Hundreds of thousands of Jews prayed to God,

but not one of them in any ancient Jewish writing, including the entire Talmud, which is as long as the entire Encyclopedia Britannica, we are talking volumes of discussion and prayer and commentary about God, no where in all of this vast literature, in this long history before the 5th century did anyone ever look up and say, “Father,” but this one person, Jesus.

He was so radical. It was so unprecedented. It was so outrageous that the gospel of John in John 5 says that the Jews of Jesus’ day wanted to stone him for claiming that God was his Father. Now, the word that Jesus used in calling upon God as Father was an Aramaic word. It was “Abba.” That was one of the first words that I learned as a little Jewish boy in parochial school. Abba. It means “Daddy” or “My loving Dad.”

The most impressive thing about Jesus’ prayers, bar none, is that he came to God and called him “Abba.” This was such a vivid impression in the mind of his followers that the early church prayed exactly the same way down to the second and third generation. They called God “Abba” even though they were in a Greek-speaking world. They still held onto this little Aramaic word.

Paul quotes it in Galatians 4:6, *“Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’”*

Only 15 times in the Old Testament is God called Father and never in reference to an individual, but always of the nation or in general terms of the king – never of an individual. And nowhere does someone say, “Abba.”

But 245 times in the New Testament God is called “Father”, “Daddy.” This is the starting point of prayer, to get this: God is your *Father*. And, in many ways, it is the ending point of prayer. Because if you get it, you got it.

If we stumble, first of all, over who God is, we also stumble over who we are. That is the second problem we have in prayer. Jesus tells us, “Don’t be like the pagans.” You are not a pagan. You are a child of God.

Now, I realize that it is politically incorrect to ever draw a distinction these days between one group of people and another. But the Bible draws a distinction among people and says that not everyone in the world can call God their “Abba.” Not every person is a child of God by virtue of his or her birth. This is not me talking now, I am just telling you what the Bible says. You are not a child of God by virtue of birth. You become a child of God through rebirth. Through the born again experience. You are not a child of God because you were created. You become a child of God through recreation when Jesus comes into your life and radically recreates you.

Children of God are not such because of nature but because of a miracle.

You say, “Rich, where do you get this narrow view of only some are children of God and only some can call God Abba, Father?”

It is all through the New Testament, but let me read to you a few verses and you can look these up if you are taking notes. From the gospel of John 1:12, *“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”* Children born neither of natural descent nor of a human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. Membership in God’s family is a miracle. It is a miracle of grace. And it depends on whether you have received Christ.

Or, how about this passage in Romans 8:14, *"Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you [you uniquely, you only] received a spirit of Sonship, a spirit of adoption. And by him, we cry 'Abba Father'. The spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we [and we only] are God's children."*

You want to know how special you are? Listen to 1 John 3:1, *"Behold, how great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear Friends, now we are children of God. You weren't a child of God before you received him, but now we are children of God."*

Here is the starting place of our difficulty in prayer. We don't know God as "Abba." And we don't know how special it is, what an incredible title we have, that when we come into God's presence in prayer, our Father is looking at one of his beloved his children.

May I suggest a couple of other problems we have in prayer? We don't know that prayer makes the difference. We read verses like Matthew 6:7, *"Do not be like the pagans, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him..."* and we say, "Well, if my Father in heaven knows what I need, why bother praying at all?"

So much of the church needs to be convinced that it makes a difference whether or not we pray. You see, Jesus' point in telling us that your Father knows what you need before you ask him is not to keep us from praying as if it doesn't matter, as if it is going to all turn out the same way anyway. Jesus' point in saying this is to get us to pray. To show us how intimately aware of our needs God is. That you don't need to manipulate him or inform him because he is totally in touch with you.

Friends, let me share with you what I believe the great problem in the church is today. I believe that much of the church and many of us here have basically a fatalistic attitude in our relationship with God and our viewpoint of life. A viewpoint that says, "Well, God is going to do what God is going to do anyway. And life is just going to go on in the direction that has already been fatalistically determined anyway, so *qué cera cera*, whatever will be will be."

I want to tell you friends, that fatalism is the mark of non-Christian thinking. If you approach God saying, "What will be will be" "*qué cera cera*" it doesn't make any difference if I pray or not, you are thinking like a non-Christian. The whole non-Christian world thinks fatalistically. The Muslims have an intense notion of fate, determinism. The Hindus believe in karma. It has already been written out. The pagans think it is written in the stars and believe in astrology. Modern America believes in psychological and emotional determinism. "Well, you know, I couldn't help myself. After all, with the way I was raised and what my mother said to me. And what my dad did to me. I couldn't help myself but to do this thing. I cannot change. I cannot choose to be different. And my kids can't help themselves because of what happened to my son or daughter growing up. Well, that is just the way it has to be. They will never be able to behave well or learn well or study well or succeed well."

Listen, if there is anything that the Bible teaches about God, it is that he has condescended to interact with us and to be influenced by us. Now, don't expect me to solve the problem of this tension of God purposing to do all that he wants to do and us being able to influence him in prayer. The Bible doesn't tell us how it all fits together. What it does tell us is that we need to avoid two extremes in our relationship with God.

On the one extreme, we will never be God's boss. He always is the boss. No matter what you say or do, God is the boss.

On the other extreme, it doesn't matter if you pray or not.

I don't know how to resolve the tensions. All I know is what we have revealed to us in the Bible which is a series of stories of people who interacted with God and who God condescended, stooped down, and allowed himself to work with these folks. I see in the Bible that God has chosen not to work around them, but with them and through them. Folks like Abraham and Moses and David and Jeremiah and Paul and Peter and Stephen and Hannah and Mary and widows and blind people and beggars.

Friends, if you approach God fatalistically, it will kill your prayers. The Bible teaches in James 4 that you have not because you ask not. It makes a difference if you pray.

Maybe the best model that we have is of a wise father kneeling down and choosing to interact with his little daughter or son, allowing himself to be influenced and yet always knowing what's best, always setting the boundaries, where there is real interaction going on, real relationship, there is a real dynamic happening when you pray.

And this is the third thing. We don't know who God is. We don't know that prayer makes a difference and we don't know how to pray. That is why Jesus gives us this model. Matthew 6:9 says, "*This, then, is how you should pray...*" It is okay to pray the Lord's Prayer, but it really is meant to be a model prayer. This is the way you should pray. This is how you should pray.

You say, "How should I pray. I really don't know how to pray."

Well, Jesus says that generally when you pray, start with God. Gather your thoughts together and start with God. You will pray much more effectively if you remember who it is that you are addressing before considering your problems and your issues and your needs and your home. Walk into the presence of God and lift up your eyes from your circumstances. Lift up your eyes from what is happening three steps in front of you. Fix your eyes on God our Father who is in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Three petitions about God. About God's name, about God's reign and about God's will.

In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*, which by the way is a wonderful, wonderful paraphrase. A paraphrase that I think will enrich your own devotional life. I have personally used it for several years from time to time in my own devotions. Here is how Gene Peterson translates the first few verses of Colossians 3: "*So, if you are serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along eyes to the ground absorbed with things right in*

front of you. Look up. Be alert to what is going on around Christ. That is where the action is."

Don't shuffle into prayer, eyes on the ground, absorbed with the things right around you – your marriage or your job. Look up. Look up. Be alert to what is going on around Christ. That is where the action is.

This is meant to be a model prayer. Just look up. Don't just shuffle along. Start with God.

And so, how do we start with God?

Our Father in heaven...Abba.

Now, listen, when you are trying to figure out who this God is who has revealed himself as "Father" as "Abba," the worst thing you could do is to project up to the sky your fallen father, read through the eyes of your fallen self. It is absolutely ridiculous how we try to define God by looking at a fallen person, our fathers. And not only looking at a fallen person, but experiencing that fallen person, that broken person, that sinful person, that bent person read through our own fallen, sinful, bent, confused eyes.

This is the definition of idolatry. We take fallen creation, read it through fallen perception and then we say that's what God is like.

No, you stop projecting up to the sky and you allow God's revelation of himself to project down from the sky. You allow God's revelation of himself, not your reasoning about God, but God's revelation of himself to define what he means by Father. Let God's revelation be the touchstone and the starting point for your thoughts about God. What has God revealed about himself as Father? What does it mean that God is your Abba when you approach him in prayer?

Well, I can suggest at least three things. Over against a stingy, tight-fisted father, our Father in heaven is more generous than we imagine. In prayer, we are always going to someone who is more generous than you imagine. Turn with me to Ephesians 2, I want you to see this.

Ephesians 2:4, *"But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved."*

Do you understand how generous God is? That God made you alive spiritually when you were dead. The starting point of the Christian life is God's great love and his rich extravagant mercy. He takes people who were dead, who can't help themselves, who can't respond spiritually, who do not seek after God, who do not want God, who are absolutely insensitive to God and he breaks into those folks' lives and makes them alive because of his rich mercy, his great love, his grace. It is all grace. It is all mercy.

Some people say, "If God exists, why am I not aware of him? Why don't I feel him? Why am I not sensitive to him?"

The Bible tells us the reason. Because many people are dead spiritually.

Let me illustrate this idea that something can be real and yet we may be insensitive or unaware of its reality. You know, there are radio waves all around us here in this room, but we are insensitive to them. We have to be told that there are radio waves here. The only way for us to be aware of those radio waves is if we had a radio receiver that was working. And with a radio receiver

that is working, we become aware of the waves. Though they are invisible and you can't smell them or feel them or touch them or taste them, they are all around us. The only way we would be aware of it is with a live radio receiver.

What Ephesians 2 is telling us is that, friends, we are all born with dead radio receivers. Our transistors have been blown out by our fallen connection with Adam. And God puts in us, by grace, fresh receivers and batteries. We become alive to God and aware of God. God makes us born again and then we say, "Of course God is real! Isn't it obvious? How can you not believe in God?"

Why is it that God does this? Why did God save you by unconditional electing?

Listen to these verses because it shows the enormous generosity of your Father. Verses 6 and 7: *"God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."* And here is the reason why God saved you. Ephesians 2:7, underline it and memorize it: *"In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."*

God saved you in order to show you how generous he is. To lavish his love on you. To show you how incredibly openhearted and open-handed he is. How long will it take for God to pour out his love on you? Forever. In the coming ages, forever and ever, he will be showing you how generous he is.

You say, "What are the implications for my prayers?"

I will tell you. Some of you think that if you ask God for something when you have already received something yesterday or ten days ago or two years ago, some of you think that you are being ungrateful. You don't understand how dishonoring your thoughts are to God. If you ever approach him thinking that he is done giving or tired of giving or exhausted from giving. You dishonor him. "I have asked him for too much. I am being too extravagant in my demands. I better go easy on him."

The most honoring thing that you can do with God, as Father, is to view him as someone who is of extraordinary worth and is willing to share it. You do not honor God as thinking of him as a piker, as frugal, as stingy. It might feel spiritual to you, but you dishonor him unless you say that he is of incredible worth and wishes to share it.

You say, "Well, my heart is so deceptive, Rich. How do I know if I am treating God the right way as being very generous?"

Let me tell you one simple way for you to know whether you are viewing God as being generous or not. Do you ask God for what you really want in the secret recesses of your heart? I think about Jesus' question to a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Blind Bart was calling out for Jesus and Jesus stopped him and asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" Do you say to God, "God, this is what I want?" Are you willing to be that vulnerable with God? Are you willing to be specific in your prayers? If you were to take a blank sheet of paper and with a little bit of thought write down all that you want, all that your heart really desires—are you willing to pray those specific things to God? This is the test of your view of God's generosity. Are you able to pray specifically rather than generalized prayers? "God, I just want to have a peaceful spirit like the serenity

prayer. Grant me the ability to change the things I can't." That's not it! "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus screams at us.

Some of you want to get married. You don't have to cover that up with God. I am not suggesting that you be frustrated now because you are not married or be discontented and miserable. But how about telling God what you want?

Some of you want a change in your marriage. Is God generous enough to change your spouse? To change you? To rekindle love from burned out coals?

Some of you want to see a loved one get saved. Pray specifically. Trust God's generosity. Ask for a ministry. Ask for a miracle.

By the way, in terms of the generosity of God—I haven't the time to look at this now, but if you want to see the revelation of what your Father is like, all you need to do is read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, which I have often relabeled as the story of the prodigal father. One who is extravagant in giving gifts? Extravagant in giving freedom, extravagant in giving forgiveness.

Some of you might say, "Rich, if God is so generous, why is my life so tough? I have been out of work. I have had numerous problems and ailments, illnesses. I have been through a number of trials recently relationally. If God is so extravagant, maybe my recent difficulties tell me that God doesn't love me. My Father doesn't love me."

Let me share with you a second thing that we must learn about our Father. Over against impulsive or permissive fathers, our Father in heaven is more purposeful than we imagined. Look at Hebrews 12:5. *"You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons and daughters. My son [I will add daughter] do not make light of the Lord's discipline. And do not lose heart when he rebukes you because the Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son [as a daughter]."*

Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you like sons. What son is not disciplined by his Father? If you are not disciplined, and everyone undergoes discipline, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons and daughters.

Friends, we completely miss an experience of joy with our Father because we always interpret trials and difficulties different than revelation from the Bible tells us what those trials and difficulties mean. The Bible tells us that many of the trials and difficulties are signs of God's love, proofs of God's love, rather than proofs of his neglect. Many things that we go through are God's method of training us, correcting us. We say, "Why would he be doing this?"

Let's read on: *"Moreover, we have had human fathers who discipline us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live our Father's discipline for a little while as they thought best. But God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness."*

So many of our fathers disciplined us impulsively as they thought best. In the moment. Often, our fathers disciplined us with no goal in mind other than to express upset or anger toward us. Or maybe the goal that they had in mind for us was a wrong goal. Lots of dads and mothers have wrong goals in mind for their children. Maybe their goal, I know because I experience this as a parent, is

that we don't want our children to embarrass us. Be quiet. Don't do that. Don't do this because you are embarrassing me.

Sometimes the goal is for the kids to be like us. You have to think the way I do and have the same tastes as me. Sometimes it is to live life through the son or daughter for us to accomplish our unfulfilled dreams. Many fathers and mothers provided no goals. I know so many of you were raised without a dream or direction for your lives. You find yourselves struggling and aimless and feeling like "why am I here?"

When you approach your Father in heaven, understand that he is not impulsive. And he is not permissive either and saying, "Well, do whatever you want." He is more purposeful in his discipline than you imagine.

Why does God discipline us? Hebrews 12:10, *"Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good. That we may share in his holiness."* God trains us, disciplines us as a Father to move us to a place of entire sanctification. That in our thoughts, in our attitudes, in our words, in our reactions, that we would be completely like Jesus. God disciplines us and puts us through the paces to fit us for heaven. He has a purpose in mind for you...your glorification. He wants to totally change you, to get rid of and break all of your sinful reactions. He wants to make you more forbearing, more kind, more gentle and generous. That is the Father you are approaching.

And last of all, over against an uninvolved or preoccupied Father, our Father in heaven is more available than we imagined. Many of our dads were just not there for us—exhausted after a day of work. They sat in front of the TV brooding night after night. How many of us as fathers and mothers communicate to our children: Go away. I am too involved with my own stuff, my own busyness, my own tiredness, my own upset to deal with your questions and your issues.

Gordon MacDonald wrote a wonderful book some years ago called *The Effective Father*. In it he says that one of the things that make fathers effective with their children is that they don't always send busy signals to their kids. You know how frustrating it is to call someone and get a busy signal? You can't get through? Companies know that you don't like to get a busy signal, so what do they do? They put you on hold and tell you over and over again to just wait and someone is eager to get your call. They will be right with you. They know that if you get a busy signal, you will go to a competitor. And so they play music and try to keep you on the line.

You know, our Father in heaven doesn't say to us, "Go away, I am busy. I am preoccupied. Your issue is so small. I am dealing with world events. Gigantic political crises. Big stuff in Russia and in Israel. Get away from me with your petty little stuff!" Any time day or night we have access to God. This is what Hebrews 10:19-22 tells us!

Our Father in heaven is available. More available than we imagine. David knew it. That is what made David one of the great pray-ers in history. He knew his Father was available. That at any time he could dump his feelings on God. That is why he says things like Psalm 61: *"Hear my cry, O God. Listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth, I cry out to you. My heart is overwhelmed."*

So often we think that if we are overwhelmed, we need to dump our feelings on another person or stuff them. Your Father in heaven says, "I am available for you to dump your feelings, your upset, your depression, your anxieties."

Psalm 34:18 says: *"The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* God is more available and closer to us than we imagine.

Do you want to pray better? Then get in touch with God as your Father in heaven. I know that we have corrupt ideas of fathers. Friends, we have spent enough time in our lives agreeing with the Devil regarding what God must be like. How about for the next 10, 20 or 50 years we spend our time agreeing with the Bible and with God's revelation regarding what he is like? God is more generous, more purposeful and more available than we imagine.

Let's pray.

Our Father in Heaven

I. Our Problems in Prayer

A. We don't know who _____.

We don't know who _____.

B. We don't know that _____.

C. We don't know _____.

II. Our Father in Heaven

A. Over against a stingy, tight-fisted father, our Father in heaven is more _____ than we imagine. (Eph. 2:4-7)

B. Over against an impulsive or permissive father, our Father in heaven is more _____ than we imagine. (Heb. 12:4-11)

C. Over against an uninvolved or preoccupied father, our Father in heaven is more _____ than we imagine. (Ps. 61:1; 34:18)