

Last week we began our twenty week journey together here in worship by acknowledging that we, as humans, longing to be in relationship with God, and God longing to be in relationship with us, are indeed **"Conditioned to Pray."** Like a piece of fine leather that needs to be conditioned and cared for, we need prayer to serve as our conditioner for life.

C.S. Lewis is quoted having said "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me."

Without prayer in our lives, I dare say we begin to dry up and one day... SNAP!

So, if we are conditioned to pray, how do we do it? What does prayer look like and sound like? Well, like we do to answer many of the conundrums of life, we look to examples and teachings available to us. Fortunately for us, Jesus, the son of God, our Lord and Savior, provides for us the ultimate example of how to live, and especially, how to live in right relationship with God. Among many things, prayer happens to be one of Jesus' specialties.

How do we know? The disciples. That is right. This band of 12, who were closest in proximity to Jesus during his ministry, did their best to follow and learn from Jesus while traveling. One day, they, as well as all the others who followed Jesus around from town to town listening to his teachings, asked a similar question to Jesus: "How are we to pray?" Jesus says...

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.⁷ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ **"Pray then in this way:**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ **Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

¹¹ **Give us this day our daily bread.**

¹² **And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

¹³ **And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.**

**¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”**

Even though we don't have a compilation recording all of Jesus' prayers word for word, Jesus had become known for his prayerful spirit. Before he ever did anything, we read about Jesus going off by himself to pray, looking up to God, asking God for blessing on food, and as we looked at a few weeks ago, even asking God why and pleading for help. Still, with what was likely a myriad of examples, Jesus is recorded by Matthew and Luke as responding in this specific way. The content of the prayer is similar in both Matthew and Luke, but Matthew 6:5-15 (within his famous Sermon on the Mount) provides a little more context. When we pray, Jesus says no to street corners for show and no to empty, long winded nonsense. Instead, we are to begin with what has become known as the Lord's Prayer.

Within the Lord's Prayer, there are seven revelations embedded: six are found within the scripture and the seventh was added by the early church as a summary and closing.

1. Prayer is addressed to God (who is both heavenly and approachable)
2. Prayer is with the belief and faith that God's kingdom will come
3. Prayer is for God's will to be done, not our will
4. Prayer is for God to provide and supply daily sustenance and bread
5. Prayer is for forgiveness from all debts, trespasses, and sins
6. Prayer is for God to provide what it takes to overcome temptation and deliver
7. Prayer is concerned with God and God's glory, for it is God's kingdom, power, and glory that lasts forever.

Today, we are going to dig into the first revelation which reads "Our Father, who art in heaven" accompanied by the first petition "hallowed be your name." To help us unpack it better, we can look at this in three main parts:

- A. Our Father,
- B. who art in heaven,
- C. hallowed be your name.

Let's start with "Our Father." Jesus in other places in scripture called out to God, "Abba (or father)." This is viewed as a term of endearment. By using this term to talk to God, Jesus set himself apart from the other Jews. Jews didn't believe God was approachable. God was out there somewhere patrolling the skies, but God was not a fathomable being able to be minimized, and therefore, God could not be referred to in such a personal way. For the Jews, God was majestic and holy but certainly not material. For the Jews, to talk to God required intercession from a priest or prophet who had been anointed to serve God in that way. But then there is Jesus, who comes in so many ways to do and teach the unthinkable.

Jesus spoke of God as a father, as though God was right there. It was like Jesus was talking to a friend. Because of Jesus' example in doing this, we believe Jesus opened a door, or window, for us too to view and talk to God directly. When we think of Jesus' declaration as "the way, truth, and life" we can think of him as the pathway and bridge to a direct connection with God.

So, just like we would call to a parent or a friend across the room or address a certain person in conversation, we can do that with God. God is available and approachable. "Father" is the term Jesus uses and he teaches and invites us to do the same: God is also "our" Father.

Now, some of you might be thinking, why not "Mother"; isn't God also "Mother"? There has been some debate over the last several years, mostly from a feminist front, that ponders whether God can also be considered "Mother." One of the things we must acknowledge is that in early biblical times, societies were very patriarchal, which helped influence most of the images of God to be masculine (father, king, husband, warrior). But, as many have pointed out, we do have scripture that also compares God to a woman: God is like a wife giving birth (Isaiah 42:14); like a mother teaching a toddler to walk and holding the child in her arms (Hosea 11:1-3); like a mother who comforts a frightened or hurt child (Isaiah 66:13); and Jesus compares God's rejoicing over a repenting sinner to a woman who has found a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). This debate is natural, I think, especially when we are thinking in human terms. But here is the thing. We are human and we can think and speak only in human terms. Therefore, we want to personalize God in the same ways, with the same attributes, we can personalize ourselves. All our language then, about God will be personal. *(Like a young girl who comments to her mother that because God is so helpful and able to do everything, God must be a mother, because mom's do everything... Alright guys, if this is true, we have our work cut out for us.)* No matter how much that might be true or untrue, we must remember that God is God, and although we recognize some personal qualities with God (God acts, speaks, knows, wills, decides, loves, rejoices, regrets, pleads, judges), we must not put God within our human limitations and boundaries. God doesn't fit in a box. So, yes, based on the scriptures, God is "Father", and "Mother" ... I'll take both.

The important thing to remember is that to call someone "father", or "mother," is to know them, recognize them, adore them, and be in relationship with them. It also means we recognize that they know us. In doing this, we recognize our place as child and God's place as the parent. Just as our parents do not refuse us the things of this life, even less will God, "our Father", refuse to give us what we ask in faith.

But Jesus doesn't just invite us to be personal with God. Through the second part of this revelation, Jesus tells us to honor God by distinguishing God as the One "who art in Heaven."

A Sunday School teacher began her lesson with a question, "Boys and girls, what do we know about God?" A hand shot up in the air. "He is an artist!" said the kindergarten boy. "Really? How do you know?" the teacher asked. "You know - Our Father, who does art in Heaven.." Do you think the boy understood just how great an artist and creator God really is?

Where is God? Everywhere we might say. But don't we refer to the home of God as heaven? This part of the prayer helps us distinguish, like the term "Father," that we are talking to THE God, and not the gods of our material world or even the gods of the sea, earth, wind, and air found in Greek mythology. Heaven is known God's eternal home. Whether that is in the clouds up there somewhere or not, I don't know exactly, but I do believe heaven (eternity with God) to be a place that is over the top nice, good, restful, intentional, open and reserved for those who place their faith in God.

A. "Our Father... B. who art in heaven... C. hallowed be your name."

The third part of this revelation is known as the first petition. We must recognize here the power of language. Words have meaning. "Hallowed" has a rich meaning. This is what we pray to God when we say, "hallowed be your name." When we honor and respect God in this way, we wish to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, coming as children to a father able and ready to help us as we pray together and for others. We wish for God to enable us and others to glorify God in all that we do as we live and work in the creation that displays God's power and mercy. And we wish to be pleased to dispose all things to God's own glory.

Put another way, we learn from the Heidelberg Catechism that this petition means:

"God, help us to really know you, to bless, worship, and praise you... for all your works and for all that shines forth from them; your almighty power, wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and truth. God, help us direct our living... what we think and do... so that your name will never be blasphemed because of us but always honored and praised."

To summarize the first revelation of the Lord's Prayer, I appreciate what Shirley Guthrie, in his book *Christian Doctrine*, offers:

"God is a person, but God is not a human person, not even a very old or very perfect one. God is a God that draws near to us as a loving parent or as one who wants to be friend and companion, but God is also infinite, almighty, omniscient, omnipresent, beyond and greater than anything we can imagine. If we think of God only as father

(mother), we will end up with a sweet, sentimental Grandparent who is not the God of the bible. If we think of God only as the God “in heaven,” we will end up with an unknown, threatening Tyrant who is also not the God of the bible. God is far above yet with us, distant yet near, mysterious yet familiar, powerful yet loving, loving yet powerful... all at the same time.”

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we begin with three very powerful clauses. They set the tone for the entire prayer and teach us that these clauses ought to be the starting point for all our prayers. They are the perfect launching pad. We don't just pray to anyone... we pray to Our Father (mother), our God who is in heaven, who can help reveal to us and provide for us in all the areas of life when we just believe and trust in faith.

Today, we have simply touched the surface of the depth of this prayer. Someone once said that what matters most with prayer is its depth, not its length. The Lord's Prayer is not a long prayer, but it certainly is packed full. Stay tuned over the next six weeks as we continue to dig deeper. For now, with all we encounter in life, lets take it to the Lord in prayer.

Let all God's people say... Amen.