

“Our Father in Heaven” — Matthew 6:9

They listened in awe as he prayed. They sensed in him the presence of God. And they wanted to pray as he prayed. They wanted to experience God as he experienced God. So Jesus’ disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray!”

When Jesus answered them, he didn’t tell them whether they should stand, sit or kneel. He didn’t say anything about how long to pray or when or how often. He simply said:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

These words have become the most famous and frequent prayer of all of history. They have been recited billions of times on every continent for almost 2,000 years.

Anyone who claims to be a Christian, any person who wants to talk to God, anybody who needs help should seek to understand this amazing little prayer. But in order to understand this prayer better there is some background information that we need to know.

First we need to understand that it is not a set prayer. You don’t have to get every word exactly a certain way.

Several years ago we decided to periodically include the Lord’s Prayer in the Sunday morning worship services at Wooddale Church. That seemed like a simple enough decision until we tried to decide what words to include. We looked up the Lord’s Prayer in various translations of the Bible and found each one a little different. We called churches all over the Twin Cities to ask which words they used. Some said “debts and debtors”, some use “trespasses and

trespassers” and a few said “sins and sinners”. Protestants add, “. . . for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory” to the end and Catholics leave that off; Lutherans end with “forever and ever” and others just finish with “forever”.

Because Wooddalers come from many different backgrounds, we decided to forge our own combination from all the samples. That’s probably okay because not even Jesus said the Lord’s Prayer the same way every time. Let me show you. In Matthew 6:9-13 it says:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Now compare that to Luke 11:2-4 where it says:

Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.

You see, Jesus never intended it to be a set prayer. Instead it was meant to be a model of the

way to pray.

When couples are married at Wooddale Church we give them a list of sample marriage vows. The vows aren’t legalistic formulas. They can be adapted to each couple’s situation.

And so it is with Jesus’ sample prayer. It’s a model, an example, a demo to be personally adapted for each of us when we pray.

Second, we need to see that the Lord’s Prayer is organized into two halves. The first

...prayer should always begin with who God is and what God wants. Only then should it move on to who we are and what we want.

half has to do with God: “our Father”; “hallowed be your name”; “your kingdom come”; “your will be done”. The second half has to do with us: “our daily bread”; “our trespasses”; “those who trespass against us”; “lead us not into temptation”; “deliver us from the evil one”.

Jesus is teaching us that prayer should always begin with who God is and what God wants. Only then should it move on to who we are and what we want.

It is also important for us to understand that the Lord’s Prayer deals with our past, present and future. The words for the past are, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” The words dealing with the present ask God to “Give us today our daily bread.” And the words about the future are, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

Finally, we need to understand that this really isn’t the Lord’s prayer at all. While it’s true that we always refer to it as “the Lord’s Prayer”, some have observed that it is the prayer that Jesus himself could never pray because he never sinned so he had no need to be forgiven. And still others have said that it really should be called “the Disciples’ Prayer” because they asked for it and it’s a pattern for all of Jesus’ disciples to pray.

Whatever we call it, this is a most remarkable and important little prayer. And nothing is more important than the way it begins, teaching us to pray to our Father who is in heaven. This opening line of Jesus’ prayer is a stunning mix of the intimate and the infinite.

When my father died it forced me to reflect on and to appreciate fatherhood in a new light since I no longer have a father on earth. One of the wonderful and fascinating aspects of losing my father was the hundreds of cards, notes, books, calls and conversations from friends near and far. Many wrote personal notes reflecting on their own fathers and their relationships with them.

For some the word “father” conjures up dif-

ficult and unpleasant memories. For most, “father” is a most positive and wonderful word. When Jesus said “our Father” he meant the best that could be. In fact, the word Jesus chose for “Father” must have shocked his followers. He taught them to call God “Abba”. “Abba” is baby talk; it was seldom used by adults. Nowhere in the expansive ancient Jewish devotional literatures is God ever once addressed as “Abba”. “Abba” was the Aramaic word for “Daddy”. In fact, if you visit Jerusalem today you may often hear a child calling out in Arabic, “Abba! Abba!” — “Daddy! Daddy!”

It was unthinkable for a religious Jew of Jesus’ day to address Almighty God in such a familiar and intimate family way. While there is nothing wrong with addressing God in lofty formal words — Almighty; Sovereign God; Maker of heaven and earth — Jesus simply said, “Our Daddy in heaven.”

Author Ruth Senter reflects on her memories of her father. She writes:

You were there in my hurts. I saw my hurt in your eyes, watched my pain in your face as the blood spurted from my wrist, cut open by a fall on a piece of broken glass. I knew you knew my hurt as surely as if you yourself had missed the toehold on the side of the barn. You did not run from the blood. You gathered me in your arms, blood and all, and raced me to the hospital. You held my hand while the doctor sewed the skin. You leaned with a watchful eye over the surgical proceedings because this was your child they were sewing together. You were there with me in my pain. Hovering over me. Daddy Father. Abba Father. The One who wears my pain.

You were there to applaud me. Proud papa sitting in the second row from the front, watching the play. You came for every performance. Saw the same play. Sat in the same row. You didn’t need to come all three nights. You saw it all the

first time. But there you were anyway. Every night . . . twenty minutes before curtain time. And in the final curtain call, I was sure I heard your applause above all the rest. You were probably the first one to stand at the ovation. I knew that you were there, even though the stage lights were so bright I couldn't see you. I knew you were there, and I knew you were well pleased with me.

Daddy Father. Abba Father. The One who takes pleasure in His child.

When we pray to God, Jesus says to call him "Daddy".

There is an added wonder when Jesus says "Our" Father. He is telling us to claim God as our own.

You need to understand something very important here. Jesus was always the Son of God. In fact, the Bible says in John 3:16 that Jesus is God's "only" son. But Jesus wanted us to claim God as our Father, too. He knew that there was only one way for that to happen. It was for Jesus to pay the price for our sins and for our adoption into the family of God. When we become Christians by accepting Jesus as our Savior, God adopts us as his sons and daughters. We become forever children of God and can legitimately say, "Our Father" ("Our Daddy").

Not "my" Father! We're part of a family. Everyone who is a Christian has brothers and sisters who have been adopted by God as well. They are young and old, rich and poor, from every race, country, occupation and gender. We are never alone in the family of God. My friend, the next time you are scared or need help or want to be held and comforted or want to share a super success or feel terribly alone — pray, to "our Father"!

But let us not get so caught up in the marvels of the intimate that we overlook the wonder of the infinite. He is "Our Daddy . . . who is in heaven". There is some risk that we might

misunderstand what Jesus meant when he prayed to Our Father "in heaven". He did not mean that God is far away from us as in Bette Midler's song "From A Distance". We too quickly imagine that we are here and God is there and the distance in between is too far to reach. The Bible clearly teaches that God is everywhere. He is as present with us as he is upon his celestial throne.

But what most of us have learned in the Lord's Prayer is not exactly what Jesus taught. In the Greek text of the New Testament it says, "Our Father in the heavens". That refers primarily to the skies overhead. Jesus was making an important point: The Father who is intimate is also the God who is infinite. He is the God who is beyond us. He is greater than our widest horizons. Our horizon may extend a few miles around us — our heaven is small; but the Father is the God of everyone's sky, the God of every horizon, the God who is infinite.

If you fly a plane to an altitude of 1,000 feet, you can see 40 miles in any direction. If you go up to 10,000 feet, the horizon is 122 miles. If you fly up to 40,000 feet, the horizon extends to 244 miles. At 40,000 feet you can see Minneapolis and Chicago at the same time or New York and Washington or even San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The God of the heavens has infinite horizons. He can see us all. His place is here and there, on earth and in the heavens.

But there's another aspect to God's infinity. "Our Father in the heavens" speaks not only of his place

but also of his power. God is the creator, owner and ruler of the whole universe. He has no limitations. He is the all-powerful God.

As a child you think your father can do anything. You may even offer his services to beat up your friend's father! But as we grow up we begin to realize that our fathers are as limited as we are. There are many things they could

When we pray to God, Jesus says to call him "Daddy".

not do even it they wanted.

That's not so with our "Daddy in the heavens". He has no limitations. He created the earth and the sky and the universe. He never began and he will never end. He can do anything. He is the God of the heavens!

I stand in awe of such power. I cannot begin to comprehend the greatness of God. I am dumbstruck. He takes my breath away. It is hard to imagine daring to speak to him, much less be intimate with him. Yet, he is our Daddy!

Is he your Daddy? Can you honestly pray the words, "Our Father in heaven"? Only a true Christian can pray those words because only a true Christian is a child of God.

If you are not a Christian, let me tell you how to become one right now. Tell God that you want to be his son or daughter and that you

want to be adopted into his forever family. Tell God that you commit yourself to Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin and the Lord of your life.

Faith Matters[®] is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
©Leith Anderson