

## The Greatest Prayer (The Lord's Prayer)

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Bible Text: Matthew 6:5-15

Lesson Focus: When we say the prayer Jesus taught us, we connect with God.

Big Question: What's the big deal about the Lord's Prayer?

Key Words: RELATIONSHIP, PETITION, EXAMPLE, ACCESS, HOLY

### Thoughts to prepare:

- Jesus invited his listeners into a relationship with God that was direct and fundamental.
- Prayer works because God is faithful, not because we are.
- Jesus offered the Lord's Prayer as an example.
- There are no prerequisites for prayer. The lines of communication are always open with God.
- Luther considered "Our Father in heaven" to be the introduction to the Lord's Prayer.
- The introduction holds in tension two great truths about the God to whom we pray.
  - Jesus calls God "Father," a parental image that implies real intimacy in our relationship with God.
  - Because of this metaphor, we can see God as close to us, deeply invested in us, because we are God's as children are related to parents.
  - Jesus addresses the God in heaven. This way of talking about God helps us see that God is beyond the boundaries of time and space.
  - We are invited to pray to God with a promise that we will be heard and that God will respond.

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### NARRATIVE

When Jesus first spoke the words we now know as the Lord's Prayer, it was in the context of a teaching moment. His first hearers were deeply concerned with how they might express their faith. As in many of the stories we have received about him, Jesus was in the midst of compare-and-contrast rhetoric. In speaking about prayer, he suggested that prayer is best done in private, implying that the public prayer of hypocrites was less about communicating with God and more about communicating with those who observed the prayer. Similarly, Jesus pointed out how the Gentiles hoped that through their wordy phrases they would capture God's attention. In contrast, Jesus taught that God knows what we need even before we ask.

Nevertheless, we are urged to pray in the midst of our shortcomings. We can pray in our worst moments and in our best. We can ask that we be saved from the time of trial, knowing full well that such times will come. And then we can also ask that we be delivered from evil when it comes upon us, or when it rises up from within. The God we see in Jesus does not demand perfection as a prerequisite for relationship. God hears our prayer as we are. It's a solid Lutheran notion—what makes our prayer work is not *our* effort, but *God's*. Prayer's primary purpose is to communicate with God, and it should not be a matter of show, which negates its purpose. Jesus then offered an example of how to pray (Matthew 6:9-13; see also Luke 11:2-4)—simple, direct, and broad reaching.

## Read

**Matthew 6: 9-13**

**Luke 11:2-4**

It seems that we humans persistently distort prayer in the very ways Jesus sought to debunk. Sometimes, because we seek to be faithful, we start keeping score, even with prayer. For example, many people are deeply uncomfortable praying aloud. You could say that private prayer is the preferred way. However, we are also invited to pray for each other, and there can be great power in offering the prayers of the community in a community setting. But if we are overwhelmed by worry that our prayer is not adequate, or doesn't measure up to what another person can do (a pastor or any other we might perceive as being more fluent or confident), we have lost sight of the point. We are invited by Jesus' own example to pray for both the deepest matters of our souls and the more temporal concerns of daily life. **The Lord's Prayer shows us that nothing is too far-reaching or too mundane to pray for.** We can ask that God's reign be manifest in our time, and we can ask for daily bread. Our entire lives are included between these brackets. We may also want to pray "beautifully" to glorify God, but what God seems to want most is that we simply pray—that we reopen and maintain the connection we have with God.

By addressing God as Father, Jesus reveals an intimacy with God. Framing God as a parent implies a relationship that bestows an identity and is generative in nature. The metaphor of Father suggests that we are the product of God's loving creation, that we have a place in God's family, that we are heirs of God, and that God's concern for our well-being will stretch beyond our own lives to the lives of our children, and to generations well beyond. We are bone of God's bone and flesh of God's flesh in so many ways. We sinners have been given a deep connection to the holy God—a blood connection—that cannot be denied or broken no matter how we may behave.

Martin Luther wondered why we worry about making God's name holy. Isn't it already? God's name is holy because God is, not because of anything humans could do or say. But, Luther pointed out, what we do in God's name can also enhance or hinder the holiness of God's name. That is, our words and actions become a mirror by which others interpret or perceive God's holiness. On the other hand, when we look at the dismal record of Christian actions throughout history, we find plenty of examples of unholy behavior. Both on a large scale and on a smaller, more personal scale, we have not always lived up to the holiness and intimacy with God that we long for in this prayer.

Jesus also speaks to God "in heaven." This is the second great truth about the God to whom we address this prayer. While "Father" implies a God who is close to us and imminently accessible, "in heaven" implies a God who is at the same time far beyond our imagining. For most people, a God needs to be powerful in the face of forces and events that dwarf us and our ability to control and cope. We need a God who can stand up to the darker forces of life and come out the victor. In Jesus, of course, we see just such a God. "In heaven" is less about where God is located and more about God's purview. Heaven is the preeminent place, a place where all else can be seen and considered, where the view is limitless, where wisdom is boundless, and where the needs of all can be considered at once. In faith, this God precedes time and space and is beyond them both.

So we have these three truths about the God to whom we are invited to pray. We reach out to (1)

a God who is as close to us as our own flesh and blood, (2) a God who is as mysterious and vast as unknown solar systems and the stars that inhabit them, and (3) a God who has chosen to convey holiness to the world through us! What kind of gift is this—that we should be invited to know and be in relationship with such a God! When we pray, “Hallowed be your name,” we are praying that the world might find God’s name to be holy, and that we might be contributors to that reality. We can go a long way toward making God’s name holy through our words and our actions.

Luther reminds us that we are not only invited to pray, we are commanded to do so. We can do so with confidence. We can speak from our deepest hearts. We can listen with confidence and hope. God will listen. And God will respond with both the tenderness of a loving parent and the power of the creator of the universe. Good work done by Christians can do much to spread God’s holiness around. If we are riveted on God’s welcome to all, if we view all of God’s creation as equally worthy, if we trust that God will provide all that we need, and if we hear God’s call to defend those who are marginalized in our society, think of the positive impact we can have, both on our world and on God’s “brand identity.”

So what’s the big deal about the Lord’s Prayer?

Sometimes praying may be difficult and stilted. How should we address God? What is appropriate to say or ask? How can I tell God what is troubling me? Jesus understood human nature very well. When his disciples asked him how they should pray, he taught them. He provided instructions for how to pray to be in communication with God. This simple but beautiful prayer is time honored and **appropriate for those who have lived a total life of faith, as well as for those just beginning their faith journey.** The caution is to avoid rote memorization and to race through it. The result can be the loss of the beauty and essence of our conversation with God.

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Read Student Book page 301 - 304:

Find the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism. When Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray, he encourages them to ask God for what they want (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). How we ask depends on how we view our relationship with God.

Look at Luther’s explanation of the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer. How does Luther suggest we view our relationship with God? How should we ask God for what we desire? Create and demonstrate an appropriate prayer posture for a child approaching a loving heavenly Father. Consider how viewing God as Father helps us understand who God is and how we can approach God. What doesn’t work for you about this image?

Make a list of things you could ask God to do that would benefit others.

Read Student Book page 301: Look at the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer, and answer the following:

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Answer:

Why is it such a big deal to call God something as personal as “Father” rather than “Your Highness” or “Most Mysterious and Important Ruler”? Notice, too, that it is “Our Father,” not “My Father.” The voices you hear praying with you are those of your family, your church family, a world full of God’s children.

Read Student Book page 188: Read through “How to Tell the Difference between the Law and the Gospel

Answer:

What parts sounds more like the Law?

Which parts sound more like the Gospel?

Are there parts of the Lord’s Prayer that seem like both? Start with the first two words of the prayer: Our Father.

Read Student Book page 193-194: Read “How to Pray.”

Answer

Do certain prayer postures help them focus more on praying?

Do you think the Lord’s Prayer is mostly about the words, or mostly about the comfort it gives us because we know it so well?

Why is praying so difficult sometimes?