

Our Father in Heaven

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 June 2024

Preacher: Anthony Parrott

[0 : 00] My name is Anthony. I get to serve as one of the co-lead pastors here at the table, and we are starting a new series today on the Lord's Prayer. Now, before we get into that, if you're anything like me, you will show up to the dentist's office, and you will get asked by your hygienist or your dentist, how often do you floss? Okay, now there are a few groups of people in the room right now. There is a group of people who will respond. They'll look the hygienist right in the eye, and they will respond every day, and they're telling the truth. I am not addressing you weirdos right now, okay? Then there's the rest of us who also look the hygienist right in the eye. Maybe we'll look down a little bit, and we also say every day, but we're not telling the truth, or maybe we feel bad for the fact that we don't do it every day, and so we'll say like, oh, you know, you know, most of the time, some days, and they just look at us like, we can tell. We're just asking you to test you, okay? There is a similar thing that happens if you go and talk to the pastor, and the pastor asks you, how often do you pray? There's a similar sort of energy that happens in that question. Oh, yeah, all the time, pastor. I wouldn't lie to you. Uh-huh. Yeah, we know. Or you say like, you know, I'm working on it. I'm praying more than I have. You're working on it, but there's this sort of guilt that immediately floods into our bodies when we get asked a question like, how often do you floss? How often do you pray? And sometimes there's a direct correlation. I don't know why.

It's science. Now, we're going to talk about prayer in the sort of mentors, both personal mentors, books that I've read, all of that, the folks that I respect who have done pastoral ministry for decades and decades. They will tell people like Tanetta and me, pastors, ministers, clergy, anybody who's in sort of like a Christian helper role, they will tell us that there is one most important thing that you can do as a pastor. And it's not raising money. It's not guiltting people into volunteering.

It's not even reading your Bible. It is teaching people how to pray. And that sucks for us because it is one of the hardest things to teach people to do, much less to want to do. Prayer sort of gets at many of our insecurities about our practice that we call the Christian religion. Prayer gets into, is there a God at all? If there is a God, does that God care about me? Can that God hear me? Is that God actually going to take action in the world? And when I actually take the moment or two it takes to pray, to address that God with my language, all of those insecurities come flooding back.

And there's the harsh realities, the practical realities, that sometimes prayer is just boring. It is a, there is no dopamine hit. There is no like scrolling through prayers and being like, yeah, like, oh, that makes me angry. No, it's just you and your own thoughts alone with a God who may or may not be there.

And so when, you know, I hear that like the most important thing that I can do as a pastor is teach my congregation how to pray, I recognize the gravity and the magnitude and the difficulty of that task.

[3 : 35] Because it's hard, it's hard, it's boring, it's difficult. And also I know from experience and I know from those mentors who have been in ministry for decades and decades, that when we actually get into a rhythm of prayer and make that part of the fabric of our lives, it changes us.

It's formative, it shapes us into the kinds of people that most of us are aiming towards being loving and joyful and peaceful and patient.

And while there's not actually a direct correlation between flossing and prayer, there is a direct correlation between being a loving, joyful, peaceful, patient kind of person and being the kind of person who stops and prays.

So the way that we're going to talk about this over the next five weeks is we're going to take a look at the Lord's Prayer, which there's a couple different versions in the Gospels. I'll be working today mostly from Matthew 6.

But there is a version of the story where Jesus has disciples, student learners, to his rabbinical teaching ministry. And the disciples ask Jesus, teach us to pray.

[4 : 53] And Jesus says, pray in this way. And so Jesus offers a model of how to pray. So we're going to use that model over the coming weeks to answer the how to pray language.

Now, there's a researcher who talks about three different kinds of languages. I'm going to start with number two, and then three, and then one, okay? So number two is the language of information.

This is the language of schools. This is the language of knowledge and Wikipedia and Google answers, which may or may not tell you to, like, eat rocks, okay? The language of information is facts.

And when we go to school and we go to college, we often think about what facts am I going to learn? When we go to a Sunday service and someone is teaching a sermon at you, you often feel like you are just learning information and facts.

Or sometimes that sermon can get into the third kind of language, which is the language of motivation. This is the language that happens in commercials. It's the language that happens in political speeches and sometimes even sermons that we recognize from a pretty early age that words have the ability to make stuff happen.

[6 : 13] So it's not just facts about what is true or what used to be true, but it's words that can make new things true. It's the language of motivation. We're familiar with these two kinds of language.

We are inundated with gigabytes and terabytes of information and motivation shoved in our faces all the time, every day. But there's a first kind of language that we learn as human beings, and that is the language of intimacy, the language of relationship.

These are the first sort of sounds and syllables and words that we make as children towards a caregiver, a parent, a grandparent, someone who's caring for us.

And that language of intimacy is simple. It's often quiet. It's very relational. And then we're shoved into schools and we're shoved into advertisements that are shoved at us.

And then sometimes we rediscover that language of intimacy with a partner, a loved one, a dear, close friend, where not a lot of words are shared. It's not tons of information.

[7 : 20] You're not trying to get anybody to do anything. You're just sharing relationship with each other. Oftentimes, prayer has been shaped and formed by our culture of information and motivation to look and sound the same way.

I'm going to, as one priest put it, rehearse my anxieties out loud with God. I'm going to share God a bunch of information. This is true, and this is true, and this isn't true, and I wish this were true.

I'm going to try to get my words into a certain order and way that I can motivate God to act on my behalf, because she hasn't yet, rather than the much more intimate and private and personal language of intimacy.

Now, I'm a person, I struggle constantly with intellectualizing everything, but the constant conversation I have with my therapist is like, Anthony, yes, I know.

You can tell me all the categories of all the things that have happened in your life. How do you feel about it? I'm like, oh, I've never thought about that. I don't know. And it's oftentimes the same kind of things can happen with our relationship with God, with the divine, that I can give God information, and I want God to give information to me.

[8 : 34] I can try to convince God to do things. If I could just pray in the right way and get the words in the right order and repeat the right phrases, if I have the right theology, I can get God to act on my behalf. And I also know that God is trying to get me to act on their behalf, rather than just the non-anxious, peaceful way of a friend, an intimate lover, a caregiver, who I feel safe and trusted with.

So as we talk about prayer, know that I'm going to be drawn by my personality to teach you facts and motivation. But I'm trying my best to draw myself towards the language of intimacy, of relationship.

Let me give you a couple definitions of prayer that I think you might find helpful. First one comes from a pastor, Jason Miller. He says this. He says, Prayer is a conscious act of presence and surrender to the loving mystery at the center of reality that we call God.

I love to think of prayer as like, I'm thinking about you on purpose.

I'll pray for you. Like, well, maybe I don't always have the words to say about how to fix your situation or what the right thing is. But to say to somebody like, oh, I'm actually, I'm thinking about you on purpose.

[10 : 03] Like I have an intentionality to put your surgery or your birthday or the day of your loss on my calendar so that I'm thinking about you on purpose is a form of prayer. And when we aim that attention and intentionality towards the center of reality that we call God, that too is a form of prayer, a conscious act of presence and surrender to loving mystery.

Second definition comes from author, podcaster, Mike McCarg. Some of you might know him as Science Mike. I've shared some of his axioms before. This is his axiom on prayer. He says prayer is at least a form of meditation that encourages the development of healthy brain tissue, reduces stress, and that can connect us to God.

Even if that is a comprehensive definition of prayer, the health and psychological benefits of prayer justify the discipline. Now, we've talked about this in the past before, but I'll reiterate that the kind of God that you pray to makes a huge difference as to whether prayer is healthy or not.

If the God that you happen to pray to is angry and vindictive and out to get you, that does have a formative effect on you, but it actually creates more stress and more anxiety and shapes and forms you into the image of the God that you happen to worship.

If you know or pre-decide that the God that you're going to pray to is loving and peaceful and patient and kind and just, and you aim your purposeful attention towards that God, then yes, there are actual psychological, physiological benefits to your brain and to that thing that we call our soul, that when we aim our attention at a being of infinite love, we too are shaped into being more loving creatures ourselves.

[11 : 51] Prayer is at least a form of meditation, and so if some of our anxieties around prayer are that you have to like copy the tele-evangelist that you saw on like a wild TikTok, no, it doesn't have to be that.

If you have to copy the most charismatic person that you know, no, it doesn't have to be that. If you just need to find a place of peace and quiet and subtleness and aim a word or two at the loving mystery at the center of the universe, then you have discovered prayer.

So prayer is at least that. Now, let's talk about the Lord's prayer itself. I'm going to give a little bit of an overview of the whole thing, and then our preachers over the next few weeks are going to dive into some of the specific phraseology that's going on here.

But the disciples ask, Lord, Rabbi, teach us to pray. And as was typical for a Jewish rabbi, they would train their students, train their disciples in their particular way of addressing the divine, addressing God.

And so what we are offered here is a model. And that model can be used a couple ways. You can repeat it verbatim, maybe not verbatim since we don't speak Aramaic or Greek, most of us, but at least a translation of it.

[13 : 09] You can repeat it. And that has its own benefits. And it can also be used as a frame, as a framework for creating your own prayers. So what Kyung Sun prayed before announcements comes from the New Zealand Anglican Book of Prayer.

And it is a form of the Lord's Prayer put through a New Zealand indigenous lens, putting that in a new way. But here is how Jesus puts it.

So briefly, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. We'll get into what that means. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debt or our trespasses or our sins or our transgressions. This is always the part when everyone's trying to do it for memory that everyone sort of mumbles their way through it.

Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debt or trespasses as we forgive those who have debt against us or trespasses against us. Do not lead us into temptation or my preferred translation, don't lead us into the time of trial, but deliver us from evil or deliver us from the evil one.

[14 : 24] Now in this prayer, we get an address to the divine, our Father in heaven. So let me talk about the address for a second. It's Father's Day.

Happy Father's Day, everyone. Tadada and I were talking earlier this week that Father's Day gets a short shrift at a lot of churches, but particularly at the table church because one of your pastors is in a lesbian relationship and the other one of your pastors was adopted at 13.

Fathers have a complicated history here, okay? So we're sorry, dads. You're not selling out the brunches after service. We know that. But also, fathers have an important, impactful role to play, hopefully for good, but we also know sometimes too often for ill.

And so the very opening line of the Lord's Prayer can all of us just immediately create consternation for folks. our Father, God damn it, why does it have to be Father?

What can it be any other word? Yeah. So let me pause for a sec. I grew up in the Midwest, and if you know anything about the Midwest, my next statement is not going to surprise you.

[15 : 40] It wasn't until I was about 26 that I experienced something that most of you know is seasoning, okay? I grew up with tacos that were just like, just cooked hamburger meat.

No seasoning involved. No sauce. It was not until I was married that I realized that the hard shells that you buy at the store, you could toast them first, and they're crispier. Didn't know that.

It's a fun fact. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. I was so, so eager to share with my wife, Emily, my mother's lasagna, and she came over.

I asked mom to make her lasagna. She made lasagna two ways. There was regular lasagna, and then there was Mexican lasagna. Mexican lasagna was regular lasagna, but with sour cream, okay?

So I take Emily to my house. We have my mother's lasagna. We get back in the car. What did you think? And Emily's like, that was not good. Because there was no seasoning.

[16 : 49] Maybe salt, maybe pepper. Never the two should meet. So recognizing, like, I grew up with a very limited palate. Tacos were tacos, like, the opposite of the platonic ideal of a taco, right?

Just like the furthest thing you could be with a taco that still counted in some dictionary somewhere. Lasagna, same thing. Then I grew up, then I had, like, other restaurants travel to Italy, to Mexico, actually try different food and realize, like, oh, I've been missing out on stuff.

Okay, good to know. Now, it could be possible for me to be in Italy trying some actual Italian lasagna or pasta or whatever and being like, oh, I can't call this lasagna because my original image of lasagna was so bad that I can't call this lasagna.

I could make that decision, but rather it's the other way around, right? Oh, now I've actually had lasagna. Now I've actually had, like, a good Mexican street taco from some truck out there.

You don't know if it's ethically sourced, but you know it's tasty, it's good. I know what the taco actually is. What I had before may not actually count. Now what often happens with the word father is that we take our earthly experiences with fathers and we cast them up, trickle up theology towards God.

[18 : 06] And what is rather meant to be the case is that God is the original progenitor, creator of all and that everything else is the pale comparison.

Now my metaphor breaks down because my unseasoned tacos did not abuse or assault or abandon me, okay? And many of us, too many of us, have had fathers who actually have.

So I understand the hurt and the trauma just with this dang word. So let me offer another way forward. In Ephesians, Paul says to fathers, fathers, do not exasperate your children.

I fail at that commandment every day, but he says it. Do not exasperate your children. And as good, educated readers that we are, as we read, fathers, do not exasperate your children.

We know that we're not be like, but mothers, it's okay, you can. Some mothers read that that way. That's not supposed to be the case. Do we understand that that command, fathers, do not exasperate your children, is towards the general parent, okay?

[19 : 08] And that is true, that the Greek word for father can function as a general word for parent or caretaker. Yes, there was a Greek word for mother. Yes, there was a Greek word for parent. But pater, the Greek word, could just function as parent.

So if it's helpful to you, our Father in Heaven, if you want to rather address it towards a mother God or a parent God, you're fine, okay? The Greek is on your side. Our Father in Heaven.

Now Heaven, again, here's a word that we don't know what to do with. We have been trained in sort of a Greek way of thinking that when we think Heaven, we look up. We think of Zeus up in a mountain, up in the clouds somewhere, okay?

This is not a particularly Jewish way of thinking. When the Jews thought of Heaven, they were thinking of what was true of the divine in this world.

Yes, there was some, like, abode of God. Isaiah in Isaiah 6 is brought up into the throne room of God and the train of the robe fills the temple.

[20 : 11] But for the most part, it was, God is here. If I go up to the mountains, there you are. If I go down to the depths, there you are. The abode of God, of Heaven, was among humans.

Let me use another example. Anna, can you put up the image of, it's one of the nebula. It's like a side-by-side of a nebula. Okay, so here's like two telescope images of the same nebula, the Lagoon Nebula.

On the left-hand side, you see the visible light spectrum of the Lagoon Nebula. And on the right-hand side, you see the infrared spectrum. Same, the telescope is pointing at the same thing, but using different cameras to get different parts of the electromagnetic spectrum that we call light recorded.

Because we see just a fraction, right? We see the wavelengths of red through violet, but we know that there are other parts of the wavelengths that we cannot see, that our eyes are not built to see.

There's ultraviolet, there's infrared, there's x-rays and microwaves and radio waves. If you took a shot of all the different electromagnetic waves in this room, you would see just like these cascading waves of things that you can't really call color because our eyes aren't built to see them.

[21 : 26] And in this image, I was going to do like a before-after, but that's not really the point. It's not like one is better or worse than the other. And one is not like more real or less real than the other. It's just what the telescope, what the camera in the telescope is able to measure.

One is visible light, and then one is like sort of false light, but part of the infrared spectrum that's colored by scientists who know what they're doing. Play the next video, Anna.

This is different ways of taking a look at the Milky Way. So this is the infrared spectrum that, again, has been colored so that we can see it on our eyes with the television. This is infrared. And that video will keep playing and show you other ones near infrared.

And it's all, again, the same part of the sky taken from different... The camera is measuring different parts of the electromagnetic spectrum.

There's X-ray, colored blue for us. And again, it's not one is more real or less real. It's not one is better or worse. It's just all there, but you have to measure it in different ways.

[22 : 33] There's infrared and near infrared and X-rays. Heaven is not up. Heaven is part of the electromagnetic spectrum that we cannot see.

It is that spiritual realm, the realm of God, that is active and living and moving and breathing and that we are not built to always be aware of all the time.

And there are moments when God does open up the eyes and the souls of God's saints to see the full spectrum of God's activity in the world. We can see God's activity in the world through flesh and blood, by my actions and your actions, my words and your words, but there are other ways that God's activity in the world is happening that we aren't always attuned to see.

That is what heaven is, not up, but around. So our father, our mother, our parent, our creator in heaven, heaven around us.

As Jesus said, heaven is in your midst. heaven is in your midst. And then we get these third person imperatives. Now, English doesn't have third person imperatives.

[23 : 48] We have very few anymore. So like, first person imperative, a command to myself, I must run. Or to you, you must clean your room. And then third person imperative would be like, he clean his room?

We don't really say that, but we do say things like, someone help. No one move. Okay? Those are third person imperatives. In a black church, right? Or like a charismatic church, someone would be like, somebody say hallelujah.

Okay? Third person imperative. The Lord's Prayer begins with three third person imperatives. In English, we often do it with the helper verb, let. Let your name be holy.

Let your kingdom come. Let your will be done. Or you could say it in that sort of charismatic way. Somebody make the name of the Lord God holy.

Somebody make his kingdom come. Somebody make his will be done. That sort of intonation. That's how the prayer begins. So when we say something like, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, and we don't, sort of bounces off of our brains because we don't know what it means.

[24 : 52] It means God, creator God, in our midst and all around us moving in ways that we are not even fully aware of. Would somebody make your name holy?

Now name, in a Jewish mindset, a Hebrew mindset, the name is the character of the thing. When Moses goes up on Mount Sinai and says, show me your glory, what God does is give Moses God's name.

Holy, holy, loving, and compassionate, gracious to a thousand generations. God, Moses asked to see God, God reveals God's name. The name is the character of the thing and it has to do with, like, bearing God's name in vain.

Though when we act in God's name to hurt people, we are not making God's name holy and set apart. We are harming the name. But when we act in ways that help and bring healing and hope and justice into the world, then we have a name that is holy, a character of God that is holy.

Let your name be holy. Somebody, let your kingdom come. Somebody, make your will be done. And these imperatives are sort of like a funnel because they each answer each other in terms of how they will be answered.

[26 : 05] May the character of your name be made holy. How? Well, by your kingdom coming. Well, how does God's kingdom come? Well, by God's will being done.

Each one answers the question of the previous one. God in heaven, creator of the world around us, may your name be made holy. How do we do that? Well, we do that by your kingdom coming.

Well, how do we make God's kingdom come? We do that by letting God's will being done. And then the next part of the prayer answers, what is God's will? How do we know what God's will is?

Next slide. We get four requests, or you could say that these are four demands because these are imperatives spoken to God. God, give us bread.

God, forgive our debt. God, don't lead us into trial. God, deliver us from the Holy One.

[27 : 04] The way that God's name is made holy is by God's kingdom coming. The way that God's kingdom come is by God's will being done. And what is God's will? It's that, that no one is hungry, that debts are forgiven, that justice is done, and that we are rescued from evil.

That is the will of God. And so when we pray, going back to the language of intimacy, these are four simple statements. Next slide. Help me, forgive me, protect me, save me.

Give us the things that we need for each day. Forgive us the ways that we mess up in the same way that we are called to forgive others. Protect us from the things that are on their way to harm us and save us from the harmful things that are already here.

And so when we pray, the language of intimacy is just simple words. God, help. Emily McGowan shared this on Twitter years ago and I saved it about what to do when prayer seems hard.

She writes this. She says, be encouraged that you even notice that you're having trouble and maybe even want to change. The fact that you even notice means that the Holy Spirit is at work.

[28 : 29] So when you're ready, find a posture that's best for you. You could sit, you could stand. I find walking helpful for prayer. And then in your mind or out loud, you know, get on the X2.

You could do it out loud. No one would notice or care. Being as honestly as possibly you can exactly where you are. So maybe like this, you say, God, I'm not praying right now and I don't know what to do.

Or maybe you don't even want to pray. So say that. God, I don't even want to pray right now. I don't know what to do. Maybe you don't even want to want to pray. So say that.

God, I don't even want to want to pray right now. I don't know what to do. And then, if you can, say to God, help. Or maybe, help me please.

And if you can't do that, then just be quiet. And do whatever it is that you are doing and just try to listen briefly. Attune your heart and your mind to God, even if only for 60 seconds.

[29 : 32] And folks, I'm telling you, I know DC folks, if you're his, in this sermon series, you're like, I'm going to change. I'm going to set a habit tracker. I'm going to set a to-do list. I'm going to pray for 30 minutes every day. Do not do that.

You will fail. And then you'll feel bad about it. And then you won't do it for a long time. 60 seconds. Okay? And then close with thank you.

And throughout the day, when the thought arises that you aren't praying, you don't want to pray, and when you just feel that anxiety or the shame emerge about not praying, just go through that again.

God, I'm not praying right now. I don't know what to do. And see if your feelings change over time. I venture to guess that they will. And then consider scheduling a short time, no more than two to three minutes, to pray daily.

Use something like the Lord's Prayer or something else already written so you don't have to come up with the words. And just do that for a while and see what the Spirit does. Maybe it'll change your heart and your mind and your will.

[30 : 38] But the key is to start where you are and be honest and take it slow and small and repeat. God is already at work. Bring your mustard seed and let God do the rest.

Would you join me if we go back to the prayer, Anna, from before announcements. This is the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer, Lord's Prayer.

Would you join me if you're willing and able in these words with this prayer. Eternal Spirit, Earthmaker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God in whom is Heaven.

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe. The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world. Your heavenly will be done by all created beings.

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on Earth. With the bread we need for today, feed us.

[32 : 00] In the hurts we absorb for one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and test, strengthen us. From trials to great to endure, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen. Amen.