

## FATHER

Nobody can say everything at once. We are using Luke's shorter (and, most scholars agree, more authentic) version of the Lord's Prayer. The very first word is "Father." That raises issues alongside the issues of the prayer itself. I do not want you wondering if I have failed to notice them, or spending your time thinking about the sexist-language issues, while I am talking about the prayer itself. I simply want to talk about the prayer first.

We have established that the use of this prayer declares Jesus to be our Master – the Teacher/Guru under whose discipline we have freely chosen to place ourselves, that we might learn wisdom, discover who we are, and find out how to live. This is the context and the important and necessary introduction. It is futile to go on if that is not clear.

It is equally important to know that this prayer is not merely intended for corporate worship. It is not just an identification of our belonging to Jesus' group, and it is not just intended for us to recite together when we meet. It is also intended to be *prayed*; it is intended for our daily, private devotions. That is, each word or phrase within this prayer carries the message of what Jesus' WAY is. Let me keep repeating that several different ways.

The Lord's Prayer lines out the sort of attitude and approach toward life we are to have if we are Jesus' followers. The prayer is both a prayer and a compact summary of the WAY of Life Jesus was teaching His disciples. This prayer contains the program for Life that Jesus was teaching. To pray or meditate on this prayer – in each of its parts, for long enough – aligns our lives with God in the correct manner. Are you hearing it yet? Perhaps you have known it already for a long time. Most people do not seem to, except in a very vague way. This prayer is not just a bedtime comfort or a Sunday-morning ritual, though neither of those are as unimportant as some people think. This prayer is THE WAY itself. Those who pray it with eager, willing, hungry souls – knowing or sensing why Jesus gave this prayer to them – find the Christian Path, and discover in this prayer the steps they must take to walk it.

One last reiteration then. Picture the dynamic that is intended: Each and every individual Christian, knowing and naming Jesus as Master/Teacher, spends time at least once each day (three times a day was the formula for the early church) thinking through each tenet contained in the Lord's Prayer – seeking to be and do what the prayer reveals; wanting to bring thoughts, words and deeds for that day into harmony with this prayer. Then these same people come together the first day of each week and say this prayer together, in each other's presence. Can you feel that? Do you sense the bonding that can take place in that? The comfort and power that can flow in such a community of believers? That is what is intended!

Can you imagine hearing an early Christian say, “But I don't know if I can pray this prayer because I'm not sure I believe everything I'm supposed to yet”? How silly that would have sounded, not that it is any less so today. None of the creeds had been written yet. Many of the creeds written later came out of the meditations this prayer inspired; you could not hope to understand or believe them if you had not been praying this prayer for years. First things first! If you want to follow Jesus, start praying the prayer He has given you. Let the rest come as it will.

*When you pray, say: “Father.”* The first item – the first step, if you will – the first act or motion that we can and must make to get on the Christian Path or WAY is to claim our relationship to God. This was not our idea. We did not dream it up. We could not invent it even if we wanted to. But it is offered, and we have to claim it or it does us no good.

This is the first item because it *has* to come first. This is the entryway into the entire Christian affair. In many ways, this is the major mission of Jesus on earth. That is, Jesus' life, death and resurrection are to open this way and make it possible for us to claim this relationship. It is not easy. The alienation between us and God is massive, and coated with fear, anger, pride and all the rest. “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself ...*” (II Corinthians 5:19) That is one of the great summations of the whole business. So there is a lot involved behind this first step. The prayer does not describe, teach or lay out any of the details. It leaves that to us – to our meditations and prayers; to our living, working, studying and all the rest. The prayer just lines it out. The first step is to claim the relationship. We do this first because nothing else can happen until we do this. We are stymied until we can begin with at least some relationship, some association, with God.

You see what we are into? Are you starting to feel how Jesus works with us? He has such authority and power, yet He does not push or shove. He leaves so much of it to us. He trusts in our soul's desire to follow, so He merely calls and gives us a lead to follow, then leaves it to us. *When you pray, say: "FATHER."* One word and we are into the whole thing: Who are we? Who is God? What is it like between us? All of it is instantly right there in our laps: Can we pray? Do we believe in God? How much? What kind?

Let us also note that this first step is not some kind of test we pass and then we are done with it. This is not a first step and then we are on our way once and for all. This is a first step that is always and forever the first step. *When you pray, say: "Father."* Not just the first time you pray. *Whenever* you pray. This is always the primary thing: claim the relationship, reestablish your association. Many of us discover that we have to do this many times a day. If somebody gets displeased with me, makes me angry, hurts my feelings, threatens me – what is my first and primary need? If I deal with the situation on my own, I will always mess up either myself or the other person. If I am awake enough to breathe that first word, *Father* – and if I have prayed and meditated enough over the years to know what that means – then I am okay again. Then I know who I am, where my help comes from, where my true security lies. I have the primary relationship right. Then there is a chance to deal with the lesser relationships in some appropriate manner.

So I never graduate from this first step. It never grows old or boring. And for the Christian, this one word stands for all the meaning of what Jesus taught, revealed and showed about the nature and love of God.

Again, the dimensions are endless, but a few comments about what Christians begin to contemplate: The relationship is very close! The relationship is very personal! We do not have enough time today, but it is most helpful to study the expected role of father and son as it existed in Jesus' day in Israel. It is important to know, for instance, that normally there was great affection between a father and his son. It is important to know that a son usually grew up as apprentice to his father, learning his father's skills and trade and then working with the father, often for years, and eventually taking over the father's business. The old saying "like father, like son" was true in a way we can barely imagine today. Unless something was badly amiss, you expected the same treatment from the son that you had received from the father.

And if the son made an agreement with you, the father would honor it as if he himself had made it. Indeed, a son's identity was always connected to the father. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as *just* King David; Israel knows that people do not just drop in out of nowhere. There is David son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz. (You might remember Boaz; he was the guy who married Ruth.) And Jesus, son of Joseph, is traced back through David's line.

All of this has a lot to do with the reasons early Christians called Jesus the "Son of God." But it also has much to do with this prayer and the shocking way in which Jesus goes to the core of our faith and/or our alienation and instructs us: *When you pray, say: "Father."* It is startling. Few of us have the nerve for it at first. None of us has the right to make such a high claim. "Dear God, this is me, your child, calling." At first, if there is a God, we expect either a disdainful and very total silence or the roll of approaching thunder – and we are not quite sure which would be worse.

That is the very point of this prayer we are given. The relationship is close. Very close! It is personal. Very personal! There is nothing here about some vague "ground of being"; some ontological energy; some primal force; some cosmic principle in whose vast ebb and flow we find ourselves a tiny and insignificant speck. *When you pray, say: "Father."* Very close! Very personal!

This God you pray to cares about you – cares what you do, what happens to you, how you behave. But it is more than that; it is more than just what you do, achieve, accomplish. God cares about YOU as being, as person, as child of the heart.

Then also it would always follow in the Hebrew mind: "I must be about my father's business." What else, pray tell, *would* we be about? One word, the first word of the prayer, and we are called to claim our relationship with God – to know it as close and personal – and to realize that our lives are therefore dedicated to serve, honor and obey.

It is made clear in this prayer that our destiny is totally linked with God and that we must be about our Father's business. Eventually this will also remind us of the inheritance. It is a theme that Paul and other New Testament writers return to again and again. Of course! They too have been meditating on this prayer.

These are only a few musings on the entryway into the Lord's Prayer. To find its true power and magic, we have to start praying it in unhurried, thoughtful devotion at least every day, knowing we will go on doing that – rain or shine, in season and out of season, through hell or high water, for the rest of our lives – because we are disciples of Jesus. In that frame of mind, in that manner, with that intent, the prayer begins to truly speak within us.

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I am sorry to now have to leave such high themes, but they have opened some wounds on another level. I cannot resolve the issue of sexist language because I do not believe a resolution yet exists. Nevertheless, the issue does exist, and it does not seem possible or right to pass over the turmoil and pain involved without some acknowledgment. Precisely because this prayer is so central to our faith and because it starts out with "Father," we all have necessary translations to make. This has always been the case, but for many it is more poignant and more difficult than ever, and for many women we can quintuple that.

The issue is that some people are not men and do not wish to think of God as male. Translating the implications of a relationship between a father and a son into a female experience can feel like a slap, a reduction, an insult – which, by the way, the God that Jesus revealed would not appreciate or tolerate for one of her daughters!

We know that God is not male or female by any definitions we know. Jewish tradition has known and taught that from the beginning and built it into the Second Commandment: "*You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*" (Deuteronomy 5:8) We know that the Jesus who gave us this prayer did not think God was a male. He said: "*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.*" (John 4:24) "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.*" (John 3:6) "*It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail.*" (John 6:63) Jesus is not trying to define God in this prayer. Jesus is seeking the best analogy He can find to point to (hint at) what the relationship is like, or supposed to be like, between us and God.

So every one of us has always had to do a lot of translating to get from our own experiences to the prayer's intended meaning. The more difficult our own relationship was with our own father, the more we have to wrestle with and translate the images that first come to mind. It is not a new problem. It is as old as language itself.

This is, I hope you realize, where some of the embellishments originated. It is how we went from "Father" to "Our Father who art in heaven." It tells us nothing new, nothing we would not have come to by praying the prayer and meditating on it. "Our Father" is even the name of the prayer for many now. Often it is preached and taught that we cannot pray this prayer alone – that it is "Our Father," not just "My Father." That is an excellent point and we will come to it later. But that is not the most ancient form of the prayer. And this prayer is teaching you that even between just you and God, you are still the precious child.

More pertinent to our subject at the moment, some people could not wait for it to become clear to novices and beginners that "Father" did not refer to any earthly father. From the beginning, it was clear that the prayer was not intended to be understood or to remain on any earth level or in literal symbolism. So the obvious – "who art in heaven" – was entered in the text. Fortunately, people realized early on that if we did not freeze the text, we would soon have a four-volume set of systematic theology rather than a prayer.

I am not trying to solve anything. I cannot fix it for you. If you think this can be fixed, you are mistaken. This is a broken world. Things are not perfect here. Jesus would have chosen better words and used clearer analogies if we had developed a better language for Him to use, and if we were involved in better experiences that He could have compared with things of the Spirit. Hell was *Gehenna*, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem, because that was the closest thing Jesus could find to suggest to us what hell was really like. The fact that we developed it into Dante's *Inferno* is not Jesus' fault. He had to use the language we were using (Aramaic) and He had to stick to experiences we were having, or there would have been *no* communication instead of merely imperfect communication.

Some of you think we should substitute "Mother" in the prayer. But that is not an improvement. Please do not misunderstand – it might be exactly right for you as an individual. You might work with this prayer in your daily meditation using "Mother" and find the

meanings and walk the disciple's WAY much better using "Mother." (And I am not just talking to women.) If that is the case for you, it seems clear to me that is what Jesus would want and expect you to do. We are not literalists in this church, precisely because we do not find any evidence that Jesus was literalist in His approach.

But *officially* changing the wording to "Mother" for everyone is not an improvement. It takes us further from the context and meanings that Jesus was trying to point toward. And many people, if I need to remind you, did not have perfect mothers either. "Parent" is worse than either, for it is stale and contains little of the closeness and personal quality that is major to the message.

The fact is that we can lose this prayer for ourselves if we make it the ground on which to fight other battles or resentments. This prayer has plenty of issues and battles of its own to bring you. So do what you have to – I cannot fix it for you – but do not lose this prayer. Find the best, the strongest, the most nurturing, loving, caring, affectionate authority figure there is in your entire human experience and start there! When you pray, begin by claiming the realization that God is in that kind of relationship with you, only far more than that – far better even, than that.

That is the first step, the most important step: Claim the relationship. Close! Personal! Caring! *When you pray, say: "Father."* And mean what Jesus was pointing toward with that word.