

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church

Knoxville, Tennessee

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Dr. Steven P. Eason

The Lord's Prayer (Part 1)

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

Matthew 6:7-9

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Today we begin a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. The disciples went to Jesus and asked him to teach them to pray, which implies we do not naturally know how to pray. We have to learn to pray.

Most Christians know this prayer by heart, but that can be a problem when we pray through it so quickly without considering its meaning. There are 65 words in this prayer, as we pray it. There are only 7 petitions. But don't underestimate the power of this prayer due to its brevity.

The Lord's Prayer has been prayed in many a foxhole. It's been prayed at death beds and the grave. You may have prayed this prayer, or heard it sung at your wedding. You'll hear this prayer in grand cathedrals and in small country churches. This prayer crosses age, gender, nationality, race, marital status, social class, or any other human barrier.

It's a prayer that could be prayed by Christians, Jews and Muslims. It has nothing distinctively Christian in it. It is a universal prayer that could actually unite us rather than divide us. Wouldn't that be just like Jesus, to give us such a prayer?

It's found only in Matthew and Luke, and they give two different versions of this prayer. They do agree, however, on this first petition. From Matthew's Gospel;

*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.
Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

⁹Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.'

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About forty years ago, I had a real problem with prayer. Every night for nine months, Catherine and I prayed for her sister's pregnancy and for the birth of their first child. A full-term, healthy baby boy was stillborn. How could this be? There was a problem with the cord. In fact, we almost lost her sister. I stopped praying.

I had a prayer problem that lasted for almost 8 years. I couldn't get over praying every day and that child died. I wasn't asking for something for myself, or for anything unreasonable. So what's the point of praying?

I was angry with God. I was disappointed, really. It wasn't a matter of me not having faith. I have no doubt as to God's power and strength. So why do things like this happen? Is God absent, or does God not care? It was a long 8 years.

You can't just stop praying if you are a minister! That's an occupational hazard. It's like a mailman who can't drive a truck! You have to pray, or at least you have to say the words. I'd go to the hospital and someone would say, "*Could you say a little prayer?*" And I'd think, "*No, I can't really say a 'little prayer.'* *There's no such thing as a little prayer. Talking to God is huge. It's complicated. It's full of mystery. I don't pray little prayers.*"

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After a long dry spell, I decided during Lent to pray the Lord's Prayer every day. I just had a need to reconnect with God. So for 40 days I prayed just this one prayer. I figured if the disciples came to Jesus and asked him to teach them to pray, and he took the time to do it, there must be something to this "*little prayer.*" I've been praying this prayer every day, without fail, for the past 30 years! It taught me how to pray again.

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Jesus begins with these words;

'Our Father...'

Prayer begins in acknowledging who God is. It doesn't begin with a list of things for God to do. Prayer begins with a focus on who God is. That focus re-focuses everything else.

Some days I get stuck on the very first word, "*our.*" "*Our*" includes everybody. *Our Father* is not restricted to Presbyterians. It's not restricted to Americans, or to people who come to church. It's not even restricted to good people. *Our Father* includes everybody. You're only one word into prayer and already your world-view has been stretched to the limits! In a sense, when I pray this prayer, I pray for everybody in the world, every day.

Our Father includes every prisoner, in every prison cell in the world this morning. No matter what they did. No matter how foul the crime, they are included in the *Our Father*.

Our Father includes those who are polarized over the issues facing our nation and world today. Every Democrat and every Republican would be included in the "*Our Father*." We don't have the luxury of only praying for those who are like us, or agree with us.

Male/female, black/white, rich/poor, gay/straight, Americans/ North Koreans, saints and sinners are all included when we pray **Our Father**. I wouldn't know who to leave out.

Thomas Merton wrote,

What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? (The Wisdom of the Desert)

How different would the world be today if we treated one another like we belong to *Our Father*? We may not agree on all the issues, we may not even speak the same language, but we all belong to *Our Father*. That brings value to every person.

Sometimes the log in our own eye keeps us from seeing this life-changing truth. Jesus begins prayer with "*Our Father*," not "*My Father*." Don't you think that's intentional?

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And then there are the words,

'...hallowed be thy name.'

When we *hallow*, or make holy God's name, that's more than lip service. We begin to live under that reverence and respect. The name of God is above every name. It's above my name. That alone, reorders life.

God's name is not a name to be taken lightly or to be used with profanity or disrespect. If you pray, "*...hallowed be thy name*," it makes it difficult for you to live as if that name doesn't matter. When that name does matter, life changes. The world changes! You honor God in the way you live your life. Prayer starts there.

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John Dominic Crossan wrote, this prayer is really "*a radical manifesto – a hymn of hope for all humanity...*" ([The Greatest Prayer](#), p. 2). This prayer is radical. It presents a different reality, another narrative. We do it a disservice when we tag it on to our other prayers as if it is an after-thought.

These words taught me how to pray again, after a lot of heartache and pain. They can open you to all people, everywhere, at all times, and under all circumstances. I live in a much bigger world, now that I pray this prayer every day.

These words can also open you to the glory and majesty of God, above all the rabble and fray of this world. That is where Jesus said prayer begins. It wouldn't be a bad idea to take him up on it.

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: **Amen**