

“**Lord, teach us to pray,**” the disciples ask. Jesus answers, “**Pray then in this way...**” You knock at the door, then open it just a crack and say, “Dad...” He looks up and smiles. “Hey, look who’s here! Come in!” You hesitate. “Dad, I know how busy you are.” But he says, “I’m never too busy for you! Come in! Tell me what’s on your mind.” So you do. “Well, Dad, it’s like this...”

Now, you may not remember the passage going quite that way, but this is the approach Jesus had in mind when He taught us to pray, “**Our Father...**” He wants us to go to God like children going to dear old Dad with whatever is on our mind. He wants us to go to God as “**Our Father...**”

These words are so familiar that we could easily miss what’s so amazing about them. But boy, would that be a mistake, because when Jesus tells us to pray “**Our Father,**” He’s basically telling us to go for it! Freely, fearlessly, go to God with whatever is on our minds! Children of God can do that, you know! We have automatic access! Yes, God is the greatest power in the universe, but that is not how we are to approach Him. Yes, God is beyond our comprehension, but that’s not to be an issue when we pray. What matters is the personal relationship. That’s all that matters: the intimate, personal relationship between Father and child. Just as President Obama’s daughter, Malia, would feel perfectly free going to her dad with whatever is on her mind; just as Bill Gates’ son, Rory, would feel perfectly free going to his dad with whatever is on his mind, so we children of God are free to go to Him with the same confidence – not groveling, not cringing, not mincing words or biting our lips, but simply praying: “**Our Father...**”

And it’s important that we “get” this about prayer – even before we get into the content. For prayer is essentially an expression of faith, an expression of trust, and that means it’s important to remember Who we’re actually talking to; what kind of relationship we have with God. Small wonder, then, that this is actually the first lesson Jesus teaches us in this model prayer: Always remember Who we are praying to!

I mean, some people pray as if God were the “*Big Miser In The Sky,*” who has to be begged, wheedled, and cajoled before He’ll do anything for us. There’s a world of difference between that image and “**Our Father!**” Likewise, there are some who pray as if God were the “*Heavenly Slot Machine*” – you know, just plug in enough prayers, like nickels in a slot machine, and eventually religion should pay off. There’s a world of difference between that image and “**Our Father!**” Then, too, there are some who pray as if God were “*The Force*” – kind of a nebulous, impersonal Being “out there,” not much connected with our lives, certainly not much interested in them. Prayer to “*The Force*” is more like meditation or self-talk – mainly a way to make ourselves feel better, but not a real conversation with God, much less a way of enlisting God’s help. Here most of all, what a difference between that image and “**Our Father!**”

Yes, what a difference! For the God we know in and through Jesus Christ is a generous God who loves to give His children good things. He just wants them to be the right things, given at the right time, in the right way, so they do us good, not harm – which makes sense. Otherwise, what kind of a “**Father**” would He be? Likewise, the God we know in and through Jesus Christ is a sovereign God, who cannot be manipulated into doing things our way. Responding to prayer is one thing, caving in is quite another. And no matter how much or how hard we pray, God will still do what seems right to Him – which also makes sense. Otherwise, what kind of “**Father**” would He be? Most of all, the God we know in and through Jesus Christ is an intensely personal God. He loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love. He listens to each one of us as if there were only one of us praying. And far from prayer being us just talking to ourselves, it’s actually God who prompts our prayer, God who stimulates prayer, God who draws us into conversation with Himself. God!

You see, “**Our Father**” wants to be intimately involved in our lives. He is interested in everything we say, think, or do. In fact, He is the ultimate hands-on “**Father**,” and that’s the only kind of “**Father**” He *can* be! For remember, God’s very essence is love. The Bible doesn’t say, “*God has love*” or “*God is loving*” – as if that were just one characteristic among many. No, the Bible says, “**God is love.**” His very essence is love. The reason for everything He does is love, and that’s also the reason for everything He doesn’t do. We may not see it that way. Then again, we don’t see the full picture as He does. But the God in whom we believe “**is love.**” In fact, the God we know in and through Jesus Christ is ultimate love, self-giving love, sacrificial love so deep, so broad, so high that He did everything necessary to save us and will let “**nothing in all creation...separate us from**” His love. “**God is love**” through and through, and that is Who we are talking to when we pray “**Our Father.**”

So...with these words we’ve opened the door and said, “Dad...” In response, the God-who-is love has invited us to come in and share whatever is on our mind. Now what comes next? In the *Lord’s Prayer*, Jesus presents us with seven petitions. Human nature being what it is, we might just start off telling God what we want. And we could. It would be okay. But the way Jesus teaches us to pray, we don’t ask for things until the Fourth Petition. No, instead of asking for daily bread, forgiveness, or help, He teaches us first to pray, “**Hallowed be Thy name.**” Or to say it a more modern way, “**May your name be treated as holy.**”

This naturally brings to mind the second commandment, “**You shall not take God’s name in vain.**” And if we think back to what we learned about this commandment in Confirmation Class, we probably remember that God’s name represents Himself, so that treating God’s name as a casual cuss word is insulting God Himself – no, it’s more than insulting Him; it’s treating God with utter contempt. Sure, some make the excuse, “*But I don’t intentionally take God’s name in vain; I do it without thinking.*” That’s even worse! How little they must value God if they can abuse His name without even thinking about it!

But that said, we also need to recognize that this petition isn't about what should not be done. We don't just pray, "*Please do not let your name be used as a casual cuss word.*" Instead, this petition calls for something positive. May your name be held in respect. May your name be spoken with reverence. May your name be treated as holy. "**Hallowed be Thy name.**" And that's a whole different issue, isn't it? Because if God's name represents Himself, we don't just want to avoid insulting Him; we want to show how much we trust and treasure Him. And we certainly want show this in the way we use God's name and the way we speak about God, but hallowing His Name also involves more. In fact, here again Jesus teaches us to always remember Who we are praying to.

Just to illustrate, I think back to when I was a kid. My Dad managed the bank across the street from my school, and one day when I was out at recess, I saw him talking to our principal and one of our local politicians, Kenny Hahn. I told my friends, "That's my dad!" As I did, I'm sure they sensed the pride in my voice. I'm sure they heard how much I treasured him just in the way I said his name: "That's my Dad!" And, of course, a child of God wants to do the same thing when we speak of "**our Father, who art in heaven.**" Just in the way we speak of God, we want to "**hallow**" His name.

But now, here's the rest of the story. I don't remember for sure that this happened the same day, but for some reason I associate them together. Anyway, late that afternoon when both of us were home, I went in to talk to Dad. You see, it was allowance day, and I had plans for the money, and my dad wasn't as forthcoming as I thought He ought be. Actually, I was kind of put out with him, even though in our family allowances were not earned but simply one of the perks of being part of the family. So I went in and told my Dad, "*You know, it is allowance day. So...how about it?*" The instant those words came out of my mouth, I realized I'd stepped over the line. It wasn't just what I said, but the way I said it – so snotty, so disrespectful! And let me tell you, I will never forget the look on my dad's face. Or his words: "*Young man, just who do you think you are talking to?*"

Who indeed? In public, the words I spoke about him may have shown how much I treasured my dad, but the words I later spoke to him showed nothing of the kind. Even more, the way I spoke to him showed nothing of the kind. In fact, it kind of cancelled out what I said earlier, didn't it? Because who you are in private, what you say in private, means far more than what you say or do when others are watching. Anyway, I will never forget his look or his words, "*Young man, just who do you think you are talking to?*"

And this is also important to remember when we're talking to God. Yes, we are invited to go to "**our Father**" with whatever is on our mind, but that does not give us license to abuse the relationship. Before a word comes out of our mouths, we need to remember who we are praying to. That is why Jesus not only teaches to pray "**Our Father**" but "**hallowed be Thy name**"

Still, we might ask: *Isn't it our responsibility to speak to God with love and respect? Why then do we pray "hallowed be Thy name"?* The answer is simple. It's because we need help with this! I mean, we need help living for God, don't we? We need help speaking about God to others. So it stands to reason that we also need help praying to God with the right attitude. And we do!

Let's be honest. Our human nature isn't exactly patient or submissive. We want what we want when we want it – which is why we can get impatient with God when He doesn't do things as fast as we'd like; and why we can get annoyed with God when He doesn't do things the way we'd like. In fact, if things are tough enough we can even get hostile toward God – forgetting how much He has done for us out of sheer love, without our deserving it. All that can just fade from memory. So much so, that whatever our words may be, our attitude can become really disrespectful – almost like, "Yeah, yeah, God, what you did in the past was great, but what have you done for me lately?" We would never say that, of course, and hopefully never think it, but human nature is fickle. It wants what it wants when it wants it – which can create an attitude problem! And let's be even more honest. Short term, this attitude problem isn't going to get us anywhere with God. Long-term, it'll even damage our relationship with God. So we need help to not let our attitude go there. We need help to come to God in the right spirit. We need help to be able to look God in the eye and remember Who He really is, what all He has done for us, how much He means to us. We need help to pray in a way that shows God we trust and treasure Him. Yes, we need help! So before we go any further in our prayer, Jesus teaches us to first ask for help – to pray, "**hallowed be Thy name.**"

Does all this seem simple, even simplistic? Perhaps, but it is, after all, just the first petition, and in the first petition Jesus teaches us a basic principle of prayer that is essential for everything that follows: Always remember Who we are praying to. That is the lesson we take home with us tonight. Whenever we address God as "**Our Father,**" let us remember that we are praying to a God who loves us with a boundless love – a love that invites us to go to Him with the confidence of children going to dear old Dad with whatever is on our minds. Alongside this, though, let us remember that we are praying to a God whose Father-love should inspire trust and respect. This doesn't always come naturally. So we pray "**hallowed be Thy name**" to ask for help with this – especially when God doesn't seem to be doing things the way we think He should, still to pray in a way that reflects trust and respect. Yes, this principle is first and foremost: Always remember Who we are praying to. That is why Jesus teaches us, "**Pray then in this way: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.**" Amen.