

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 26, 2009**

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

Matthew 6:9-13

INTRODUCTION

Most of you probably know that the Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the question: “What is the chief end (or purpose) of man?” And you know the answer given in the catechism: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” That is the purpose for which God made us. There is no greater purpose or calling in life than to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

If you continue on in the catechism, you eventually come to Question 98, which asks: “What is prayer?” Here is the definition: “Prayer is offering our desires to God in the name of Christ for things that agree with His will, confessing our sins, and thankfully recognizing His mercies.”

Then the catechism asks (Q. 99): “How does God direct us to pray?” The answer: “The whole Word of God, but especially the Lord’s prayer, which Christ taught His disciples, directs our prayers.”

When you read the gospels, you see that Jesus Himself modeled a life of prayer. For Jesus, prayer was not an afterthought. It was a central and essential feature of His relationship with the Father. It was because they saw the importance of prayer in His life that the disciples of Jesus asked Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). So He taught them a model prayer – the Lord’s Prayer – a prayer after which to pattern our prayers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Let me ask you:

Is prayer a priority in your life, or an afterthought?

Do you view it as a spiritual duty or a privilege?

Do you consider it a luxury for those who are super-spiritual or a necessity in your life?

Is prayer something you avoid or neglect, or a means of grace you regard as essential to your spiritual wellbeing?

How is it in your life?

Some people dismiss prayer as nothing more than a psychological exercise designed to make us feel better about ourselves or some aspects of life in this world. Not Jesus. He knew better than that. Which is why He made communion with God the Father a priority in His life.

Martin Luther said this about the importance of prayer in the Christian life: “As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray.”

Two centuries later, Jonathan Edwards observed that “prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.” And two more centuries later, Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed Edwards by saying: “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” Prayer is as essential to our spiritual health as breathing is to life itself. If we let this truth take hold of our hearts, if we really believe it is true, it will transform our lives.

Before He introduced the Lord’s Prayer, as we saw last Sunday, Jesus taught His disciples how not to pray. He told them not to follow the examples of the Pharisees in their hypocrisy and the pagans in their babbling, but to pray instead as children who are dearly loved by our heavenly Father.

Children who are dearly loved by our heavenly Father. That tells us something about who we are. And it tells us something incredibly important about God.

THE GOD TO WHOM WE PRAY

Let’s look together at the very beginning of the Lord’s Prayer today.

To whom is the prayer addressed?

Who is the God to whom we pray?

What is God like?

What do we know about God?

How are we to relate to Him?

The Bible tells us many things about God. It tells us that He is the Creator of everything there is. He is the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 121:2). He is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth (Isaiah 40:28). Not only did He create the universe and everything that exists, but He sustains and preserves all things by the power of His word (Hebrews 1:3). He is El Shaddai – God Almighty. He is El Elyon – God Most High. He is Jehovah-Jireh – the Lord who provides. He is the Lord over all creation, the Giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). He is the rock of our salvation, our refuge and strength, our fortress and hope. He is gracious and compassionate, loving and faithful, merciful and just, powerful and wise. He is holy, holy, holy. He is sovereign over all the affairs of men and nations. He is the judge of the living and the dead. In all things He works sovereignly and graciously for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His redemptive purpose (Romans 8:28). He is the Lord of time and eternity. From everlasting to everlasting – from eternity past to eternity future – He is God (Psalm 90:2). In life and in death He is God.

The Bible tells us – and I can tell you it is true in my own experience – that God is not some kind of impersonal force or cosmic principle. He is living and personal. He is not distant or aloof or uninvolved in the world. He is not weak or helpless in the face of evil. He is not uncaring or fickle. On the contrary, the Bible says you can cast all your cares and anxiety on Him, because He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). It tells us that He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8), faithful to all His promises, righteous in all His ways, and loving toward all He has made (Psalm 145:13, 17).

What a great God He is! And what a blessed people we are! But there is more. Here in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says that we are to address God as "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9).

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

The language may be so familiar to us that we have difficulty understanding just how remarkable it is that the Creator of all things, the Lord of the whole universe, would condescend to be our Father through faith in Christ. As John Stott points out, "Already in the Old Testament God was known as the Father of (His people) Israel, but when Jesus came, the title became more personal and more intimate. He Himself used it in addressing, or referring to, God. Not only did He Himself use this name for God, but He gave us permission to do the same (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2). 'Father,' then, is Christianity's distinctive name for God" (*Christian Basics*, pp. 59-60).

To show how radical this is, in his book *The Central Message of the New Testament*, Joachim Jeremias said: "Nowhere in the literature of the prayers of ancient Judaism ... is this invocation of God as *Abba* (Father or 'Daddy') to be found. Jesus on the other hand always used it when He prayed" (p. 65).

Stott also points out that while Muslims have 99 different names and titles for Allah, not one of them is Father.

In contrast to both Islam and Judaism, for Christians the idea of God as "our Father in heaven" is woven into the very fabric of our faith. J. I. Packer expressed it this way in his classic book, *Knowing God*: "You sum up the whole of New Testament teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as a revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father.... Everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God" (p. 182).

But we have to be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that God is the Father of everyone indiscriminately. Without a doubt He is the Creator of all human beings. We are all His "offspring," as Paul acknowledged in Acts 17:28, in the sense we are all His creatures. But the idea that all men and women are children of God is not found in the Bible. Not everyone can rightly claim God as their Father.

Being a child of God (and, thus, having God as our Father) is not a universal status everyone receives by virtue of physical birth. It is a supernatural gift you receive through faith in Jesus (Packer, 181). The Bible says it is only through the saving work of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, that we can become the sons and daughters of God and know Him as our heavenly Father (Stott, 60).

John 1:12 says: “To all who received Him (that is, Jesus), to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.” Galatians 3:26 says: “You are all sons (children) of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” And 1 John 3:1 says: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

That is not true of every person in the world. But it *is* true of everyone who through repentance of sin and sincere faith has embraced Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives. If you have taken this step of faith, you have been adopted into God’s family and you are a dearly loved child of the heavenly Father. If not, the invitation to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, the invitation to believe in His name and to receive Him as Savior and Lord of your life, is extended to you today. When you take the Son (Jesus), you get the Father. I urge you to come to Him today. If you sense God speaking to your heart about your relationship to Him today, I’d love to talk with you after the service.

Anne Graham Lotz, one of the daughters of Billy and Ruth Graham, writes in her book *Heaven: My Father’s House* about people who want to visit her parents’ home in the mountains of western North Carolina. It is a tourist attraction for the curious. They drive up the long drive, she says, and come to the gate. They knock on the gate and say things like: “Billy Graham, please let us in. We’ve read your books. We’ve seen you on TV. We’ve written to you. And we’d like to come to your house.”

Billy Graham responds: “I’m sorry, I don’t know you. You’re not a member of my family, and you have not made any arrangements to come.”

But it is different when it is a member of the family. When Anne drives up the same driveway and knocks on the gate, she says: “Daddy, this is Anne, and I’ve come home.” The gate is thrown open and she goes inside. Why? Because she is the father’s child.

That is how it is for us, too – not in our relationships with Billy Graham, but with God our heavenly Father when we become His adopted children and members of His spiritual family through faith in the saving work of His Son on our behalf. Through faith in Christ, you are the Father’s child. And so am I.

J. I. Packer says that to those who trust in Christ, the holy God is a loving Father. We belong to His family. We may approach Him without fear. And we may always be sure of His fatherly concern and care. “This,” says Packer, “is the heart of the New Testament message” (*Knowing God*, p. 184). And it is wonderfully good news for us.

GOD AND OUR FATHERS

I realize that the word “father” may evoke a variety of emotions and memories for many of us. Some of you, I know, have been immensely blessed by your relationship with your earthly father. If that is true in your life, praise God for it. But not everyone has been blessed with a good father.

Maybe you grew up – or maybe you are growing up – without a dad in your life.

Maybe you had a dad who left you when you were young. Gene Hackman is a famous actor, best known for his roles in such movies as *The French Connection* and *Hoosiers*, but he knows from real life what it is like to be abandoned by his father. He says: “I was just 13, but that Saturday morning is still so vivid. I was playing down the street from our house, when I saw my father drive by and give me a light wave of his hand. Somehow I knew that gesture meant he was going away forever.” To this day, that memory is a ghost that never seems to disappear. Maybe you can relate to that.

Maybe you had a father who abused you in some way.

Maybe you had a dad who was always preoccupied with work or something else, and never seemed to have time for you.

Maybe you had a father for whom your best was never good enough, and you could never live up to his standards.

Maybe you had a father who never seemed to be able to say: “I love you.”

Maybe for some reason your earthly father failed to be the father you needed, or the father you longed for.

Maybe because of your father, you’ve never been able to accept the idea of God as a loving Father. Maybe you struggle with the concept of God as your heavenly Father because of the baggage you’ve got from your relationship with your dad.

If that is the case for you, I understand. Even more important, God understands. He knows your heart. He knows your hurt. He knows the way you’ve been wounded. And He cares about you. He is there for you right now. And He always will be. He loves you as His very own child (because you are). And that will never change. He will never abandon you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5).

I invite you to come to Him as your loving heavenly Father and to discover the incredible reservoir of spiritual riches that are the inheritance of His adopted children through faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Take time to reflect on the blessings that are yours and the privilege of approaching Him in prayer as “Our Father in heaven.”

A TESTIMONY TO THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

As part of its special series called “This I Believe,” National Public Radio (NPR), broadcast the moving testimony of a journalism professor named John Fountain. Fountain was formerly a reporter for *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Washington Post*, and a national correspondent for *The New York Times*. Here is what he said:

“I believe in God. Not that cosmic, intangible spirit-in-the-sky that Mama told me as a little boy ‘always was and always will be.’ But the God who embraced me when Daddy disappeared from our lives – from my life at the age of four – the night police led him away from our front door, down the stairs in handcuffs.

“The God who warmed me when we could see our breath inside our freezing apartment, where the gas was disconnected in the dead of another wind-whipped Chicago winter, and there was no food, little hope and no hot water.

“The God who held my hand when I witnessed boys in the ‘hood swallowed by the elements, by death and by hopelessness; who claimed me when I felt like ‘no-man’s son,’ amid the absence of any man to wrap his arms around me and tell me, ‘everything’s going to be okay,’ to speak proudly of me, to call me son.

“I believe in God, God the Father, embodied in His Son Jesus Christ. The God who allowed me to feel His presence – whether by the warmth that filled my belly like hot chocolate on a cold afternoon, or that voice, whenever I found myself in the tempest of life’s storms, telling me (even when I was told I was ‘nothing’) that I was *something*, that I was His, and that even amid the desertion of the man who gave me his name and DNA and little else, I might find in Him sustenance.

“I believe in God, the God I have come to know as Father, as Abba – Daddy.

“I always envied boys I saw walking hand-in-hand with their fathers. I thirsted for the conversations fathers and sons have about the birds and the bees, or about nothing at all – simply feeling his breath, heartbeat, presence. As a boy, I used to sit on the front porch watching the cars roll by, imagining that one day one would park and the man getting out would be *my daddy*. But it never happened.

“When I was 18, I could find no tears that Alabama winter’s evening in January 1979 as I stood finally – face to face – with my father lying cold in a casket, his eyes sealed, his heart no longer beating, his breath forever stilled. Killed in a car accident, he died drunk, leaving me hobbled by the sorrow of years of fatherlessness.

“It wasn’t until many years later, standing over my father’s grave for a long overdue conversation that my tears flowed. I told him about the man I had become. I told him about how much I wished he had been in my life. And I realized fully that in his absence, I had found another. Or that He – God, the Father, my Father – had found me.”

Dear friends, whatever your story is like, do not ever doubt that you have a heavenly Father who loves you. And do not ever underestimate the privilege that is ours to draw near to God in prayer, to approach Him as “Our Father in heaven,” as Jesus instructs us. Which is what He is.

May it be so in your life and mine, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.