

The Divine Paternity of God

Matthew 6:9

In Matthew 18:1, the disciples of Jesus ask him a question that they apparently couldn't get out of their minds during the entire time they walked with him: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" "What does it take to be a big-shot in the kingdom?" "How is greatness measured in kingdom terms?" Jesus answers them with an object lesson. He finds a child. He presents that child to the disciples. And in so doing, he declares the child to be greatest in the kingdom. "I assure you," says Jesus, "unless you turn from your sins and become as little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven." Don't miss that. To make sure that there was no way for his disciples to get off the hook, Jesus emphasizes his point by making childlikeness not only the means of greatness in the kingdom, but he also makes it the means of entrance into the kingdom as well.

I'll give it to you again to make sure you get it. Not only must you become childlike in order to become a success in God's kingdom, but you must also become childlike in order to become a citizen of God's kingdom. Nope. You can't get off the hook. You must become like a child in order to be accepted into God's kingdom. But here's the good news: "Childlikeness" is a hook worth getting caught on. You see, when you become like a child, not only are you accepted into the kingdom, but the king also adopts you. Hallelujah! The citizens of the kingdom are the children of the king. And Jesus affirms this truth in what we call the Lord's Prayer. In this model or outline of prayer, Jesus bids his followers to approach God as secure children coming before a loving father. The Lord Jesus teaches us to address God as "Our Father in heaven."

Today, I want to examine this address, this preface, this invocation of the Lord's Prayer. Before we get to the outline, let's take a moment to consider the context of the Lord's Prayer, both the extended and immediate context. The extended context is the so-called Sermon on the Mount, which consumes chapters 5-7 of Matthew. The theme of this discourse is the kingdom of God, and the point of this discourse is true righteousness, the righteousness demanded for citizenship in the kingdom. The immediate context of the Lord's Prayer is 6:5-8, in which Jesus is teaching on prayer. In this chapter he has already spoken about charitable giving, he will speak on fasting, but here he speaks on prayer. Continuing his point about the righteousness needed for citizenship in God's kingdom, Jesus exposes and condemns the way hypocrites approach God in prayer. For instance, in 6:7 he criticizes spiritual pretenders for merely repeating empty phrases and calling it prayer, as if piling on the words will get God's attention. In 6:8 Jesus states

and explains his conclusion about pretense in prayer. Here's his statement: "Do not be like them." And here's his explanation: "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Matthew 5:20, one of the key verses of the Sermon on the Mount, says, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Get that. You must have surpassing righteousness in order to be a part of God's kingdom. And one of the areas where excelling righteousness is demanded is the area of prayer. And in order to make sure that your prayers don't fall into the pharisaical pretense, Jesus teaches us to approach God as secure children approaching a loving father. Jesus teaches us that we should not pray as if we were asking a total stranger to grant us a big favor. We should pray as secure children coming to their loving father. Jesus says that we are to pray in this manner: "Our Father in heaven." Pray recognizing the divine paternity of God. Well, what does it mean to be a child of God? What does it mean to approach God as children coming before a loving father? What does it mean to pray, "Our Father in heaven?" Let me try to answer that for you.

I. TO CALL GOD "OUR HEAVENLY FATHER" IS TO REMEMBER WHAT JESUS CHRIST HAS DONE FOR YOU.

Let me say right up front that the divine paternity of God is not an endorsement of universalism. Universalism teaches that all human beings are children of God. The danger with that concept is that it is carried on to erroneously conclude that all human beings will ultimately be saved and go to heaven. Don't bank on that! Not everyone is going to heaven, because not everyone will be saved, because not everyone is God's child. Let me put it another way: There is a sense in which every human being is a child of God. But not every human being has the spiritual right to address God as "our Father in heaven." And only those who can rightfully call God their Heavenly Father are saved into the kingdom of heaven. You must have a relationship with the Father in order to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

Now, admittedly, Malachi 2:10 says, "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?" And, yes, Paul did say to the philosophers on Mars Hill, "We are his offspring" (Acts 17:28). But scripture makes it clear that God is the Father of unbelievers only in creation. And if we are only talking about a relationship through creation, then we must throw in there the fact that James 1:17 calls God the Father of lights." That is the sun, moon, and stars. And we know that there will be no lights in heaven. Revelation 21:23 says, "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." Unbelievers will live in heaven the day God needs light bulbs to brighten up heaven. God is the Father of all

human beings only in the sense that he is Creator and Sustainer of all life. But spiritually, unbelievers have another father. In John 8:44 Jesus says to unbelieving Jews, **"You are of your father, the devil."** Ephesians 5:5-6 says, "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." And 1 John 3:10 says, "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother."

There is simply and absolutely not one spiritual family of mankind under some universal fatherhood of God. 2 Peter 1:4 says that only those who believe have been made partakers of the divine nature. John 1:12-13 says, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." In John 3:3 Jesus told Nicodemus, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."** And again in John 3:6 and 7 Jesus said, **"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"** Mark it down and highlight it in yellow: In order to be a child of God you must be born again. We are adopted as members of God's family through the agency of Jesus Christ, his bloody cross, and his empty tomb. And so when we approach God as children coming before a loving father, we do so remembering that we are saved, we are born again, and we are children of the Heavenly Father only because of what Jesus Christ has done for us on that bloody Roman cross.

All human beings are God's children through creation. And all believers are God's children through adoption. But only Jesus Christ is God's only begotten. Jesus is the unique one. Christ is the one-and-only. He's the God-Man.

- Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
- Jesus Christ is the fullness of Godhead wrapped in flesh.
- Jesus Christ is the eternally and exclusively begotten one of the Father.

Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God. And he even calls God "Father" more than 150 times in the Gospels. But Jesus only calls God "God" once in all of his recorded statements. Ironically, the only time Jesus calls God "God" was while he was dying in order to get us into the family. In Matthew 27:46, while bearing our sins on a tree, Jesus cried out, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** But thank God that Matthew 27:46 was not Jesus' last word from the cross. John 19:30 reports that before he died he shouted,

“It is finished!” Hallelujah! We are the children of God because of what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross. The citizens of the kingdom are the children of the king. So we pray “our Father in heaven” remembering what Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross. We pray “Our Father in heaven” remembering that we are saved, born again, adopted, redeemed, and justified. We pray “our Father in heaven” remembering that we don’t deserve to be God’s friends, much less God’s children, but by faith in Jesus Christ we are accepted by God.

BLESSED ASSURANCE, JESUS IS MINE
O WHAT A FORETASTE OF GLORY DIVINE
HEIR OF SALVATION, PURCHASE OF GOD
BORN OF HIS SPIRIT, WASHED IN HIS BLOOD

THIS IS MY STORY, THIS IS MY SONG
PRAISING MY SAVIOR ALL THE DAY LONG
THIS IS MY STORY, THIS IS MY SONG
PRAISING MY SAVIOR ALL THE DAY LONG

II. TO CALL GOD “OUR HEAVENLY FATHER” IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE CHURCH AS YOUR FAMILY.

This seems to be a good place to point out the fact that the Lord’s Prayer has no singular personal pronouns that refer to the one who prays it. “I, me, and my” are left out of this model prayer. Instead, Jesus teaches us to pray using “us, we, and our.” We are to approach God as “our Heavenly Father,” acknowledging that every other believer is our brother or sister in Christ. I submit to you that the most basic sin of the human race is our demand to be totally independent of everything and everyone. That is, we are proud, selfish, and arrogant. But Jesus commands us to pray, which acknowledges that we cannot make it on our own. And he further commands us to pray to the heavenly father, which acknowledges that only God can help us. But, moreover, he commands us to pray to our heavenly father, which acknowledges that not only can we not make it alone, and not only do we need God’s help, but when we go to the Father for help, we must pray for others and not just ourselves. I don’t care how much of a prayer warrior you think you are, if you only pray for yourself and not others, you have big spiritual problems. You are not an only child. You have brothers and sisters in Christ that have needs you should be concerned about. Let me put it this way. The Lord’s Prayer answers Cain’s question in Genesis 4:9. Yes! You are your brother’s keeper.

Some people are offended that we are taught to address God with such an intimate term as “Father.” However, the greater offense may be this little word “our.” “Our” says that ultimately all prayer is corporate prayer. Yes. In this prayer we are taught to pray, not as individuals, but as the church.

The “our” reminds us that we cannot pray without our friends. Christianity is inherently communal, a matter of life in the body, the church. Every time we say “Our Father,” we are naming the way of the kingdom – though we must enter the kingdom for ourselves, we get to the kingdom as a group, praying together, correcting one another, forgiving one another, and stumbling along after Jesus together. Now, that may sound odd, but just think about how you got called to be a disciple. Is this something you thought of yourself? Was it revealed to you by staring into the sun, or walking in a field of clover? No! Someone had to tell you the story. Someone had to live this faith in such a way that you said to yourself, “I want to know more about this. I want to be a part of that.” Somebody had to walk the walk and talk the talk. Maybe it was a believing parent, or someone you met at school or at work, or by going to a church service. Even if you got in by simply reading the Bible, remember that the Bible is the record of God’s activity with his people. Any way it goes, somebody helped you get in. And this communal call was not accidental but integral to the Christian life. We get by only with help from our friends.

Philippians 2:4 – Let each of you look no only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Hebrews 3:13 – But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

1 John 3:14 – We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

The children worked long and hard on their own little cardboard shack. It was to be a special spot – a clubhouse – where they could meet in solemn assembly or just laugh, play games, and fool around. But before the summer came, they were smart enough to know that if they didn’t have some rules to govern them, they would spend more time feuding, rather than having a good time together. As they thought long and hard about their rules, they came up with three rather perceptive ones:

1. Nobody act big.
2. Nobody act small.
3. Everybody act medium.

I think those are pretty good rules for preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As you approach the father let us be mindful that you are not an only child, you have brothers and sisters. We need acceptance. We need fellowship. We need encouragement. We need responsibility. We need accountability. We need one another.

III. TO CALL GOD “OUR HEAVENLY FATHER” IS TO KNOW THAT HE CARES ABOUT YOU.

When we pray “Our Father in heaven,” we are resisting the idea that God is impersonal, insensitive, or indifferent. That’s not God. Our God is personal, accessible, and compassionate. Our God is like a father, only better. He’s our heavenly father. He is a model father. He is the perfect father. And you don’t have to drag him into court in order to get him to acknowledge or take care of his children. Think about it. In the Old Testament, the Jews were frightened to call God by his personal name. And he is only called “Father” about seven times in all of the Old Testament. But Jesus calls God “Father” ten times in Matthew 6:1-18. And in 6:9, he beckons us to join in the fun. “Pray in this manner,” he says, “Our Father in heaven.” Here’s the point: You matter to God. As his child, you are the apple of his eye. God loves you. Hallelujah!

- When your body is sick, God cares!
- When your dreams are shattered, God cares!
- When your faith is attacked, God cares!
- When your heart is broken, God cares!
- When your pockets are empty, God cares!
- When your relationships are failing, God cares!
- When your strength is low, God cares!

Now, that’s not H. B. That’s in the Bible. Psalm 103:13 says, “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.” Matthew 6:31-33 says, “**Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.**” And Matthew 7:11 says, “**If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!**” God is our heavenly father; therefore you can, as 1 Peter 5:7 exhorts us, cast all of your anxieties on him, knowing that he cares for you.

And let me say a special word to someone who is struggling with sin, guilt, and failure: The heavenly Father cares about you! Read Luke 15:11-32. God is not only a loving Father; he is a lovesick father. And if you have strayed away, I want you to know that God is waiting on you to come home. God still loves you. God still cares about you. Where sin abounds, his grace abounds all the more. Now, that is not to say that the father never punishes sin. But Hebrews 12:3-11 teaches us that even when God is chastising us, that’s a sign of his love. Anyone he doesn’t discipline is not his child. He’s a bastard. But sometimes God whips those who belong to him. But when he whips you, remember several things. First of all, God doesn’t whip other people’s children. If he’s whipping you, that means you’re his. Secondly, if he’s whipping you, that means he still has his hands on you. And finally, he knows just how much we can bear.

In his book *Mortal Lessons*, DR. RICHARD SELZER writes of standing by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, had been severed. To remove a tumor in her cheek, he had to cut that little nerve. She will be like this from now on. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and it seems like the two of them are the only ones in the room. The young woman speaks.

“Will my mouth be always like this,” she asks.

“Yes,” says the Doctor, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.”

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.

“I like it,” he says, “It’s kind of cute.”

And then, unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth. And as he leans over to kiss her, he twists his own lips to accommodate hers, to show her that their kiss still works.” That’s the divine paternity of God. That’s what it means to be a child of God. That’s what I’m trying to get across when I say God cares for you. That’s grace and mercy: It’s the crooked kiss of God. God cares for you.

IV. TO CALL GOD “OUR HEAVENLY FATHER” IS TO TRUST THAT HE IS ABLE TO MEET ALL OF YOUR NEEDS.

Two boys were arguing. One boy finally played his best card. Well, my daddy can beat up your daddy,” he claimed. But his nemesis trumped him. “Big deal,” was the reply, “My momma can beat up my daddy too.” Here’s the point: Not only do you need a loving father, but you also need a father who is capable. So here’s the final aspect of the divine paternity of God that I want to point out. God is able to meet our needs. Jesus seeks to get that across when he teaches us to pray, “Our Father in heaven.” To say that God is “in heaven” is to affirm that he is sovereign, powerful, and competent.

God blessed me to have a good daddy in H. B. Charles Sr. There is no doubt in my mind that my earthly father loved me. He would have done anything in his power to help me. But, to be honest, there were many times when he just couldn’t help me, no matter how much he tried. He loved me; but he was limited, finite, and...well... human. But my heavenly father not only loves me, but he is able to meet all of my needs. My earthly father only knew certain things, but my heavenly father is omniscient. He knows everything. My earthly father could only be at one place at one time, but my heavenly father is omnipresent. He is everywhere at the same time. My earthly father was only good in certain areas, but my heavenly father is omnipotent. He is able to do all things. My earthly father has past away, but my heavenly father is eternal. He lives forever.

Our Father is in heaven. He is sovereign, powerful, and competent. Psalm 2:4 says, “He who sits in the heavens laughs...” in response to humans who try to thwart his plans. Psalm 103:19 says, “The Lord has established his

throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” 2 Chronicles 20:6 says, “O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you.” And Acts 7:55-56. “But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ “

I TRUST IN GOD WHEREVER I MAY BE
UPON THE LAND OR ON THE ROLLING SEA
FOR COME WHAT MAY FROM DAY TO DAY
MY HEAVENLY FATHER WATCHES OVER ME

HE MAKES THE ROSE THE OBJECT OF HIS CARE
GUIDES THE EAGLE THROUGH THE PATHLESS AIR
SURELY HE WILL REMEMBER ME
MY HEAVENLY FATHER WATCHES OVER ME

I TRUST IN GOD, I KNOW HE CARES FOR ME
ON MOUNTAIN BLEAK OR ON THE ROLLING SEA
THOUGH BILLOWS ROLL, HE KEEPS MY SOUL
MY HEAVENLY FATHER WATCHES OVER ME