

# The Greatest Prayer

Bible Text: Matthew 6:5–15

Lesson Focus: When we say the prayer Jesus taught us, we connect with God.

Big Question: What's the big deal about the Lord's Prayer?

Key Words: RELATIONSHIP, PETITION, EXAMPLE, ACCESS, HOLY

## Prepare

### QUICK PREP

- Jesus invited his listeners into a relationship with God that was direct and fundamental.
- Prayer works because God is faithful, not because we are.
- Jesus offered the Lord's Prayer as an example.
- We can pray for temporal and eternal things.
- There are no prerequisites for prayer. The lines of communication are always open with God.
- Luther divided the Lord's Prayer into seven petitions, an introduction, and a conclusion.
- Luther considered "Our Father in heaven" to be the introduction to the Lord's Prayer.
- The introduction holds in tension two great truths about the God to whom we pray.
- Jesus calls God "Father," a parental image that implies real intimacy in our relationship with God.
- Because of this metaphor, we can see God as close to us, deeply invested in us, because we are God's as children are related to parents.
- Jesus addresses the God in heaven. This way of talking about God helps us see that God is beyond the boundaries of time and space.
- God is at the same time both intimate and deeply mysterious. God is far more than we can ever name.
- We are invited to pray to God with a promise that we will be heard and that God will respond.
- Martin Luther believed that God's name is already holy. We pray this prayer to help remind us of our part in making God's name holy.
- In the Large Catechism, Luther talked about how our words and actions can contribute to the perception others have of how holy God is.
- As a community of faith and as individuals, Christians have been known to sin, both by actions we commit (sins of commission) and actions we should have done (sins of omission).

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### DEEP PREP

When Jesus first spoke the words we now know as the Lord's Prayer, it was in the context of a teaching on practical piety. His first hearers were deeply concerned with how they might express their faith. As in many of the stories we have received about him, Jesus was in the midst of compare-and-contrast rhetoric. In speaking about prayer, he suggested that prayer is best done in private, implying that the public prayer of hypocrites was less about communicating with God and more about communicating with those who observed the prayer. Similarly, Jesus pointed out how the Gentiles hoped that through their wordy phrases they would capture God's attention. In contrast, Jesus taught that God knows what we need even before we ask.

Nevertheless, we are urged to pray in the midst of our shortcomings. We can pray in our worst

moments and in our best. We can ask that we be saved from the time of trial, knowing full well that such times will come. And then we can also ask that we be delivered from evil when it comes upon us, or when it rises up from within. The God we see in Jesus does not demand perfection as a prerequisite for relationship. God hears our prayer as we are. It's a solid Lutheran notion—what makes our prayer work is not *our* effort, but *God's*. Prayer's primary purpose is to communicate with God, and it should not be a matter of show, which negates its purpose. (Martin Luther had similar complaints about the public prayer of his day. See his discussion of prayer in the Large Catechism.) Jesus then offered an example of how to pray (Matthew 6:9–13; see also Luke 11:2–4)—simple, direct, and broad reaching.

It seems that we humans persistently distort prayer in the very ways Jesus sought to debunk. Sometimes, because we seek to be faithful, we start keeping score, even with prayer. For example, many people are deeply uncomfortable praying aloud. You could say that private prayer is the preferred way. However, we are also invited to pray for each other, and there can be great power in offering the prayers of the community in a community setting. But if we are overwhelmed by worry that our prayer is not adequate, or doesn't measure up to what another person can do (a pastor or any other we might perceive as being more fluent or confident), we have lost sight of the point. We are invited by Jesus' own example to pray for both the deepest matters of our souls and the more temporal concerns of daily life. The Lord's Prayer shows us that nothing is too far-reaching or too mundane to pray for. We can ask that God's reign be manifest in our time, and we can ask for daily bread. Our entire lives are included between these brackets. We may also want to pray "beautifully" to glorify God, but what God seems to want most is that we simply pray—that we reopen and maintain the connection we have with God.

By addressing God as Father, Jesus reveals an intimacy with God. Framing God as a parent implies a relationship that bestows an identity and is generative in nature. The metaphor of Father suggests that we are the product of God's loving creation, that we have a place in God's family, that we are heirs of God's largesse, and that God's concern for our well-being will stretch beyond our own lives to the lives of our children, and to generations well beyond. We are bone of God's bone and flesh of God's flesh in so many ways. We sinners have been given a deep connection to the holy God—a blood connection—that cannot be denied or broken no matter how we may behave.

In his discussion about the first petition in the Large Catechism, Martin Luther wondered why we worry about making God's name holy. Isn't it already? God's name is holy because God is, not because of anything humans could do or say. But, Luther pointed out, what we do in God's name can also enhance or hinder the holiness of God's name. That is, our words and actions become a mirror by which others interpret or perceive God's holiness. On the other hand, when we look at the dismal record of Christian actions throughout history, we find plenty of examples of unholy behavior. Both on a large scale and on a smaller, more personal scale, we have not always lived up to the holiness and intimacy with God that we long for in this prayer.

The intimacy of "our Father in heaven" speaks of access. We have an "in" because we are in the family. We don't have to worry about whether we have the necessary status to get God's attention. We don't have to buy God's favor. As God's children, we belong. Of course, this metaphor breaks down after a time and may break down earlier for some than for others. If one who prays has never had a loving family, if he or she does not know the comfort of belonging, or if a parent was the one

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needing care, then this metaphor might not carry the same deep meaning. Some would also benefit from pushing the basic notion of the metaphor—the intimacy involved in a parent-child relationship—beyond the role of father to include mother. There are even more ways to talk about God's loving care when the feminine is also included, but the foundation is the same. We are God's, heirs, and we are beloved.

Jesus also speaks to God "in heaven." This is the second great truth about the God to whom we address this prayer. While "Father" implies a God who is close to us and imminently accessible, "in heaven" implies a God who is at the same time far beyond our imagining. For most people, a God needs to be powerful in the face of forces and events that dwarf us and our ability to control and cope. We need a God who can stand up to the darker forces of life and come out the victor. In Jesus, of course, we see just such a God (albeit one with surprising ways of getting there). "In heaven" is less about where God is located and more about God's purview. Heaven is the preeminent place, a place where all else can be seen and considered, where the view is limitless, where wisdom is boundless, and where the needs of all can be considered at once. In faith, this God precedes time and space and is beyond them both.

So we have these three truths about the God to whom we are invited to pray. We reach out to (1) a God who is as close to us as our own flesh and blood, (2) a God who is as mysterious and vast as unknown solar systems and the stars that inhabit them, and (3) a God who has chosen to convey holiness to the world through us! What kind of gift is this—that we should be invited to know and be in relationship with such a God! When we pray, "Hallowed be your name," we are praying that the world might find God's name to be holy, and that we might be contributors to that reality. We can go a long way toward making God's name holy through our words and our actions.

Luther reminds us that we are not only invited to pray, we are commanded to do so. We can do so with confidence. We can speak from our deepest hearts. We can listen with confidence and hope. God will listen. And God will respond with both the tenderness of a loving parent and the power of the creator of the universe. Good work done by Christians can do much to spread God's holiness around. If we are riveted on God's welcome to all, if we view all of God's creation as equally worthy, if we trust that God will provide all that we need, and if we hear God's call to defend those who are marginalized in our society, think of the positive impact we can have, both on our world and on God's "brand identity."

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## ADOLESCENT CONNECTION

What's the big deal about the Lord's Prayer?

For teens (and adults), praying may be difficult and stilted. How should we address God? What is appropriate to say or ask? How can I tell God what is troubling me? Jesus understood human nature very well. When his disciples asked him how they should pray, he taught them. He provided instructions for how to pray to be in communication with God. This simple but beautiful prayer is time honored and appropriate for those who have lived a total life of faith, as well as for those just beginning their faith journey. When it becomes rote memorization and we race through it, we are losing the beauty and essence of our conversation with God.

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## **BAPTISMAL CONNECTION**

In the Rite of Affirmation of Baptism, a five-part question addresses each confirmand's intent to continue in the covenant God made with them in Holy Baptism. Here We Stand resources help students—with support from parents, leaders, and the entire congregation—prepare to answer this question as they continue in their lifelong faith journey.

Today's lesson focuses on the clause "to live among God's faithful people" (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 201; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 236).

In baptism we became part of God's family. With the Lord's Prayer, Jesus introduced God as a loving parent. Jesus invited his listeners into a relationship with God that was direct and fundamental. That same invitation is extended to all people, everywhere, every day. We truly are a family with God, and with all of God's faithful people!

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