

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflections
A New Prayer for a New Year
1 January 2023
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Scripture Text: Luke 11:1, Matthew 6:9

Sermon Preamble

The freshness of a new year causes us to reflect and do something new. Some of us are Do-It-Yourself; we jump right in and figure it out. Others go straight to the expert. Sometimes, to learn something new, all we need to do is ask for help. That is what the disciples did over 2,000 years ago. Jesus' prayers and prayer life caught the attention of the disciples. As recorded in the Old Testament, Jewish folks had been praying for centuries, so praying was not new for the disciples. The disciples observed something different about Jesus' prayers. The disciples wanted to learn a new way to pray that was different from what they had already been doing. Jesus taught them. Similarly, Jesus teaches us a new prayer for a new year.

The prayer Jesus taught is in Luke 11 and Matthew 6 to different audiences

In Luke, Jesus is talking to the disciples specifically. "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray...'" (Luke 11:1).

However, in Matthew 6 Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount to a large audience. The teaching on prayer is part of his message. Jesus says not to be like the hypocrites who only pray for the glory and reward of being seen (Matthew 6:5). Instead, pray to your Father in private who sees what is done in secret and will reward you; this does not mean never to pray in public, but it is about why you are praying in public (Matthew 6:6). Jesus then says not to keep babbling, thinking that many words will get you heard (Matthew 6:7). Instead, be assured that your Heavenly Father knows what you need. In other words, prayer is not about impressing others or God. We can keep it simple, speaking from the heart. Jesus then declares this is how you should pray. (Matthew 6:8).

Most are familiar with the prayer Jesus teaches in Matthew 6

We most often repeat the Authorized King James Version: "⁹Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. ¹⁰Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread ¹²and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; (for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.) (Matthew 6: 9-13).

The last line does not appear in the earliest Greek texts. Somewhere in church history, the last line got added as a doxology or closing. Depending on the version of the Bible you use, that line may or may not be included directly, but it is often added as a footnote. "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen" is a beautiful closing and true, so it is usually included when we say this prayer aloud.

Trap of prayer being so familiar and common that we just say it rather than pray it

The Lord's Prayer is so common and well known that we can lapse into just saying it and not praying it. We then miss the point! Jesus taught his followers, including us, to pray this way. This prayer models what our prayers should be like. For the next few weeks, we are going to dive into this prayer a little deeper, verse by verse. We are going to be students of Jesus. We will unpack this prayer afresh, hear how to pray according to this prayer, and hear how to live into this prayer in our daily lives. We will discover anew what this prayer really means. For us, this will be a new prayer for a new year, just like it was for the disciples.

Five reasons to pray the Lord's Prayer as a new prayer for a new year

When we actually pray the Lord's Prayer, enter into the mindset and intention that we are talking to God. Here are five reasons to incorporate this prayer into our daily prayer time.

Reason #1 – It is a good place to start for those new to prayer. The prayer is simple, brief, condensed, and encompasses all aspects of life.

Reason #2 – It gives a framework as to what should be included in prayer and what is appropriate and honors God's holiness. It is a prayer for God's mission in advancing the Kingdom of God. It is a prayer for our material, spiritual, and other non-material needs. It helps us focus on our needs, not our wants. It is a prayer for our relationships in healing what is broken and confessing our sin in relationships. It is a prayer for making good choices when it comes to evil and temptation.

Reason #3 – It affirms the personal and communal nature of prayer. The Lord's Prayer challenges our self-centered tendency to focus on ourselves; it includes others. The Lord's Prayer reminds us that we are interdependent and responsible for one another. Prayer is not primarily about what we can get from God, for God knows what we need.

Reason #4 – It captures our desires and goals to be deeply loved and cared for, to have our needs met, and to be at peace and safe in the world.

Reason #5 – It is the prayer Jesus prayed and directly instructed us to pray. Second century African theologian Tertullian said the Lord's Prayer contains everything we need to commune with God. The Lord's Prayer aligns us with the heart of God and enables the Holy Spirit to shape us.

Lord's Prayer soaks into other times of prayer and every aspect of our lives

The Lord's Prayer is a special gift for each of us. This is a new prayer for a new year. As we pray the Lord's Prayer, the meat of this prayer will begin to influence prayer at other times. We will catch God's vision for prayer, and it will begin to influence every aspect of our lives. The early church fathers and mothers advocated praying this prayer three times daily as a rhythm of life. It will take a lifetime to fully understand and embrace this prayer. This prayer has stood the test of time. We can embrace this prayer for ourselves and learn to pray the way Jesus taught.

For the remainder of this message, let's look at the Lord's Prayer's first verse: "Our Father who is in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name..." (Matthew 6:9).

"Our" speaks to the communal relationship we have with God and others

To say "our Father" means God is not just my father, but I have siblings. We see this communal nature all through this prayer. Prayer is not just about me and my God. That is one of the criticisms of European and Western Christianity. European and Western cultures tend to be very individualistic; "I" is at the center and the world revolves around me. We are so used to self-centered thinking that we don't even recognize it. So many of our worship songs are about me and Jesus or what God has done for me. These songs are not necessarily wrong, but that is only part of the story.

Other cultures and parts of the world often warmer climates and darker skinned people, think in terms of "We," not "Me." "We" is at the center, and my wants are secondary to the group. This is an important distinction because when we only think in terms of "Me," the needs, concerns, issues of others become secondary and sometimes off our radar all together. But when we think in terms of "we" and "our," we have the mindset what happens to you matters to me. We are aware that what I do has an impact on you. Therefore, I am cognizant and careful about the choices I make, because it is never about just "me," but it is about "us."

In teaching us to pray, Jesus begins with an "our" mindset. Jesus is reminding us that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. From the time Adam and Eve left the garden, God's plan has been to re-establish God's family. Jesus teaches that our prayers must be bigger than me, my needs, my wants, my fears, my emergency pleas for God to help me. God cares for those things, but our prayers are to be so much broader than me, myself, and I!

This brings us to the next word in our text, “Our Father.”

“Our Father” establishes who God is and who we are (adopted children) in relationship to God

God is our Father, and we are sons and daughters of God. In Jewish culture a father meant someone loving and trustworthy on whom a child could depend for their needs, with the same meaning for us today. To call God our Father speaks of a family bond of nurture, care, commitment, a tender relationship, benevolence and good will. God as Father also speaks of God’s grace, because there is nothing we have done to be worthy to be called children of God.

God as Father is the root, cause, and power that undergird this entire prayer. It is the reason we can pray everything else. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and power of the Holy Spirit in us, God made possible for us to be children of God. Jesus is God’s Son by virtue of the Trinity; we are God’s sons and daughters by adoption.

The terminology for God is “Abba, Father”

“So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you have received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, ‘Abba, Father’” (Romans 8:15). “Abba, Father” is the same term Jesus used. Some teachers and scholars used to say that Jesus introduced new intimacy by saying Abba, like a little child saying Daddy. There is debate because the Aramaic term Abba is not only said by children, but also it means father in general. It was common in Judaism and elsewhere to call God “Father.” The Greek God Zeus was called Father. In calling God “Father” Jesus was not introducing something new.

The term “Father” signifies the intimate nature of the relationship. Jesus manifested and exemplified closeness with the Father. Jesus pointed out to the disciples that he no longer called them servants, but friends. Changing from servants to friends did shift our relationship with God through Jesus.

The term, “Father” is meaningful for the unmerited, unconditional parental love and attention from the God of the Universe. This is an amazing gift of grace.

Keep our focus on the perfect Heavenly Father, not broken human father that fall short

Sometimes, the gift of grace is hard to receive if one’s experience with an earthly father has not been pleasant. Some people are stuck because of what “father” conjures up for them. There is evil in this world, and God promises that the evil will be vindicated. God comforts us in our tribulations. Nothing goes unnoticed by God. Sometimes, we don’t know or see the consequences that follow, but we do reap what we sow, and all evil will be made right.

Human fathers are not the standard for fatherhood. God is the perfect standard. When a person struggles with the concept of Father God, try to focus on the attributes of a perfect Heavenly Father, instead of applying the attributes of a broken human father onto God. There is only one perfect parent, encompassing both father and mother. God is our perfect parent, offering healing from the brokenness we all experience from earthly parents who fail us by virtue of being human.

“You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him” (Matthew 7:9-11). God is altogether generous, compassionate, caring, responsive, and provides our needs. God is always looking out for our good even when we don’t understand the hardships we may experience. God still is, always has been, and always will be “The Good Father.” God will never fail you or forsake you no matter what it looks like.

All that is embedded in the phrase we pray - “Our Father” - the one to whom no earthly father can compare. This leads to the next phrase, “which art in heaven.”

We pray to “Our Father, which art in heaven” speaks of God’s power and divinity

God is completely different from us. We are not equals. God is so personal, intimate, and close to us that we sometimes think of God as a friend or buddy. We must also remember that God is Creator and we are the created. God is non-material, ethereal, transcendent, mysterious, divine, and eternal. God is all powerful, all knowing, present in all times and in all space. God is above all, before all, and beyond all. God is the Alpha and Omega. God is the Creator of heaven and earth. This is the God we get to pray to. All this is embedded in the phrase, “who art in heaven.”

God Almighty speaks to why Jesus then teaches us to say, “Hallowed be thy name.”

“Hallowed be thy name” means all about God’s name is worthy of respect and worship

Hallowed things are holy, sacred, worthy of respect, reverence, and worship. The name of God encompasses God’s person, God’s character, and who God is. All of God is worthy of worship because God is holy. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray that God’s name be honored. Jesus instructs us to pray that God would be recognized, revered, respected as holy and sacred, and worshipped by us and the world. To hallow something is to make it the most important thing in your life and worship it.

In a commencement address at Kenyan College, David Foster Wallace declared that everybody worships. Our only choice is what to worship. The reason for choosing to worship God is that anything else will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, you will never have enough. If you worship your own body, beauty, and sexual allure, you will always feel ugly; when you age, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. If you worship power, you will feel weak and afraid, needing ever more power over others to keep fear at bay. If you worship your intellect and being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. The Biblical truth is that whatever you worship, you will serve and it will dictate how you live your life. We all have something or someone that is hallowed, and that we worship in our lives.

When we pray “hallowed be your name” to God, we are recognizing the holiness of God in our lives. We are re-committing to worship God alone. We are seeking to live accordingly in obedience, reverence, and honor that is due God’s sacred name. This is a call for us to make God’s name holy and sacred wherever we go by what we say and do. We represent God’s holiness as God’s sons and daughters. Leedah Wong, our former youth pastor, would often pray to the Lord, “to help us make God’s name famous, recognized, and honored not only by us, but also in the world.” We look forward to the day when Christ will return and every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus is the Holy Lord and worthy of all worship.

What is new for the New Year?

The prayer Jesus taught is so powerful, with much to meditate on, and much to apply to our lives as we begin a new year. Perhaps God is inviting you to a regular prayer period or to pray more. Perhaps God is inviting you to expand your prayer radius this year to think and pray more from a communal and our mindset, with requests on behalf of others. Perhaps God is inviting you to consider what it means to you that God is our perfect loving Father. Perhaps something caught your attention about God’s holiness with God inviting you to consider some areas of your life to more worship God and bring God honor. So you have some decisions to make.

The best thing we can do as we enter into a new year is draw closer to God, our perfect Father.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDING FOR USE IN FAMILY GROUPS

Sermon Preamble

-As we enter the New Year with New Year Resolutions, in what way(s) would you like your prayer life to imitate more the prayer life of Jesus?

The prayer Jesus taught is in Luke 11 and Matthew 6 to different audiences

-In Luke 11, what group of people is Jesus teaching to pray? Why does Jesus teaching on prayer in Luke 11 also apply to us today?

-In Matthew 6, what are the essential introductory contexts to instructions on how to pray? How do these instructions on prayer to a large crowd in the Sermon on the Mount apply to us today?

-In reviewing verse 8, why is prayer not a memory-jogger for God, but a means by which the one who prays is reminded of the character, will, and purposes of God?

Most are familiar with the prayer Jesus teaches in Matthew 6

-When do you remember first learning or hearing the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6: 9-13? In what circumstances do you see evidence that the Lord's Prayer is used merely as repetition of words, rather than praying the meaning as instructed by Jesus?

Trap of prayer being so familiar and common that we just say it rather than pray it

-How can we avoid missing the point of the Lord's Prayer being so common that we lapse into just saying the words, rather than really praying it?

Five reasons to pray the Lord's Prayer as a new prayer for a new year

-In the New Year, why do we incorporate the Lord's Prayer into our daily prayer time with the mindset that we are talking to God, not just saying the words?

-What reason most resonates with you to pray the Lord's Prayer as a new prayer conversing with God for the New Year?

Lord's Prayer soaks into other times of prayer and every aspect of our lives

-What aspects of the Lord's Prayer should begin to influence other times of prayer, whether private or public prayer?

-In what ways should aspects of the Lord's Prayer begin to influence every aspect of our lives?

"Our" speaks to the communal relationship we have with God and others

-What does the communal word "our" teach you about the nature of prayer not readily understood by Western Christianity of European and other Western cultures?

-Why are the mindsets of other cultures more in line with the communal "our" rather than "me, myself, and I?" How is the different cultural mindset of people of color in the Middle East and Africa important in proper interpretation of Biblical texts?

"Our Father" establishes who God is and who we are (adopted children) in relationship to God

-What characteristics of God are being referred to in God as "Father?"

The terminology for God is "Abba, Father"

-Who are we in relationship to God and Jesus? Why is this important?

Keep our focus on the perfect Heavenly Father, not broken human father that falls short

-What spiritual practices would be helpful in focusing on the perfect Heavenly Father, not our human parents who fall short of the standard of a perfect parent?

We pray to "Our Father, which art in heaven" speaking of God's power and divinity

-What aspects of God are embodied in the phrase, "which art in heaven?" What are essential distinctions between God and created humans?

"Hallowed be thy name" means all about God's name is worthy of respect and worship

-Since everyone worships something in our lives, what is meaningful to you about worship of anything other than God?

-Why is it important to pray that God may be treated as holy with worship and reverence in the thoughts and conduct of those created in God's image?