

"Abba, Father"
Sermon Series – *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* #2
(Rm. 8:12-17)
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Before I begin my sermon, I've been asked to make an announcement. It's for you parents. It has to do with a child. Would the parents of....

Now, you'll have to forgive me. There is no child in distress in the building. Everything is okay. I did this to get your attention, because IF I had mentioned the name of your child, or the name of your grandchild, and I said there was a problem, you would have been out of here in a New York second, wouldn't you?

There is something about the deep heartfelt concern that we parents have for our children, and we grandparents for our grandchildren, that makes us willing to drop whatever we're doing and come to them whenever they need us. We love them so much, and we're concerned about their care and protection. And we'd do just about anything for them.

How fascinating it is, then, that Jesus would choose the image of a Father to teach His disciples about prayer. What can we learn from these opening words in the prayer Jesus taught His disciples when they asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray?"

I. The Idea of God as Father.

The Lord's Prayer begins with the words, "Our Father who art in heaven." The word Jesus used for "Father" here in this passage is the Aramaic word *Abba*. It was an intimate term used by little children in ancient Palestine for their fathers, and it comes close to our English expression of papa or daddy. *Abba* was a word of love and affection, and it's the tenderest of all the words for father in the Aramaic language. In this prayer Jesus introduced a revolutionary concept that forever changed the way we can envision God and relate to Him.

Some people today don't like the word "Father" as it relates to God because they say it's sexist and that male imagery doesn't carry the full weight of who God is. While it's true that God is neither male nor female and there are a indeed variety of feminine metaphors in Scripture for God which broaden our concept of Him, nevertheless the Lord chose to reveal Himself in this personal way, and Jesus taught us to call God our Father. It provides a personal intimate family expression, and it emphasizes the love that God has for His children. Language is important, and we would do well to preserve the manner in which Jesus taught us to address God.

It's also important to note that Jesus didn't say, "My Father..." when He introduced this prayer. He said, "Our Father." While Jesus Himself prayed, "My Father," on many occasions in the prayers of He prayed that are recorded in Scripture, in the prayer He taught His disciples, Jesus insisted that we say "our." There is a corporate quality to this petition, and we can never be selfish or possessive in thinking only about me and mine when we pray to our Father. I must be concerned about my neighbor and my brothers and sisters in Christ, too. That's something to remember whenever we come to prayer.

How is it that we are God's children, and why are we given the right to call Him our heavenly Father? Noted Bible scholar Dale Bruner writes about the distinction that Christ has as God's only Son *by nature*, whereas we are God's children *by adoption*. Christ and Christ alone is God's Son by right; we are God's children by grace. By means of God's grace we've been adopted and brought into the family of God, and we're given the privilege to call Him Father.

Indeed, as Dale writes in his commentary on the gospel of Matthew, "...when Jesus gives us the right to call on His Father as our Father, He is passing on to us His own priceless relationship. This is Jesus' greatest gift in the Lord's Prayer."¹ By our union in Christ, through Jesus we participate in the loving relationship between God the Father and God the Son, the first two Persons of the Trinity, and we're invited to share in the intimacy of the love relationship that exists in the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

However, for many people the image of God as our heavenly Father is problematic, because their own experience of their earthly fathers hasn't been a good one. Some of us have dads who were selfish and self-centered, and we didn't feel like they cared much for us. Maybe your dad was an alcoholic, or he left home when you were young. Maybe he had a problem with anger, and you remember many nights crying yourself to sleep. Perhaps he was aloof and unaffectionate. Some of you were abused by your dads, and the wounds run deep. Maybe you never even met your real earthly father.

My relationship with my own father was a complicated one. In many ways my dad was a great father, but he also had many character flaws. Even though I knew he loved me, it was always on his terms and his turf. He was probably an alcoholic, and sometimes he had a temper that could be scary. He was a chauvinist and he didn't treat my mother very well, so he provided a very poor example of what a husband is supposed to be like. Then my dad died when I was only 22, and it left many unresolved issues for me as a young adult.

I know I'm not alone in having had a complicated relationship with my dad growing up. Because of all of these sorts of problems, the name "Father", instead of being rich with warm and happy memories, is often associated by many people with fear and repulsion, anger and hostility, sometimes even hatred and scorn.

And the tragedy is that in ascribing the title Father to God, we sometimes unconsciously transfer onto Him all the hurtful qualities we associate in our minds with our experience of our own earthly fathers. This is what psychologists call *transference*.

But the fact of the matter is that none of this was in the mind of Jesus when He spoke so sincerely and simply of God as His Father. His view of God was not conditioned by His childhood relationship with Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, but by His own personal identity with God the Father. As God's only begotten Son, He fully knew the true essence of God's character. He understood the beauty and the wonder of God's personality. If we are ever going to fully appreciate the kind of person God really is, then we need to see and experience the Father as Jesus saw and experienced Him.

II. The Love of the Father.

The most outstanding attribute of God the Father is His love. And the selfless character of God's love is so foreign to our typical ideas about love today. Usually we love someone only when it's reciprocated, or it serves our own ends or meets our needs. But not with God. His love for us is unchanging regardless of how we act. His love isn't dependent upon His mood or our good behavior, or even our response to His love. Rather, it's given unconditionally, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us more or make Him love us less than He does right now. How different that is from the love I usually have even for those closest to me.

We see a picture of this kind of Fatherly love in Luke 15 when Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son. You'll recall it involved a touching story about a father and his two boys. The father's attitude toward both boys never altered; it never changed. The prodigal son was disrespectful and cruel to his father, and the dad died a thousand deaths while his son was away living it up in the far country. Not only did the boy squander his father's money, he also dragged his father's good name through the mud.

Yet despite all of this, the father's attitude toward the boy never changed. In spite of all the shame, suffering, scandal and loss, the father's love never diminished. Instead he had compassion and concern for his son. The father never rejected his boy. He simply forgave him and welcomed his son back home when he returned.

That's the essence of God's love for us. Whenever I pray to my Father in heaven, I'm praying as a child of God, and I can know with assurance that as His child I am the object of His affection and the focus of His constant love. I can know with certainty that His patience and compassion, His mercy and understanding are always extended to me. In every situation in life, no matter how

difficult, I have the quiet assurance that I am His and He is mine, no matter what happens and no matter what I do. That's a great comfort! It's such a wonderful encouragement!

Before Jesus, most people thought of God as someone who was remote and distant, someone who sat in the high and holy place as a stern Judge behind the demanding bar of the law. He was a God people feared. But Jesus changed all that when He talked about God as His Father more than 70 times in the gospels. He put our relationship with God in an entirely new light, where God moved from behind the bar of justice and came down to the level of a child, knocking on the door of our hearts and inviting us to come to our heavenly Papa.

Do you have a relationship with God that is as tender as that of a child with his/her daddy? Do you know God in that kind of intimate way? You can, and it can start today. Just invite Him into your life, and He'll welcome you into His family. And He'll tell you just how much He loves you. And even though your earthly father may have failed you, God your heavenly Father never will. And He can fill up all the holes in your heart that you feel, and He'll never leave you nor forsake you. Come to Him today. The Father is waiting with open arms.

III. The Discipline of the Father.

As a parent I have learned that loving my children doesn't mean always being sweet and giving them whatever they want. I've learned that at times love has to be tough. And sometimes the most loving thing I can possibly do as a parent is to say "No." The love of a parent for a child is expressed in a variety of ways, including the way of discipline as they help their children grow to maturity.

The writer to the Hebrews picks up on this, and he says in the 12th chapter of his letter, "*[Do not forget the] word of encouragement that addresses you as children [in the book of Proverbs]: 'My child, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a child.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as children. For what child is not disciplined by his/her father? ...No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*" (Heb. 12:5-7, 11).

Usually, when we hear the word "discipline" we think of the idea of punishment, but that doesn't capture what is meant here. The word that is translated "discipline" in this passage is the Greek word *paideia*, from which we get our English word "pediatrics." It carries with it the idea of "training, teaching and education of a child." The discipline of God the Father isn't really about His punishment; it's about His teaching and training us in the school of discipleship.

Part of the role of our heavenly Father is not only to love us, but also to love us so much that He wants the best for us. And He'll do everything He can to shape our character into the image of His Son Jesus Christ. Sometimes as a heavenly Father the Lord disciplines His children, which is the process of sanctification the Bible talks about. At times it can be a painful process. It's not a pleasant experience to go through the refining fire. Training is tough. But the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that the discipline is for our own good to help chip away the rough edges of our lives and purge from us the impurity that exists in our hearts.

Parents sometimes say to their kids before they discipline them, "This is gonna hurt me more than it's gonna hurt you." And most kids think to themselves, "Yeah, right!" But in the case of our heavenly Father, it's a true statement. His heart aches with our pain; He sympathizes with all our struggles. And I am convinced the Lord is empathetic whenever one of His children hurts, even in the midst of discipline.

Suffering in the Christian life is never easy, but it can be used by the hand of a providential and loving heavenly Father for our good. When we go through difficult times God uses these awful experiences to refine us like the precious metal of gold. It's when we have to deal with the brokenness of a fallen world, and even walk through the valley of the shadow of death, that we come to know the unfailing love of our heavenly Father and learn to lean on His everlasting arms which can sustain us through the toughest of times.

The amazing truth we read in Scripture is that even Jesus learned obedience to the Father through the things He suffered, and we're invited to join Christ in the fellowship of His sufferings. I read somewhere, "God had only one Son without sin, but never did He have a child without suffering." It is part of process God uses to shape us through the discipline of our heavenly Father.

"Our Father." Just two short words, and yet they have a world of meaning wrapped up in them. They set the tone for the entire prayer that follows, and they embrace all the beauty found in belonging to the family of God. No other religion in the world carries such an intimate concept of a relationship with the living God of the universe. And no other philosophy or teaching touches the heart of our human need like this one does. Where else can you turn to find words tenderer, more meaningful, more powerful than these simple words, "Our Father"?

On September 8, 1998, St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Mark McGwire made history by hitting his 62nd home run of the season, and he set a new Major League record, which has since been broken. It was an emotional moment not only for McGwire but also for 4 people sitting in the VIP section of the stadium. They were the grown children of Roger Maris, the man who hit 61 home runs in 1961 to establish the record that stood for 37 years.

The children of Roger Maris were an important part of the celebration that night, yet none of them had ever played even an inning of a Major League baseball game in their lives. Maris' children didn't receive special attention that evening because of anything they had done. Instead, they were there and they were honored that night because of who their father was and what he had done. Their father made it possible for them to be present that night and to be the honored guests because of his achievement years before.

One day you and I will sit down at the great celebration of heaven with the Lord Jesus Christ, and we will enjoy all the benefits of the eternal kingdom of God that is to come. But we will not be there because of who we are or anything we have done. We'll be there because of who our heavenly Father is and what He did in sending His Son to redeem our lost and broken world. Thanks be to God that we have a heavenly Father who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for you and me. Thanks be to God that He is "Our Father who art in heaven." Amen.

¹F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, Vol. I, p. 239.