

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

January 17, 2010 Praying to Our Heavenly Father

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Dear Radio Friends,

Last week we began to look at the subject of prayer. We saw prayer as God's gift to us, a miracle in which we who are sinners are given access into His presence. We saw that prayer is the conversation of the saved with their God. We saw that prayer, from our point of view, is a time when we can stop and focus on God, bringing ourselves consciously into the presence of God.

We then looked at what kind of prayer is acceptable to God, and we saw that our prayers must match the character and the word of God, that prayer is not just anyone praying for anything that he might want; but in prayer we must come as sinners believing in the Son of God as the only way of access to the Father. And we must come confident that God will give us the things that we ask because He is able as almighty God.

We also looked at why we need to pray. In Luke 11 the disciples saw Jesus praying and asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray." We need to pray, and we need to learn to pray. We need this because we are creatures dependent on God for all things. We need this especially because of our sin, for which we must constantly seek forgiveness and over which we can have victory only through the power of God's grace that comes through prayer.

But we need to pray especially because our sin and sinfulness causes us to forget that God *is*. We live without thinking about Him. Prayer stops us and brings us back into the presence of God.

Our instructor in prayer is Jesus. When the disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray," He gave them a prayer in Matthew 6 and Luke 11 that we commonly call the Lord's Prayer. This can stand alone as a prayer that we can pray. But it was intended by Jesus especially as a guide or model after which we should pattern all of our prayers. Today we want to look at the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, in which Jesus teaches us to approach God, saying, "Our Father which art in heaven."

Before we look at that, I want us briefly to look at the structure of this Lord's Prayer, because that is helpful for us too. The Lord's Prayer is made up of an introduction, six petitions, and a closing doxology. The most striking thing about this prayer is that so much of it focuses on God and on our spiritual needs. Many today think to pray only when they are in some earthly calamity and have some external need for their body. There has been a natural disaster, or they are sick—and so they suddenly turn to God in prayer. The structure of the Lord's Prayer teaches us that we should always be praying, not only when we have personal needs.

The introduction and the first three petitions deal exclusively with God—the honor of His name, the coming of His kingdom, and the doing of His will. Two of the second three petitions that have to do with us focus on the spiritual needs that our sin creates. The doxology (For thine is the kingdom, power, and glory forever) also has to do with God. There is only one petition in the Lord's Prayer (Give us this day our daily bread) that deals with our earthly needs. This

teaches us that God, His honor, His name, should take priority in our lives over ourselves and our needs. It teaches us that God is always worthy of our prayers and attentions. It teaches us that spiritual things are much more important than material things.

Today, though, we want to focus on the beginning, the introduction, of the Lord's Prayer, which tells us how to address God in prayer.

Now, if you think about it, the beginning of any conversation is very important because it conveys the attitude of the one who is approaching you. This is very important in our society. If you are in sales, you want to make a good first impression. If you are meeting someone for the first time (maybe it is your first date), you are very careful about showing respect to that person because you want him to know something of your attitude and feelings towards him.

And so it is with prayer. The way that we begin our prayers to God shows our attitude toward and feelings about Him. And Jesus, in this introduction, is teaching us how we should approach God in prayer. We should not begin by asking things of Him for ourselves. We should not begin with ourselves as though God needs to get down to business and help us. But we should begin with a humble realization of who God is and who we are before Him.

So Jesus tells us to pray: "Our Father which art in heaven." There are four things that I want to draw out of this introduction to the Lord's Prayer.

The first is that we should think of God as Father and of ourselves as His children. This describes our relationship to God.

What does it mean that God is Father? Well, we are very familiar with the concept from the earthly realm of the family. The father is the head, the caregiver, and the provider in the family. But we also know that in human families many earthly fathers do not function as they should. Today many view fatherhood simply as a biological connection. The father is the one who helped to create the life of the child. And, sadly, many today do not know much more than that about their fathers. They do not have loving and caring fathers who provide for them.

This is important because we should see that God is the real and the original Father. Earthly fatherhood should be patterned after Him. If you have had bad experiences with your earthly father, you must not reflect them back on God. Just because your dad here on earth has failed you does not mean your Father in heaven will fail you.

So, what is God as Father? First, He is the Father of Jesus, His Son. When Jesus lived on the earth, He used this name for God more than any other. And for us to be the sons of God, we must believe on Jesus and come to God through faith in Jesus His Son. Otherwise we have no right to call God our Father.

Today it is commonly understood that God is the Father of all men and that we are all brothers and sisters. Now it is true, of course, that God is the Creator of all men, and that all men are related through Adam. But the Scriptures do not use the term "Father" to describe God's relationship to all the fallen human race. Instead, the Scriptures teach that, by nature, we are all the children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). Jesus says of the unbelieving Jews that they were not Abraham's children, but the children of the devil (John 8:44). This is true of all men who are not reconciled

to God through faith in Jesus Christ. The Fatherhood of God does not bring all men together into one family. It creates a division between believers and unbelievers.

In John 1:12 we read: "But as many as received him [that is, received Jesus Christ], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." And Galatians 3:26 says, "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." Only those who believe in Jesus Christ have the right to call God their Father. God makes us His children by adopting us from the family of Satan into His own family and by regenerating us—giving us a new birth through the work of His Holy Spirit.

When we come to God as Father, we should think of His attitude towards us and of what He does for us as our Father. As our Father, He is tender and intimately involved with us. In Psalm 103:13, 14 we read: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." He knows our condition and He pities us in it, dealing gently with us as His children. In Matthew 6:32, Jesus teaches us that God knows all our needs. He knows your illnesses. He knows what bills you have to pay. He knows the burden of your family life. He knows your spiritual struggles. And, as our Father, He provides us with all we need in this life. In Luke 11 Jesus compares God to a good earthly father who will not give stones for bread or a snake or a scorpion to his children in the place of food. And Jesus says that God is much better than that. As our Father, He knows our needs and He meets us in them.

And as a Father, He also instructs and chastens us. Every good father teaches and corrects his children. We can expect this from God our Father as well.

So, that is the first thing here. God is our Father who loves us and we are His dear children.

The second thing we should notice in the introduction to the Lord's Prayer is that we are a part of the family of God. Jesus teaches us here to pray in the plural. Not: *my* Father in heaven, but *our* Father which art in heaven. This means that we are part of a family, and we should be thinking about the other members of God's family as we go to Him in prayer.

This will affect how we pray. God's people are gathered from all the nations of the earth. And God's people have a great variety of needs. Some of God's people are very sick and deal with this day after day. Others of God's people are persecuted severely for their faith. Some of God's people deal with grief and loneliness in their lives. Others are very poor. And then there are also many of God's elect people who are still living in darkness, under the power of Satan. We must pray for all of these in their needs.

Sometimes we do not know what to do for others. An elderly person in the nursing home says, "I really cannot do much for the church and for fellow believers any more." But that is not correct. The best thing that we can do for others is to pray for them in their needs. Jesus is teaching us here that we should not be selfish in our prayers. So often we cry out from our own need, failing to remember that there are many of God's people with much greater needs than our own.

Do you remember this as you pray? Do you have in your mind all of God's people and all their many different needs as you pray? If you do not, your prayers will fall to the ground and will not be heard by God. This is what James means in chapter 4 when he says, "Ye ask, and receive not,

because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." Selfish prayers are not answered by God.

But when we pray with and for others, then our prayers are caught up in the great stream of acceptable prayer that ascends to God—what the Scriptures call "the prayers of the saints." And these intercessory prayers serve the great purpose of bringing us together as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

The third thing that we learn from Jesus' introduction in this prayer is that we should pray to God with reverence. Jesus says, "Pray, Our Father *which art in heaven.*" He means by that that we should remember that God is God. We should remember the heavenly majesty of God—that He is exalted so far above us that we are like tiny ants and specks of dust before Him. That does not mean that we cannot be personal with God. But it means that He is God in heaven who is different from us. When we are talking to God, that is different than when we are talking to the neighbor over the back fence or to a brother sitting next to us. If someone approaches his local city council with a request, or if someone has a hearing with the President of the United States of America, his approach is going to be careful and respectful. How much more with the God of heaven and earth?

This means that in our attitude in prayer we should approach God with reverence, with humility, with meekness, and with sincerity. It means that in our posture in prayer we will be respectful. We will bow the knee before God. It means that in our language we will be respectful of God, using language appropriate to who God is.

In Isaiah 6 God gives the prophet a vision of heaven. The first thing that Isaiah sees is angels covering their faces before God—sinless angels—covering their faces and crying out: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." And Isaiah himself responds with these words: "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Is. 6:5).

So we should be respectful and reverent in our approach to God in prayer.

Are you? When you come before God in prayer, and as you live before God, are you conscious of who He is and of who you are before Him?

Then there is one more thing in what Jesus says here, and that is that we may come to God with confidence in prayer. We may come expecting that God will hear our prayers and that He will answer our prayers. He is our Father in heaven. Because He is our Father, He will help us in our needs. Because He is in heaven, almighty, He is able to help us. He has a power beyond all the powers in the circumstances of our life.

We do not need to come timidly, afraid that He will not help. We must not come doubting that He can help us. In Ephesians 3:12 Paul says that through faith in Christ, we have boldness and access with confidence. As God's children, through Jesus Christ, we can know that God knows and cares and receives and hears us when we pray.

Are not these words of Jesus with which He tells us to begin our prayers beautiful and

encouraging words for us? Maybe today you have many needs and you look around and you see the needs of your fellow Christians. Then Jesus is saying, "Come to your heavenly Father assured that He will answer. He is a God who hears and answers prayer. That is His promise." And that is the foundation of our confidence in beginning as we come to God in prayer.

Let us pray.

Our Father which art in heaven, we give thanks for Thy Son. We give thanks that we may be called children of God. And we give thanks for the access that we may have to Thee through prayer. Hear our prayers, we ask, for Jesus' sake, Amen.