

## Matthew 6:5-15

### Closing in With God

*Our Father which art in heaven – 6:9*

We come this morning to a portion of Scripture that is one of the most well known passages in all the Bible. The Lord's prayer could certainly be categorized with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the story of David and Goliath. Most Christians know this prayer. I hope that you know it today. Even as an unsaved child growing up in a home that was not a Christian home for reasons that I can only trace to the much stronger effect of Christianity upon our culture I was taught to recite this prayer by my parents when I was a child. They would have us recite it when we went to bed at night.

It's a good prayer for a child to learn. I hope that you parents will take it upon yourselves to make sure that your children know how to recite this prayer. Your aim should be that may recite it so that one day they may be able to not merely recite it but pray it. There has been controversy down through the ages as to how this prayer should be used. Should we recite it as a congregation? Should we recite it in the secret place of prayer? Critics of this use of the Lord's prayer will point out that there's a danger to merely reciting any prayer. We run the risk of doing the very thing that the Lord was criticizing the Pharisees for doing. We simply go through the motions – we simply utter words without having our hearts engaged in what we're doing.

That kind of criticism is valid but the solution need not be to never recite the prayer – the solution, rather, is to make sure your heart is engaged when you use this prayer. There is good reason for making this prayer our own. Listen to the words of Alexander McClaren who writes:

*We teach this prayer to our children, and its divine simplicity becomes their lisping tongues and little folded hands. But the more we ponder it, and try to make it the model of our prayers, the more wonderful does its fulness of meaning appear, the more hard does it become to pray 'after this manner.' There is everything in it: the loftiest revelation of God in His relations to us and in His purposes with the world; the setting forth of all our relations to Him, to His purposes, and to one another; the grandest vision of the future for mankind and the care for the smallest wants of each day.*

The genius of Christ in giving us this prayer is readily seen when you consider that all the essential elements to true praying are in this prayer. This is not to say that we must restrict ourselves simply to using the words of this prayer. Christ Himself would spend whole nights in prayer and you can believe that He didn't merely utter the words of a prescribed prayer over and over.

On the other hand – anything and everything that is expressed in our more lengthy prayers will find it's expression in the Lord's prayer. To go beyond the principles that we find in this prayer is very likely to drift out of bounds when it comes to spiritual praying in the will of God.

There is another good reason for utilizing this prayer. I was struck and greatly encouraged by the remark of Lloyd-Jones who writes in connection with praying in general: *Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer*. Aren't you glad to hear a renowned preacher make such a statement? It's not just you – it's not just me – it's all of us together. We face challenges when we pray. We face opposition when we pray. We have to deal with countless distractions when we pray and as a result we may manage to utter a few words to God and when we're done we don't really feel that we've gained much from it. Our hearts aren't effected – we don't sense any peace or joy or communion with God and usually we're in a hurry to devote ourselves to the business of the day.

Lloyd-Jones raises a heart searching challenge when he points out that what we really are spiritually can be determined by our private praying – when there's nobody else around – when it's just you and God – this is where we can best determine what we're made of spiritually. And I dare say this is where many perhaps most of us need to develop the most improvement in our walk with the Lord. This prayer is designed to help us do that very thing.

It's important to remember the context of this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. We have seen already in this 6<sup>th</sup> chapter that the Lord places a strong emphasis on steering the subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven away from trying to be men-pleasers in their religious exercises in order that their focus may be properly placed on God Himself. We aim to please God, in other words, and not to flaunt our religion before others in such a way that we try to impress them.

And so the setting for the Lord's prayer is given to us in v. 5 *When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are; they pray to be seen of men.* V. 6 – *When thou prayest, enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father, who is in secret.* V. 7 – *When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye, therefore, like unto them.*

There's the setting for the Lord's prayer and you may recall when we looked at these verses a couple of weeks ago the thing that I sought to emphasize was that the key to right praying is closing in with God. We are not confined to praying privately – we are not required to enter into a closet – although the practice is certainly allowable especially if that's what it takes to close in with God – but the aim behind our praying must be to close in with God and it is in connection with the practice of shutting everything else out and shutting ourselves in with God that Christ then teaches us to use the Lord's prayer.

Notice the words of v. 9 *After this manner, therefore, pray ye*. The term *therefore* takes us back to the previous verses. It's as if Christ is saying – *Don't pray like the hypocrites or the heathen, learn, instead, to close in with God and in connection with closing in with God after this manner pray ye*.

What I would like to do this morning, then, is to look at the opening words of the Lord's prayer within the theme of closing in with God. Simply put – Christ teaches that:

## We Must Close in With God

The Lord's prayer teaches us how to close in with God. I want to look at the opening words of the prayer – *Our Father which art in heaven* and draw the lessons from these words as to how we close in with God. If you would close in with God you must do so, first of all:

### I. By Resisting Pride

Pride is the key thing that is being addressed in the previous verses. Those that flaunt their religion before others in order to be seen of men are like proud Pharisees. It's interesting to note in Lk. 18 that when the proud Pharisee is being compared to the contrite publican the text tells us that *the Pharisee stood, and prayed thus with himself* (Lk. 18:10). Isn't that interesting? It doesn't say he prayed to God the text tells us rather that he prayed with himself. Evidently he was so impressed with himself that he loved to hear himself pray to God. Could anything be more vain?

Now this issue of pride can be effectively dealt with by giving due consideration to the very first word of the Lord's prayer. Would you note that it begins *Our Father which art in heaven*. The very first word in this prayer recognizes a certain equality among the followers of Christ. He is not merely my Father or your Father – He is *our* Father which art in heaven.

Now, I'm not one of those who in our political culture today strive so much for equality between people that it's become politically correct to eliminate every barrier that distinguishes people from each other. You know what I'm talking about – there's to be no differences between races or between genders. We're to make no distinctions between old people and young people – experienced people or inexperienced people. We should all be the same and we should all have the same and I suppose if you follow this philosophy to it's conclusion there would be no room for individual identity of any kind. That's not the kind of equality I'm referring to.

There are differences between people and between Christians. The Lord sees fit to bestow gifts on some that he doesn't bestow on others. There are differences between our levels of sanctification. There are differences in our spiritual habits. There are varying degrees to our levels of knowledge and experience in our Christian lives. The differences between Christians are so vast that Paul equates them to the various parts of a body which serve different functions. Some are more visible than others and each part is essential but they are also different.

The equality that I'm referring to is the equality of our sonship. This is something that we all share in common. You may know more than I know. You may pray more than I pray. You may have better and more consistent spiritual habits than I have. These things do not make you more of a son than I am. He is *our* Father which art in heaven.

We both lay hold of God as our Father based on a merit outside ourselves. We have both received forgiveness of our sins. We have both been clothed in the righteousness of Christ and Christ's righteousness cannot be improved upon. Neither do we know our sonship in varying degrees. As sons of God, God loves us. *Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God* (1Jn. 3:1). And as sons of God we may say that God could love us no less for our failures neither does He love us any more for our successes. He loves us as His children and we are exalted and blessed to say *Our Father which art in heaven*.

And so the best way to avoid flaunting our piety before each other is to simply acknowledge in our praying that by virtue of Christ's life and Christ's death we call upon God as *Our Father which art in heaven*. Christ expressed this principle later in His earthly ministry when He said *Be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your Father upon the earth: for one is your Father which is in heaven* (Mt. 23:8,9).

And when we realize how exalted and how blessed we are to call God our Father – then there will simply be no place for the kind of vain spiritual competition that tempts one to think that he's holier than thou. We'll be free from the kind of vain spiritual competition that endeavors to impress others. Indeed, we'll rejoice in the gifts that God gives to others. We'll rejoice in the increased knowledge that one may have over us. We'll see ourselves as the beneficiaries of those that serve God with their gifts and we'll encourage and build up each other rather than compete with each other.

The first thing that must be overcome and resisted, therefore, is our pride. God resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble. If we would close in with God and enjoy the benefit to true praying then we begin by acknowledging the equality we share in calling upon God as *Our Father which art in heaven*.

Would you consider with me next that we close in with God:

## II. By Reckoning on Our Relationship to Him

Lloyd-Jones makes a good observation when he points out that in most cases the answer to every prayer we utter can found in the truth of this statement being impressed on our hearts – the truth that God is our Father. It's as if the beginning of the Lord's prayer takes the form of God answering even before we call on Him.

And doesn't the truth of God being our Father answer to so much that our hearts cry for? Our longing is to be closer to God. Since the day we were reconciled to Him through Christ this has been our longing and in keeping with this longing Paul writes in Gal. 4:6 *And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father*.

This is the language of intimacy. We're not taught by Christ to address God as our King or our Ruler. We're not taught to address Him as One who is far removed from us. It is true that our God does rule over all and it's true that He is quite beyond us because He

transcends the entire universe. But we're not instructed to approach him with the kind of fear with which Esther approached the king of Persia – hoping that the scepter would be held out to her so that she wouldn't be put to death.

We are taught, rather, to approach God within the intimacy of our relationship to Him. *The Father Himself loveth you* Christ says in Jn. 16:7 *because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.* The next time you read through the gospel of John pay attention to the love that exists between the God the Father and God the Son. All that Christ did was in keeping with His love for His Father. And the Father's testimony in the gospels is that He is well pleased with His Son. There is a bond of love within the Godhead that we can hardly grasp.

And in the grace of salvation we are brought into that bond of love. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. Christ so loved us that He shed His blood for us. *Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end* (Jn. 13:1). And now *The Father Himself loveth you because ye have loved me* we just read in Jn. 16:7. The opening words of this prayer, therefore, should fill our hearts to overflowing because we are taught to approach God with the blessed recognition that He loves us and we love Him.

Think about it for a moment. What did it cost God in order for us to pray *Our Father which art in heaven*? This is not an invocation we could take to our lips in and of ourselves. We are aliens and sinners by nature and the devil was our Father. We were not children of God but children of disobedience and children of wrath according to Paul in Eph. 2. *But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ* (Eph. 2:5). And in making us alive in His Son He also brought us into the family of His Son. *For ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ* (Gal. 3:26).

So the right way to approach God and the most blessed way to approach God is by reckoning upon our relationship to Him and to enter into His presence in the blessing of our sonship. This opening invocation is something, therefore, that we have to approach slowly. We do well to collect ourselves, so to speak, and to contemplate the blessing of calling on God as our Father. It may well be that when you utilize the Lord's prayer you may not for a time get beyond these opening words.

There are times when you come to God in prayer with so many anxious thoughts running through your head that you hardly know where to start. It becomes a difficult task to even sort out all the things that are pressing your heart. You bear so many burdens and some of them run very deep. Or you may come with great perplexities as to what God is doing and why. You don't understand the purpose behind your trials and afflictions. You don't understand why God would allow certain things to happen to you and you hardly know how to express your true heart desires to God.

May I suggest that you slow down enough to reflect on the way you are taught to approach God. Pause long enough to take two deep breaths and then try to take in just a

portion of all that is implied by this opening invocation *Our Father which art in heaven*. You may discover that if you take the time to reckon upon what is implied in that statement that you'll find a pressure relief valve set off in your soul. You'll feel a heavy weight lifted from your shoulders before you even go any further in prayer. It's true what Lloyd-Jones says – this invocation is also the answer to your prayers.

If God is your Father through Christ, you see – then all is well. Everything that has been dispensed to you has come from a loving heavenly Father. Everything you need can and will be given because God is your Father. And nothing can ever forfeit that standing. There have been times, I'm sure, when you haven't felt worthy of calling God your Father. How often do we become prodigals who drift away from God.

One of the blessings of having this prayer inscripturated is that we can never undue the truth of it. You sin – but still the word says *Our Father which art in heaven*. You flee from God for a time – still the word says *Our Father which art in heaven*. If your status could ever change – if your sonship could ever be lost, Christ would never have committed such an invocation to the inspiration of the word of God. The reason Christ could commit this statement to the sacred scriptures is because your sins could never out do what Christ Himself accomplished by His atoning death. And so, as a believer in Jesus Christ, God is your Father – He's my Father – He's *our Father which art in heaven*.

We see, then, that what we need in order to close in with God is to resist the kind of pride that leads to flaunting our piety before each other. We accomplish this by recognizing the equality of the statement – He's our *Father which art in heaven*. We close in with God by reckoning upon all that this glorious statement entails – He's our *Father which art in heaven*. It remains for us to consider that we close in with God:

### III. By Practicing Reverence

If the term *Father* places emphasis on the nearness of God then the fact that He's *our Father which art in heaven* places emphasis on His transcendence. He is beyond us. He defies our comprehension. His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts just as certainly as the heavens are higher than the earth.

He is the Father of all creation and the fact that He is in heaven signifies that He rules over everything that is in the world below. Nothing escapes His dominion – not even a sparrow can fall to the ground without His permission. The nations are before Him as nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing and vanity (Isa. 40:17).

But not only does the phrase *our Father which art in heaven* suggest His exalted rule over the world but it also speaks of the purity of His character. It is in heaven, after all, that the angels cover their faces as they sing *Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory* (Isa. 6:3). Heaven is the place where worship is conducted perfectly. Heaven is the place where God is served instantly. Heaven sets the standard for what we want to see on earth – as we'll see later in the petition *thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*.

So while we approach God openly and freely because He is our Father – we also approach Him with deep reverence because He is our Father which art in heaven. I'm afraid that in our casual culture not enough is made of the truth that He's our Father which art in heaven. Not enough is made of His sovereign majesty or His pristine purity. Instead of striving to aspire to His character there are many that would instead pull God down to our level of degradation. This cultural mindset is reflected all too often in the endless stream of Bible translations that seek to condescend to the gutter language of our day.

It's also reflected by the casual approach that so many take to church and to the worship of God in general. Church is not viewed as a place where we present ourselves to God, it's viewed too often as a place where we become spectators and we expect to be amused or entertained.

Let's never forget that while God is our Father – He is nevertheless our Father which art in heaven. This should not prevent us from coming to Him. I am not now seeking to contradict everything I said in my previous point. I'm only saying that our approach to our Father must be tempered by the reverence or the respect for which He is worthy.

Far from hindering our approach to God – our knowledge of His character should increase our confidence in coming to Him. After all He has the authority and power to bring about change. It's interesting to see in the realm of politics how often change has become the theme – each candidate professing to be the one that bring about needed change. I'm afraid that none of them could really bring about the change that's needed in the hearts of men.

But God can bring about such change. He is, after all, the ruler of all Creation and the ruler of all nations. *Pr 21:1 The king's heart [is] in the hand of the LORD, [as] the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.*

I love the way the early church approached God at the time they were being persecuted. In Acts 4 we have the account of the apostles being apprehended and placed in custody. And the next day they're warned and they're threatened not to teach or preach in the name of Christ. Their response upon their release was to go to God in prayer. And in the place of prayer they begin with the acknowledgement: *Lord, thou art God, who hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is* (Acts 4:24).

They go on in their prayer to draw from Psalm 2 how the heathen rage and the kings of the earth take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed. They're approaching God not only as their Father – but as their Father in heaven. And while their approach is tempered by the proper reverence they are nevertheless able to approach boldly and to seek God for the boldness they need to continue to speak for Christ.

And 4:31 we're told *And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.* This is what we need and this is what we can expect when we close in with God. When we resist pride and reckon upon our relationship to God through Christ and have the confidence to seek Him for great things that we know not – our hearts will be

shaken – shaken with the reality that this God is our God – shaken with the truth that this God is *Our Father which art in heaven*. And in the shaking of our hearts we'll gain confidence that God is with us and God is for us. We'll gain the grace to submit to God because we'll see every circumstance of life being dispensed from our Father who loves us.

I trust then this morning, that you'll be enabled to close in with God. I hope and pray that the Lord Himself will stamp the truth on your heart that through Christ we can close in with God as *our Father which art in heaven*.