

“Our Father in Heaven”
Accessing the Inaccessible
(Part 1 of *Lord’s Prayer* Sermon Series)

I love the internet! I now can access information that fifteen years ago would have been difficult to find or a long time in arriving. For example, I no longer have to wait for the Seminary library to snail-mail me books and papers on subjects I’m interested in. If I can’t simply download the resource to my computer, the library staff will scan the information I want and email it to me. Perhaps you like the internet because when you’re stuck for a meal idea, a few clicks will generate enough recipes to keep you fed for a month. Or if you want to know what the weather is like in Aberdeen, SD, you don’t have to have family there to tell you, you can just check the internet.

The internet though does have its limitations. You still can’t access it everywhere, and it can’t handle all of your requests. For example a medical website might tell you why your throat hurts but it can’t print out a prescription for you to get medicine that will make you feel better. You’ll still have to see a doctor for that. Is there anything better than the internet that allows us to freely access the help we need for life’s tasks? There is. **Prayer.**

Today we’re starting a sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer and in this sermon we’re going to look at the opening words, “**Our Father in heaven...**” In so doing we’ll learn that **through prayer we’re accessing the inaccessible**. Let’s find out what that means for your life.

Perhaps we should begin by defining what prayer is. A pastor once defined prayer in this way - prayer is faith finding a voice. Prayer is not the recitation of a formula as if the Lord’s Prayer is a magical incantation that anyone can say to stave off evil. God listens only to the prayers of those who have put their trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and he only pays attention to the prayers of those Christians who are confident that he is listening to them. The opening words of the Lord’s Prayer teach us how to express such trust. Jesus said: “...*when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.* ⁸ *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* ⁹ *This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven...’* (Matthew 6:7-9a).

What’s striking about the Lord’s Prayer is how simple it is. That simplicity begins with the opening address: “Our Father in heaven.” Luke records a version of the Lord’s Prayer that begins with *one* word: “**Father.**” Jesus taught a way to pray that the Jews weren’t used to. When King Hezekiah once prayed he addressed God this way: “*O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth...*” (Isaiah 37:16) Hezekiah sounds a bit like a ring master announcing the next wrestling card. God certainly deserves any accolades and titles of respect we can think up but he’s not impressed just because we’ve said them. Anyway, “Our Father in heaven” says all we need to know and believe about God when we approach him in prayer. Let’s unpack those words.

We’ll start with the word “**Father.**” Tell me, if you bumped into former President Bush (Herbert Walker Bush), would you ask him if you could borrow \$10? You would think nothing of such a request if your name was George, George Bush. George’s father may have been the former President of the U.S. but he’s also still his dad and therefore George should feel comfortable turning to Present H.W. Bush for anything he needs, morning, noon, or night. Likewise because God is our Father we should feel comfortable turning to him for all of our needs no matter what time of day. Although you wouldn’t think of going to your boss dressed in your PJs to ask for a raise you can approach the God of the universe like that when you say your prayers at night because he is your Father.

It’s great to know that God is approachable just like a good dad but there were often requests we made of our earthly father that he was unable to fulfill because he was only human. That time you broke your arm you wished Dad could take the pain away. Or the time that you were in the school play you wished Dad could be there but he was busy working. To remind us that God isn’t ever unavailable or lacking power like our human fathers are, Jesus invites us to address God as “our Father in *heaven.*”

Actually what Jesus said was “**our Father in the heavens.**” Why the plural? Is there more than one heaven? The word “heaven” refers to the blue sky where birds fly but it also includes the black outer space where planets race. Our Father inhabits both and more for not even the highest heavens can contain him (1 Kings 8:27). But by addressing our Father as the one who is in the heavens we’re not so much suggesting that this is where God is, as in he’s “up there” but not “down here.” No, God fills the heavens *and* the earth so that he’s “up there” and “down here” at the same time. We pray “Our Father in the heavens” to remind us how great God must be to fill such space. Psalm 115 explains clearly what it means to confess that our Father is in heaven. The psalmist writes: “*Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him*” (Psalm 115:3).

The address, “Our Father in *heaven*” is more impressive than saying, “My father is at the Pentagon.” Some of the world’s most powerful men work at the Pentagon. They have the capability to eavesdrop on what I’m saying right now and if they wanted to, these Pentagon officials could fire a missile through the roof and make our day miserable. Wouldn’t you hesitate to make mad someone whose father works at the Pentagon?

Ah, but dear Christian, *your* Father is in the heavens! He doesn’t need a network of satellite and spies to gather intelligence and to do his bidding. Nor can any power withstand him. “*Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him*” (Psalm 115:3). And get this, *you* please him! “I do? God couldn’t have been pleased with what I thought about my teacher for giving me that test. He can’t be pleased with me when I keep using his name like a filler word. Why, I can’t even say a prayer to him without my mind wandering. Such inattentiveness can’t be pleasing to him!” You’re right. These things don’t please God. That’s why he washed you clean of your sins in baptism before taking you into his family – just like you wash those clothes you bought at the Salvation Army Store before wearing them. And just as you’ll wash those clothes again and again after each wearing, likewise our Father continues to wash us clean of our sins by working repentance in our heart – that’s sorrow over our sins and faith in his only-begotten Son, Jesus who provided the sin-cleansing detergent with the blood he shed on the cross.

“**Our Father in heaven.**” What a way to begin a prayer! With a few words we draw God down to us by calling him “Father” yet are reminded of his continuing greatness by confessing that he is our Father “in the heavens.” Every time you begin the Lord’s Prayer you should be reminded that you’re praying to the one who is eager *and* able to help. (Joel Fredrich)

So does this mean that God will give us whatever we ask? No, not even your earthly fathers would do that even if they could. A wise father will only give his child what’s good for him/her. In fact by teaching us to address God as our Father in “heaven” Jesus may have been foreshadowing the kind of things we are to ask for in the Lord’s Prayer - things that are more “*heavenly*” in nature than “*earthly*.” We’ll talk more about that in our subsequent sermons.

There is, however, one word that we haven’t focused on yet: “**our.**” Jesus teaches us to address God as “our” Father to remind us that we’re not an only child in this family. Therefore we won’t want to act like a spoiled brat and only pray for the things that would be good for *us*. When you approach your heavenly Father in prayer do so mindful of others’ needs. Jesus modeled this when on the night he was betrayed he prayed for himself for five verses in John 17 while for 20 verses he prayed for his disciples and for us!

One way you can better pray for others is by using the fingers on your hand as a guide. When you look at your pinky, your weakest finger, pray for those who are sick or whose faith may be weak. When you look at your ring finger, pray for those who are married. Your middle finger is usually the biggest finger so pray for those in authority – our mayor, our president, and our church council. And then since your index finger is used to point, pray for those who point the way to heaven. Pray for me, your called worker. Pray also for our Sunday School teachers. Then, only then when you get to your thumb, pray for those who are near and dear to you and pray for yourself. Try this memory hook to put into practice the truth we confess when we pray, “*Our Father in heaven.*”

When my internet goes down I stop everything to get it up and running again because I feel cut off without it. Isn’t that how I should feel about my prayer life? Shouldn’t I also get antsy when hours pass and I haven’t checked in with God, just as I get antsy when it’s been hours since I’ve checked my email? We would feel more that way when we remember what a privilege it is to pray. When we pray we are accessing what was once inaccessible for sinners. Thanks to Jesus we can address God as “Our Father in heaven.” The Almighty God is your father and mine. He delights in hearing from his children and is eager and able to help. Approach him often in prayer. Amen.