

## The Family Room of Prayer

### Matthew 6:5-15

My Heart, Christ's Home

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If you have been led to believe that prayer is a strictly personal affair, something that you do in the privacy of your own inner sanctum, note that the pronouns in the Lord's Prayer are plural, not singular: "OUR Father who art in heaven..." "Give US this day OUR daily bread." "Forgive US our debts...lead US not into temptation, but deliver US from evil." According to Jesus, then, PRAYER IS, FIRST AND FOREMOST, A FAMILY AFFAIR. Yes, Jesus tells us to go into our room and shut the door when we pray, but that's a warning against egotistical prayer, the kind of public oration that makes bystanders say, "My, can't that person pray! She must be very close to God!" There is nothing egotistical about the Lord's Prayer. We offer this prayer alongside others, in behalf of others, and with the support of others.

Some tell me they don't pray much because it seems so selfish. "Why should I bother God with my petty concerns when there are so many overwhelming problems elsewhere in the world?" But that's just the point. We pray for others and not just for ourselves. We pray for victims in the Middle East, and for peace wherever bullets fly. We pray for AIDS sufferers in Nairobi and Washington, and for people who lost their loved ones in Madrid and Iraq. We intercede in behalf of colleagues who lost their job or their marriage. We take home the Sunday bulletin prayer list and pray for the sick and the grieving on the prayer list.

I have my own prayer list to remind me that prayer is, first and foremost, a family affair. The list contains the names of my wife, our brothers and their families, our children and their spouses, and our grandchildren. All the members of our church staff are on the list, and so are the Pastor Nominating Committees in this church and in our church in Arizona. Our church's candidates for ministry are there, and so are the names of people who ask me to pray for them. When I've finished with that list I turn to our church's membership directory, and I pray for you, praying through four pages of names a day. My prayer list is both a guide for intercessory prayer and a guard against selfish prayer, because prayer is, first and foremost, a family affair.

SECONDLY, PRAYER IS A CONCISE ENDEAVOR. "Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them." (6:7-8) Jesus then illustrates his point with a prayer that is so concise that contains just fifty-four words in the version we pray on Sunday mornings. Moreover, the Lord's Prayer takes only twenty-six seconds to recite.

The point is, we need not harangue God. We need not shout to get God's attention, or cry to tug at God's emotions. "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him," Jesus says. What God does not know until we ask is that we are ready to admit our need, that we are open to God's help, and that we are willing to accept God's guidance.

Even we human parents can't do much for our children unless our children are open to our help. One of my favorite comic strips is called "Zits." It's about teenagers searching for their identity, and parents trying to guide them through the tangled maze called adolescence. In one of the strips Jeremy's mother is tearing her hair and saying to her husband, "I prod, I question, I challenge, I probe, and all I get from Jeremy is a hi-slam." "What's a hi-slam?" he asks. The next frame shows Jeremy climbing the stairs to his bedroom and mumbling a halfhearted "Hi." Then he slams the door, and his father says, "Oh!"

You parents know all about hi-slams. You wait for your children to open up, to ask, to confide in you, to admit they need you. There's nothing you won't do for them if only they'll ask, but sometimes all you get is a hi-slam. Our Heavenly Father is also waiting to hear from us, and it doesn't take much, just an open mind and a tightly focused, concise appeal for help.

THIRDLY, THE LORD'S PRAYER CONTAINS COMMONPLACE REQUESTS. This prayer doesn't deal with heroic struggles. Instead, it's all about the stuff you need to get up and get going on a rainy Monday morning. It's about food, forgiveness, and guidance. It's about the commonplace needs of ordinary people, struggling to make it through another day.

If you watch Biography on A&E, if you read People Magazine or Sports Illustrated, if you are enamored by sports figures, movie stars, even by prominent Christian leaders, you may get the impression that you don't count with God unless you make it big. But Jesus doesn't read People Magazine, nor does he give out his private phone number only to people like Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King. Jesus teaches us to pray, not to be great or famous or heroic, but to be what Lewis Smedes calls "a pretty good person." No one can be perfectly good, but with God's help we can all be pretty good, and that's why we turn to God again and again for food to keep us healthy, forgiveness to overcome our guilt, and guidance to set us going in the right direction. Here is what Smedes says about it: "Few of us are ticketed for pure sainthood. Goodness and badness will mingle in the veins of the best of us until we die. At one moment we will be more on the good side. At another moment we will feel a push toward the bad. None of us is going to get beyond our need for the grace of God and the charity of our friends. But with some help from both, we can become the sort of people who lean toward goodness. In other words, pretty good people." ("A Pretty Good Person," pg. 174)

FINALLY, THIS PRAYER IS SATURATED WITH OUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S PRESENCE. We do not pray to a celestial CEO whose schedule is so tight that he can't give us five minutes until late in the afternoon on April 29. We do not pray to a distant deity whose bifocals may or may not be able to pick out our planet among the billions of galaxies. We pray to our heavenly Father who is right here, right now, in the power of the Spirit, genuinely wanting and waiting to hear from us.

For some of you, the image of God as Father is troubling. Your father was autocratic, absent from the home, even abusive. So you don't find it helpful to pray to God as your heavenly Father. Then let me repeat something I heard Kenneth Bailey say. In Luke 15,

Jesus likens God to a woman who loses a coin and then sweeps the entire house until she finds it. In the same chapter Jesus likens God to a man who welcomes his errant son home from the far country. Then Dr. Bailey said this: "God is a Father who behaves like a Mother." All the stereotypical qualities we ascribe to good mothers and fathers are resident in our heavenly Parent: the forcefulness of a father and the compassion of a mother, a father's advice to act on and a mother's shoulder to cry on. Parenthetically, please note that Bailey is talking about stereotypes. I know as you know that fathers and mothers cannot be neatly pigeonholed. Yet if we can agree that in Jesus' day these stereotypes were prevalent, then Bailey's point is valid. God is a Father who behaves like a Mother, so when you pray you can call on one or the other or both, and be absolutely true to the God who desires nothing more than to help us become pretty good persons.

How do I know God wants and waits to help us? Because in the Lord's Prayer twenty-four words refer to God while thirty refer to us. In the mind of Jesus you and I have a clear majority. When it comes to prayer, God is important, but you are more important still.