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The National Presbyterian Church

## The Lord's Prayer: First Things First

Matthew 6:1-15

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In the first weeks of this new year, leading all the way up to Palm Sunday and Easter, we're thinking about prayer. During the season of Lent, the immediate weeks before Palm Sunday and Easter, we're going to be thinking about different prayers prayed by different faithful servants of God (and recorded in scripture). But between now and then we are looking line by line at the Lord's Prayer – the prayer that our Lord Jesus teaches his followers which you'll find in the 6th Chapter of the gospel according to Saint Matthew. It's right in the middle of an extended body of Jesus' teaching that we call the Sermon on the Mount (Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's gospel) and right in the middle of the sermon, in Chapter 6, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray; he longs for his disciples to pray and to learn how to pray.

The prayer begins with the words "Our Father" – "Our Father Who art in Heaven". Jesus refers to God as 'Father,' which has nothing to do with God as male rather than female (God clearly transcends all gender roles: we are all made in the image of God, male and female made in the image of God). But this word is powerful because it reminds us that God is not merely a 'great cosmic force' out there, a vague cosmic force, but as father, we come before a God who is infinitely personal, the source of our life. The God Jesus asks us to pray to, is one who longs to relate to us, to call us into relationship with him as our redeemer, our creator, our friend; one who wants to enter into a relationship with us that nothing can break, that will last through this life and on through eternity. This is the God to whom we pray and who calls us to pray.

Some of you may have been watching television this past week. I don't get to see it that often but this week I watched NCIS which I understand is one of the most popular shows on television. In this particular show Ziva who is one of the NCIS agents who comes

from Israel is nearby when her father is shot, and she comes running up to him and she cries out in Hebrew (you may have seen the episode but missed the words) she cries out in Hebrew “*Abba! Abba!*” which is both Hebrew and Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke) for “Daddy.”

There is no question that when Jesus taught the Lord’s Prayer originally in Aramaic, translated in our gospels into Greek, that he said to his disciples that when they talk to God they are to call God “Abba, Daddy.” It is to be that familiar with God in Heaven. We’re not to become disrespectful or contemptuous of God (our Father is still the one who is in Heaven, above all!!) But the familiar, the relational is still central.

This is what God tells us to do, to enter into this kind of intimate, hugging relationship with Almighty God. And this reminds us of the first principle of prayer that we looked at last Sunday and to which people are so often blind. What you often find in books about prayer is that they skip stage one. They skip step one! *Step one is simply to acknowledge that prayer is the vehicle by which we enter into relationship with God.* It is not first of all about “asking and getting” though I’ve seen amazing requests answered by God. But first of all, if you want to get prayer right, if you want to continue in prayer and find prayer effective, prayer is the door by which we enter into a relationship with God. And when you pray, no matter what you say, if you pray consistently your relationship with God will grow. And prayer to that extent will work.

Prayer is social media, prayer is Facebook. Prayer is the phone line that is open to God when we call. Prayer is emailing, texting. How critical these are in our society today. They are at the center of everything. We want to communicate with others, be in relationship with others and God says first, “You can be in a relationship with me. I open the door for you to do this.” And this is the miracle: How is it that the God who made us has time to answer our email? Facebook us whenever we say “Father, hear my prayer”? This is the miracle on which everything else depends.

So that’s what we looked at last time – the opportunity, privilege and miracle of connecting with God. But having said that, if that’s the first thing about prayer the second thing is unquestionably the fact that when we pray to God we certainly do ask for things, and we do so with some kind of expectation that we might get what we ask for. Asking and getting are certainly part of prayer – but it’s not what prayer is first

of all about: it's relationship and connecting first; then asking and getting, second.

After all God is parent, God is father. Every child asks things of a parent. God is strong and we are weak. God is wise and we are foolish. It was once said that Abraham Lincoln said *"I've been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day."* We have all been in that place where we had nowhere else to turn and we knew that there was insufficiency in ourselves, and we turned to God.

The bulk of the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples as he trains them in praying – has to do with the kind of help that we need and the kind of requests that we are to make before our God who is our Father in Heaven. So it's there. But it's second: the expectation that God should hear and answer our requests.

But as soon as we look at those requests in the Lord's Prayer we come face to face with another reality, and that is this: that *the kinds of things that Jesus says we are to pray for may not be the kinds of things that immediately come to our minds when we have a prayer request to offer to God.* So if you look at the prayer you find that Jesus doesn't teach us to pray "Our Father Who art in Heaven, may the Redskins win." Though perhaps if we'd all done that, who knows what would have happened last week. But that's not what it says. Or to pray like a man called John Ward. I just came across this prayer this week. He was a member of the British Parliament in the early 1880s. When his house was cleaned up after he died they found this handwritten little prayer which goes like this:

*"Oh Lord enable the banks to answer all their bills and make all debtors good men.*

*Give prosperous voyage and safe return to my ship the Mermaid Sloop because I have not insured it.*

*And make all my servants so honest and faithful (isn't that nice! but here's the reason) that they may always attend to my interests and never cheat me out of my property night and day."*

Well those aren't the kinds of things that Jesus says are to be at the center, the focal point, to take first place in our prayers when we ask God for something and expect something in return.

In fact when we look at the Lord's Prayer there are no requests, no requests about us in the whole first half of the prayer. In the first three requests out of six requests total, there are no requests about us! All of them are still about God and about our relationship with God. So that when we speak to God, connect with God, get on line with God and make requests, the requests that Jesus says are to be at the focal point, the center of our attention, are still to be about God. See for yourself! How does it begin?

Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed be *Thy* name. *Thy* kingdom come, *Thy* will be done.

What's the word that screams out to you? I've placed the emphasis on it! It's the word 'Thy'. It's repeated three times and actually if we were to go back to the Greek and Matthew's gospel and if we were to unravel those requests and preserve the word order in translation, we would find that at the end of each of those requests is the word Thine or Thy or Yours. That is,

*"May the name that is hallowed be Thine. May the kingdom that comes be Thine. May the will that is done be Thine."* That's how it reads: Thine! Thine! Thine! Not, mine! Mine! Mine! But Thine, Thine, Thine! repeated again and again in poetic fashion so that it would be remembered. This is what would be remembered by Jesus' followers: Thine!

That's what the requests are about -- the first three. As if Jesus is saying to us that before you get to anything else, "You will not pray rightly, if you don't sort out your priorities and put first things first," and "God is first!" So ask that God be made the center of your attention, the most special person of all to you! Before you get to anything else, come to grips with the fact that this world is not about you or me, but about God. That's the image in our Scripture passage from Revelation 4: the world revolves around God, not around us.

It's about eleven years ago now that Rick Warren wrote his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*,<sup>1</sup> with a now famous first paragraph about the purpose of our lives:

It's not about you.

It's far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet you must begin with God. You were born by God's purpose and for God's purpose. You were born by God's purpose and for God's purpose.

It's not about you!

Where does he get this? Well, he gets it from the whole tenor of scripture; but he could also get it from Jesus in the Lord's Prayer which begins with its focus on Almighty God, the sovereign ruler of the universe.

And where does Jesus get it as he teaches this prayer to his disciples? I think he gets it from no other place than the Ten Commandments, those commandments given by God through Moses to his ancient people Israel.

Half of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), five of those Commandments have to do with relationships with other people. They have to do with families, with murder, with adultery, with theft, with lies – getting our relationships right with one another.

But what are the first three Commandments about? The first three Commandments, like the first three petitions in the Lord's Prayer are about getting our relationship with God right first of all; choosing our priorities; putting first things first.

- You shall have no other gods before me. Get that right.
- You shall have no idols: don't make God in your image, but allow God to remake you in His image.
- You shall not take my name in vain, making "wrongful use" of the name of God.

Do you see the parallel? *"Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed, honored, special, above all others, be Your name."*

God's 'name', of course is not just about God's name! This commandment is not just about swearing; it may be partly about that, but it's far more than that.

God's 'name' is God's person. God's 'name' is God's very being. God's 'name' is God's reputation. It's everything God stands for. It's like your family name. A parent may say "This is our family name; do not abuse our good name."

It's like a brand name given to a company or a corporation. Millions of dollars are spent developing a brand name and then protecting that name because when that name goes everything else goes as well; and you and I know of companies and corporations whose names once flashed across every screen and they're gone. Gone. Disappeared because the name was emptied of its significance.

*"May the person who matters most to us," (this is what we are to pray for, says Jesus) "May the reputation that we will defend, may the purpose we pursue may the name we hallow more than any other be Yours, God's."*

That's what Jesus calls his followers to pray. Enter into relationship, connect with God, ask. But for what? That God be at the center of our very being. Ask repeatedly, three times in different ways, at the center of our very being.

Is this what you want? Is this what you pray for? Is this our concern *that God undermine our view of the world and replace it systematically, consistently with another view of the world which is centered on God?* If this were our prayer for our lives, then our world, our church, our nation, would indeed be transformed.

One of my favorite authors is Robert Coles, professor of psychiatry at Harvard (I don't know if he's still there. He must be around 80 years old just now). In 1999 he wrote a wonderful book called *The Secular Mind*. And in *The Secular Mind*<sup>2</sup> he includes some interviews with other people, some he conducts himself, other conducted by others. One of these was conducted by his friend Carlos Williams in Patterson, New Jersey. Carlos Williams is interviewing an Italian grandmother who came as an immigrant to this country when she was 15 years of age. And this is how Carlos Williams reports the conversation:

It's become different here going to church than it was when she was in Italy, when she first came here. She said she used to sit there and talk to God and try to figure out what God wanted and tried to please God. Now she says she mostly thinks about what is going on in her life and her kids' lives and she asks God to make it better. She said to me,

*"It used to be that I prayed to God that I would learn what God wanted from me and how God wanted me to behave. I wanted God's help to be that kind of person, the kind God wanted. But now I pray to God that God help us with this problem or that. It used to be when I prayed to God I was talking to God. And now it seems as if it's me talking to myself and I'm only asking God to help out with things."*

See the transformation that's taken place? It used to be that God was at the center and I was bringing my life into God's sphere. Now I'm at the center and I'm asking God to come into different parts of my life.

Now in and of itself that's how it's going to be from time to time, there's no question about it. God surrounds us: we need God to enter our lives

as they are. But what Jesus teaches us to do is to move away from that model (which after all is the model of a tiny little child) and to grow up into the place where we realize that we are not the center, but that God is. And we now want to bring our lives – all we are, all we have and all that we think, into God’s realm to be reshaped and refashioned by God. That’s what the Lord’s Prayer, the first half of it, is all about. That God be our first priority, first things first. God on center stage.

I know of only one way to get there. There may be many other ways to get there but one way is essential if, in fact, we’re going to get there, if we are going to be a part of the answer of this particular prayer that Jesus teaches us to pray: **and that way is by making deliberate time for God.**

Go back to the Ten Commandments. The fourth Commandment comes on rapidly after the first three: One: God being first, no other gods before God. Two: No idols. Three: No taking God’s name in vain – Then Four: Keep the Sabbath day holy. That is, “Make time for God!!” (and for others), but, “Make time!” If we don’t make deliberate time it won’t happen. It won’t happen.

You can’t Facebook somebody, you can’t write an email unless you sit down at the desk, turn on the computer, pull out your cell phone, and deliberately do something *in which you exclude whatever else is going on for a second*. It must be deliberate, if only for a few minutes. It must be deliberate, or it will not happen.

- The Sabbath Day is *one day in a week*. You are here – I’m in a sense preaching to the choir, but in our society the day is rapidly gone. That whole idea that we will give a day to God, no matter what else is on our list, is an idea that is disappearing rapidly – but the commandment still stands.
- But what about *time every day* for God? I don’t really care if it’s five hours or five minutes.

***The simple act of stopping and placing our lives within the gaze of God for God to reorder is so critical, if this prayer is to be answered in part by us.*** In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote these words:

*The very moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. [DR: Is this not true?] And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back. Listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter, life come flowing in.<sup>3</sup>*

You may not think of prayer like that, but that's exactly what it is for, teaches Jesus! It's for "shoving all those forces back." That's what Jesus says we're to pray for. It's for listening to that other voice (when we are silent, or when we open our Bible and read as we pray), it's for "taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter, life come flowing in."

This is what we need to do. It's not put quite so beautifully, but in a little ditty that you might remember. Somebody else wrote this. He said, "I woke up early one morning and rushed right into the day.

I had so much to accomplish that I didn't take time to pray.

Problems tumbled all about me and heavier came each task.

Why doesn't God help I wondered. He said you didn't ask.

I woke up early this morning and I paused before entering the day.

I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to pray."

Deliberate, systematic, not the amount but the fact of doing it, places God first, and is surely the beginning of the answer to that prayer that we are privileged to pray, to enter a relationship with God who says "I am your Father, not just a cosmic force, come on in! Enter my presence! I am there. Connect with me. I'm on-line, now and always, so that our relationship might be tight, not only now but forever. And ask, ask, fire away and ask, but get it right from the outset:

*May the name that is hallowed not be mine but Thine.*

*May the kingdom that comes not be mine but Thine.*

*May the will that is done not be mine but Thine.*

This is a prayer that God wants to answer.

1 Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* Zondervan 2002, 2011, 2012. Grand Rapids, Michigan.

2 Coles, Robert. *The Secular Mind*. Princeton University Press (January 29, 2001).

3 Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. ©1952 C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. Copyright renewed ©1980 C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. HarperCollins 2001.Z

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