



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Abba, Father"
Lord, Teach Us How to Pray:
A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer
Romans 8:12-17
Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes
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Introduction.

Some time ago, I came across the 10 Cardinal Rules for being a dad. Here they are: The later you stay up, the earlier your child will wake up the next morning.

- For a child to become clean, something else must become dirty.
- Toys multiply to fill any space available.
- The longer it takes you to make a meal, the less your child will like it.
- Yours is always the only child who doesn't behave.
- If the shoe fits...it's expensive.
- The surest way to get something done is to tell a child not to do it.
- The gooier the food, the more likely it is to end up on the carpet.
- Backing the car out of the driveway causes your child to have to go to the bathroom.
- The more challenging the child, the more rewarding it is to be a dad...sometimes.

Being a parent is the toughest job on the planet, and the challenges and the rewards of being a dad are some of the greatest we will ever know. How fascinating it is that Jesus would use the image of a Father to teach His disciples how to pray. What can we learn from these opening words in the Lord's Prayer?

I. The Idea of God as Father.

The word used by Jesus for "Father" is the word *abba*. It was an intimate term used by little children for their fathers in ancient Palestine, and it comes close to our English expression of papa or daddy. *Abba* was a word of love and affection, and it is the most tender of the words for father in the Aramaic language. Jesus introduced a revolutionary concept that changed forever the way in which we can envision God.

Some people today don't like the word "Father" as it relates to God because they say it is sexist and that male imagery doesn't carry the full weight of who God is. While it's true that God is neither male nor female and there are a variety of feminine metaphors in Scripture for God which broaden our concept of Him, nevertheless the Lord chose to reveal Himself in this personal way, and Jesus taught us to call God our Father. It provides a personal intimate family expression, and it emphasizes the love God has for His children. Language is important, and we would do well to preserve the manner in which Jesus taught us to address God.

How is it that we are God's children, and why are we given the right to call Him our heavenly Father? Noted Bible scholar Dale Bruner writes about the distinction that Christ has as God's only Son by nature, whereas we are God's children by adoption. Christ and Christ alone is God's Son by right; we are God's children by grace. By means of God's grace we have been adopted and brought into the family of God, and we are given the privilege to call Him Father. Indeed, as Bruner writes, "...when Jesus gives us the

right to call on his Father as our Father, he is passing on to us his own priceless relationship. This is Jesus' greatest gift in the Lord's Prayer."ⁱ

However, for many of us the image of God being our heavenly Father is problematic, because our own experience of our earthly fathers hasn't been a good one. Some of us have dads who were selfish and self-centered, and we didn't feel like they cared for us much. Maybe your dad was an alcoholic, or he left you when you were young. Maybe he had a problem with anger, and you remember many nights crying yourself to sleep at night. Perhaps he was aloof and unaffectionate, or maybe he was always traveling for his work to provide for his family. Some of us were abused by our dads, and the wounds run deep. Maybe you never even met your real earthly father.

My relationship with my own father was a complicated one, and even though I knew he loved me, it was always on his terms and his turf. He was probably an alcoholic, and at various times in his life he was what he referred to as "on" or "off" the wagon. He also had a temper which was scary at times. Then my dad died when I was 22, just when we were beginning to appreciate each other, and it left many unresolved issues for me.

Because of all of this, the name "Father", instead of being rich with warm and happy memories, is often associated by many people with fear and repulsion, anger and hostility, sometimes even hate and scorn. And the tragedy is that in ascribing the title Father to God, we sometimes unconsciously transfer to Him all the hurtful qualities we associate in our minds with our own human fathers. This is what psychologists call transference.

But the fact of the matter is that none of this was in the mind of Jesus when He spoke so sincerely and simply of God as His Father. His view of God was not conditioned by His childhood relationship with Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, but by His own personal identity with God the Father. As God's only begotten Son, He fully knew the true essence of God's character. He understood the beauty and wonder of God's personality. If we are ever to fully appreciate the kind of person God really is, then we must see and experience the Father as Jesus saw and experienced Him.

II. The Love of the Father.

The most outstanding attribute of God the Father is His love. His selfless character is so foreign to our typical ideas about love. Usually we love others only when that love serves our own ends or satisfies our needs to some extent. But with God, His love is unchanging regardless of how we act. His love isn't dependent upon His moods or our good behavior, or even our response to His love. Rather, it is given unconditionally, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us more or love us less than He does right now. How different that is from my love even for those closest to me.

We see a picture of this kind of love in Luke 15 when Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son which involved the touching story of a father and his two sons. The father's attitude toward both boys never altered; it never changed. The prodigal son was disrespectful and cruel to his father, and the dad died a thousand deaths while his son was away living it up in the far country. Not only was the father's money squandered, but also his good name was dragged through the mud.

Yet despite all of this, the father's attitude toward the boy never changed. In spite of all the shame, suffering, scandal and loss, the father's love never diminished. Instead, he had compassion and concern for his son. The father never rejected his son, he never repudiated him, and he simply forgave him and welcomed the boy back home when he returned.

That is the essence of God's love for us. When I pray to my Father in heaven, I am praying as a child of God, and I can know with assurance that as His child I am the object of His affection and constant love. I can know with certainty that His patience and compassion, His mercy and understanding are

always extended to me. In every situation in life, no matter how difficult, I have a quiet assurance that I am His and He is mine, no matter what I do. What a great comfort that is! What an encouragement!

Before Jesus, most people thought of God as someone who was remote, someone who sat in the high and holy place as a stern Judge behind the harsh bar of the law. He was a God people feared. And rightly so! Many Old Testament stories are full of punishment and consequences. But Jesus changed all that when He talked about God as His Father more than 70 times in the gospels. He put our relationship with God in an entirely new light, where God moved from behind the bar of justice and came down to the level of a child, knocking on the door of our hearts and pulling us into the lap of our heavenly Papa.

Do you have a relationship with God that is as tender as that of a child with his/her daddy? You can, and it can start today. Just invite Him into your life, and He'll invite you to climb up in His lap to hold you close and tell you how much He loves you.

III. The Discipline of the Father.

As a parent I have learned that loving my children doesn't mean always giving them what they want. At times love has to be tough, and sometimes the most loving thing I can do is to say "No." The love of a parent for a child is expressed in a variety of ways, including the way of discipline as they help their children grow up to maturity.

The writer to the Hebrews says in the 12th chapter of his letter, "*[Do not forget the] word of encouragement that addresses you as sons [in the book of Proverbs]: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.'* Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ...No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:5-7,11).

Usually, when we hear the word "discipline" we think of the idea of punishment. But that doesn't capture what is meant here. The word that is translated "discipline" is the Greek word *paideia*, and it carries with it the idea of "training, teaching and education." The discipline of the Lord isn't really about His punishment; it's about His teaching and training of us in the school of discipleship.

Part of the role of our heavenly Father is not only to love us, but to love us so much that He wants the best for us and will do everything He can to shape our character into the image of His Son Jesus Christ. Sometimes as a heavenly Father He disciplines His children, which is the process of sanctification the Bible talks about. At times it can be a painful process. It's not a pleasant experience to go through the refining fire. Training is tough. But the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that the discipline is for our own good to help chip away the rough edges of our lives and purge from us the impurity that exists in our hearts.

Parents often say to their kids before they discipline them, "This is gonna hurt me more than it's gonna hurt you." And most kids say to themselves, "Yeah, right!" But in the case of our heavenly Father, it's a true statement. His heart aches with our pain, and I am convinced the Lord sheds empathetic tears when one of His children hurts.

Suffering in the Christian life is never easy, but it can be used by the hand of a providential heavenly Father for our good, when we let Him. And when we go through difficult times God uses these awful experiences to refine us like the precious metal of gold. It's when we have to deal with the brutality of a fallen world and even walk through the valley of the shadow of death that we come to know the unfailing love of the Good Shepherd and learn to lean on His everlasting arms which can sustain us through the toughest times.

The amazing truth we read in Scripture is that even Christ learned obedience to the Father through the things He suffered, and we are invited to join Christ in the fellowship of His sufferings. I read somewhere, "God had only one Son without sin, but never did He have a child without suffering."

Conclusion.

"Our Father." Just two short words, and yet they have a world of meaning wrapped up in them. They set the tone for the entire prayer, and they embrace all the beauty found in belonging to the family of God. No other religion in the world carries such an intimate concept of a relationship with the living God of the universe. No other philosophy or teaching touches the heart of our human need like this does. Where else can you turn to find words more tender, more meaningful, more powerful than these simple words, "Our Father"?

On September 8, 1998, St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Mark McGwire made history by hitting his 62nd home run of the season, and he set a new Major League record, which has since been broken. It was an emotional moment not only for McGwire but also for 4 people sitting in the VIP section of the stadium. They were the grown children of Roger Maris, the man who hit 61 home runs in 1961 to establish the record that stood for 37 years.

The children of Roger Maris were an important part of the celebration that night, yet none of them had ever played even an inning of a Major League baseball game in their lives. Maris' children did not receive special attention that night because of anything they had done, but rather because of who their father was and what He had done. He made it possible for them to be present that night and to be the honored guests because of his achievement years before.

One day you and I will sit down at the great celebration of heaven with the Lord Jesus Christ, and we will enjoy all the benefits of the eternal kingdom of God that is to come. But we will not be there because of who we are or anything we have done but because of who our heavenly Father is and what He did in sending His Son to redeem our lost and broken world. Thanks be to God that we have a heavenly Father who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for you and me. Thanks be to God that He is "Our Father who art in heaven." Amen.

ⁱF. Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, Vol. I, p. 239.