

**“Our Father in Heaven”**

**(The Lord’s Prayer, Part 1)**

Matthew 6.9; Luke 11.2

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

April 30, 2017

“Our Father, who art in heaven” ... the words are *so* familiar, etched into our memory banks, in most cases at a very young age, and then repeated, time and time again, practically every week of our lives for decades on end. They are *good* words, *rich* words, emanating from the mouth of Jesus himself, in the prayer that he taught his followers to pray. “Pray then in this way,” says Jesus (Matthew 6.9), and the verb is *plural*; he’s not talking just to one person, but to *many*. “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11.1); that had been the request, made by one of the disciples, and we aren’t told which one. The prayer is for *all* the disciples, for *all* those who take up their cross and follow Jesus. The prayer is for all of *us*.

The prayer is recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matthew 6.9-13 and Luke 11.2-4). I’m willing to bet that most of you learned the prayer from your Sunday School teacher or from repetition in worship, but it’s actually in the Bible. The versions of the prayer in Matthew and Luke are a little bit different. The words are not quite the same. At certain points, that will really matter (Matthew says *debts*, but Luke says *sins*). We don’t know which version is closer to what Jesus actually said. Jesus spoke in Aramaic; the New Testament was written in Greek. For whatever reason, Matthew recorded the prayer one way, and Luke recorded it another. There’s not one “right” version of the prayer.

Even the beginning of the prayer is different. In Matthew, we find the familiar “Our Father who art in heaven,” but all Luke has is one word: “Father.” Let me show you the Greek. Here’s Matthew:

πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς

And here’s Luke:

πάτερ

Even if you don’t know the least bit of Greek, it’s obvious that there’s a difference. Six words in Matthew; just one in Luke; the key word is *πάτερ*, *pater*, like “paternal,” *Father*. “Call him *Father*,” says Jesus. He’s your *Father*. Not your *earthly* father, Matthew makes clear; ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, *ho en tois ouranois*, “the one that’s in the heavens.” It’s actually plural in Greek, *heavens*, not just *heaven*. “The one *in the heavens*.” There are different ways to translate that: “who art in heaven” is the most familiar, but “who is in heaven” would be perfectly fine, or even simply “in heaven.” There’s not a verb there; no

form of the verb “to be,” though many translations supply it. Don’t get bogged down in these details. The point is, *he’s not your earthly dad.* He’s your *heavenly* dad. And he’s not just *yours*; he is *ours* – ἡμῶν, *hēmōn*, “our.” He’s not just the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; he’s not just *my* Father; he’s *yours*, and *yours*, and *yours*. Anyone with faith in Christ – he is heavenly Father for *all* of us.

Now I realize that there are some people for whom the word “Father” is laden with difficulty, because of their own *earthly* fathers. I know some men who were routinely chewed out and cussed out by their earthly fathers, for the slightest of offenses; fathers who did great harm to those boys’ self-esteem and, in some cases, had a lasting, negative impact on the whole trajectory of their sons’ lives. A father’s job is to *build up* his sons, not rip them to shreds. I know some women who were abused, yes, even sexually abused, by their earthly fathers, *violated* in the most intimate and vulnerable way. A father’s job is to *protect* his daughters, not *exploit* them. I know some men who had an earthly father, at least in theory, but the fathers made it clear that they loved their work more than they loved them. A father’s job is to *guide* and *train* and *equip* his son, to help him learn how to be a *man*, but a dad can’t do that if he’s never there. The list goes on. There are all sorts of people in today’s world who struggle to call God “Father,” because of what their own earthly fathers did (or did not do) in their lives.

There are also those who choose to call God “Mother.” Some of the great early Christian writers and mystics, including men like Anselm of Canterbury and women like Julian of Norwich, called God “Mother” as well as “Father” centuries before anyone ever heard of “women’s lib.” There is language in the Bible that speaks of the maternal aspects of God. In Isaiah 46.3, God says that Israel was “borne by me” and “carried from the womb.” In Isaiah 66.13, God says that he will comfort Israel “as a mother comforts her child.” In Isaiah 49.15 God declares that he can forget Israel no more than “a woman forget her nursing child.” In Deuteronomy 32.11 God compares himself to a mother eagle, “stirring up its nest, hovering over its young, spreading its wings, taking them up, and bearing them aloft.” In Hosea 13.8, God compares his anger to that of a mother bear “robbed of her cubs.” And so on. There are a variety of verses that use maternal imagery to describe the nature of God. And according to Genesis, humanity was created in the image of God, male *and female*. (Genesis 1.27) “God is spirit,” Jesus says (John 4.24); God does not have a body; God *is not male*. Yet 99% of the time in our Holy Scriptures, God is referred to with masculine pronouns, and Jesus calls him “Father.” Remember: Jesus did not have an *earthly* father. He had a mother, named Mary, and he had a Father, who is *God*. Calling God “Father” does not negate the maternal aspects of God that are lifted up in scripture, nor does it imply that God is male. What it does say is that, through our faith in Christ, *we* get to have a relationship with God that is akin to the relationship that *Jesus* had. God didn’t just *create* us. He *fathered* us, and he fathers us still.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul uses the language of *adoption* to describe our relationship with God. “God sent his Son,” he says in Galatians (4.4-6), “so that we might receive *adoption* as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”, he says in Romans (8.15-17), “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” What do we *inherit*? The answer is in Ephesians (1.5-14): “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious *grace* that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have *redemption* through

his blood, the *forgiveness* of our trespasses.... With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us *the mystery of his will*.... In Jesus Christ we have also obtained an *inheritance*, ... so that we ... might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with *the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*....” That, my friends, is *one heck of an inheritance*. Grace, redemption, forgiveness, the mystery of his will, election, salvation, the seal of the Holy Spirit – all of that is ours, for those of us who trust in Jesus. God made *all* of us, and God adopts those who trust in Jesus into his family. He becomes our Father, and what we get through that relationship is *infinitely richer* than anything the *very best* earthly father could ever provide.

I know a guy named Morgan who talks about how he came to experience God as Father. He was a good Christian; he had a wonderful wife, Cherie, and two young children, Joshua and Abigail. Cherie had struggled with anxiety and depression on and off for years. A few years into their marriage, she took a nosedive. Morgan had to remove all the knives from the house. Then he had to check Cherie into a hospital, near where her parents lived in Illinois. She was going to be there for *weeks*, maybe *months*. Joshua was 2½; Abigail was nine months, and nursing. Morgan was a wreck. Cherie’s mom suggested that Morgan leave Abigail with them, and that they would tend to the needs of mother and daughter, while Morgan took Joshua to Pittsburgh, where Morgan’s parents could tend to the needs of father and son. Morgan agreed that made sense. One day Morgan and Joshua made a run to Wal-Mart. They came out of the store; Morgan put Joshua in his car seat; then Morgan, crushed by the weight of the world, collapsed to the asphalt by the side of his truck. He realized: “This ain’t good. My wife’s in a hospital, my son’s in the car, and I’m lying in a parking lot.” Then he felt a presence, a strong presence, that he had never felt so strongly before in his life; and he heard a voice: “Get up, son. We can do this together.” Something got Morgan off the ground, and he drove back to his parents’ house. That night, as he’s tucking Joshua into bed, Joshua says, “Daddy, we’re brothers!” Morgan thinks, “This is so cute, but it’s not really true; I’m your dad; you’re my son,” but then he hears this nudge: “Go with it.” So he says, “Joshua, what do you mean?”, and Joshua says, “Well, Daddy, God is *your* Father, and he’s *my* Father, and so that makes us brothers!” Morgan realizes that he’s learning theology from a two-and-a-half-year-old! At that moment, something *deep* in Morgan’s heart shifted, and he said to his son, “Joshua, forgive me. All your life, I have tried to be the strongest thing in your world. Please forgive me. We both need a Daddy. We can’t do this.” Then they prayed, and they asked God to father then both. “We *invite* you to father us.” That was the day Morgan realized the limitations of every single father on the face of this planet. That was the day Morgan learned how to lean on *God* as his Father.

Cherie got better. The family was reunited. Morgan’s faith took off by leaps and bounds. He calls it his “second conversion.” There were *three human fathers* in this story – each of them *good* – and it wasn’t enough. *Morgan had to learn to rely on God* – and to receive everything God was offering him.

Friends – this is what we all must learn to do. *God wants to father us*. Intimately. Personally. If you’ve got faith in Jesus Christ, then you have been *adopted* into the *best family ever*. You are being offered *lavish* gifts, *rich* blessings, a *magnificent* inheritance. Receive it! Claim it! It is *yours*, and it can help you through *anything*. *Your heavenly Father wants to give it to you*. He *loves* you ... *that much*.

© 2017 Rev. Bill Pinches. Morgan Snyder’s story is from Sonship: Receiving God as Father, Ransomed Heart Audio Resources, 2013.