

Text: Matthew 5:1; 6:9

Theme: Our Father who is in Heaven

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word (Father's Day) on 18/06/2017 at 10.30am

What do you think of when you hear the word "father?" Are your mental images positive or negative? How does your experience with your earthly father impact your view of God as your Heavenly Father?

Today is Fathers' Day and we will be focussing on the first two phrases in the prayer our Lord Jesus taught His disciples. **Our Father who is in Heaven** seems to me the most apt for today's consideration.

Before we begin to think about the Lord's Prayer in detail, there are certain general facts which we will do well to remember. First of all, this is a prayer which Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Matthew sets the whole Sermon on the Mount in the context of the disciples (Matthew 5:1); and Luke tells us that Jesus taught this prayer in response to the request of one of his disciples (Luke 11:1). **The Lord's Prayer is a prayer which only a disciple, who is in relationship with Christ can pray with any meaning.**

The Lord's Prayer is not a "private" prayer.

When you say, "Our Father in heaven," you are admitting that you do not pray alone. The words "I" and "me" are nowhere to be found. You are admitting that you are not the only one in the world who has a concern to bring to God. This is an important insight because it is very easy to become me-oriented when we pray.

To pray like this imparts a bigness and expansiveness to your prayer because it includes all of God's children everywhere - a family created by the new birth and made possible by the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ for our redemption.

The first step in prayer is to learn to call God "Father."

In a true biblical sense, the only people who can do that are those who are the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:26). I know it is popular today to say "We're all God's children" with a kind of glibness that blurs the distinctions between those who know Jesus Christ and those who don't. Muslims, Buddhists and other world religions have their own prayers and their own rituals based on their beliefs. And the same is true of the Lord's Prayer. It is a uniquely Christian prayer based on Christian truth and it is intended for those who have been born into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, when you say, "Our father in heaven," you are proclaiming that he has the authority and power to hear you and to help you when you pray.

Sons and daughters have family rights that guarantee them access to their father. That's a big part of what being a father is all about. My children don't need an appointment to see me, and I don't need an appointment to see my Heavenly Father. Even in the midst of running the entire universe, keeping the stars in their courses, and making sure the planets don't run into each other, and while he oversees six billion people with all their troubles, cares, worries, fears, problems, and difficulties, our God still has time for us. He listens to us as if He had no one else to listen to.

If we believe that God is Father, it settles our relationship to God. It is not that it removes the might, majesty and power of God. It is not that it makes God any the less God; but it makes that might, and majesty, and power approachable for us.

There is an old Roman story which tells how a Roman emperor was enjoying a triumph. He had the privilege, which Rome gave to her great victors, of marching his troops through the streets of Rome, with all his captured trophies and his prisoners in his train. So the emperor was on the march with his troops. The streets were lined with cheering people. The tall legionaries lined the streets' edges to keep the people in their places. At one point on the triumphal route, there was a little platform where the empress and her family were sitting to watch the emperor go by in all the pride of his triumph. On the platform with his mother, there was the emperor's youngest son, a little boy. As the emperor came near, the little boy jumped off the platform, burrowed through the crowd and tried to dodge between the legs of a legionary and to run out on to the road to meet his father's chariot. The legionary stooped down and stopped him. He swung him up in his arms: 'You can't do that, boy,' he said. 'Don't you know who that is in the chariot? That's the emperor. You can't run out to his chariot.' And the little boy laughed down. 'He may be your emperor,' he said, 'but he's my father.' That is exactly the way the Christian feels towards God. The might, and the majesty, and the power are the might, and the majesty, and the power of one whom Jesus taught us to call Our Father.

A Friend in High Places

Third, we pray to our Father who is “**in heaven**”. That’s usually a throwaway line for most of us. We tend to think it means that earth is where we are and heaven is where God is, which we imagine is beyond the farthest star. That’s not what it means. The phrase “in heaven” refers to heaven as the centre of the universe and the seat of all authority and power and dominion and greatness. You are on earth and are therefore limited to this little ball of dirt floating around the sun. **To say that we are “on earth” means that we pray from a position of weakness and comparative insignificance. God is in the seat of all authority and all power.** Therefore, when you say, “Our father in heaven,” you are proclaiming that he has the authority and power to hear you and to help you when you pray. *It is precisely because God is in heaven that he has the power to help you.*

Is There Anyone Up There Who Cares for Me?

The Lord’s Prayer answers the greatest question of the Universe-Is there anybody up there who cares about me? Is there anybody up there who watches over me? Is there anybody up there who knows my name? And the answer comes Back-Yes. Yes. Yes. There is a God in heaven who cares about you. And he is called Father.

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, the image of God within each of us has been marred by sin but despite all our failures we still want to know God, and we still want to find meaning in life but just don’t know where to look. This prayer is the answer to the deepest problem of mankind-the problem of fatherlessness. The Lord’s Prayer reminds us that if we know Jesus Christ, we are not orphans in the universe.

When you call God “Father,” you confess that he is a God of tender loving care. There’s a Hebrew word in the Old Testament-*hesed*-which is translated a number of different ways. In the King James, *hesed* is usually translated as lovingkindness. As in “thy lovingkindness is better than life”. The newer translations take that concept and add the concept of faithfulness to it. This word speaks of God’s loyal love to all His children. *It is the love that keeps on loving no matter what we do or how badly we blow it or how many dumb mistakes we make.* He is a God who never lets his children go. He loves his children with an everlasting love that is faithful and loyal no matter what happens.

When we were far away, he loved us. *When we turned our back on him, he loved us.* When we broke his law, he loved us. When we went our own way, he loved us. When we said, “Leave us alone, we don’t want you around anymore,” he said, “I’m going to stay around anyway.” And when we ran, he followed. When we hid, he found us. When we cursed him to his face, he just smiled and said, “I love you anyway.” That’s what loyal love is all about. That’s

the Father's love for his children. He is always near us whether we see Him or feel Him or even whether we believe He is there or not.

He calms our fears. He cheers us on. He provides what we really need. He lets us go our own way. He welcomes us back from the far country.

Good News for Prodigal Sons and Daughters

Jesus told a story in Luke 15:11-32 that beautifully illustrates this truth. We call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The story begins with a younger son who out of character demands his inheritance from his father who agrees to give it to him. Taking the money, he leaves home and journeys to a place the Bible calls "the far country." There he spends every dime he has on riotous living. Parties day and night, women on both arms, the good life, the fast lane. Whatever he wants, he buys with his father's money. Eventually the money runs out. When a famine comes, not having any money and being too far away from home, he attaches himself to a farmer who says, "The only work I have is feeding my pigs." The prodigal son ends up penniless, homeless, starving, feeding the pigs... He who had eaten with friends just a few weeks earlier now dines with the pigs. *In the end he lost everything.* The prodigal son has hit rock bottom. That's when his life began to change.

First, he came to his senses and realized what a fool he had been. Second, he decided to return to his father. Third, he mentally rehearsed how he would confess his prodigal son story. Words cannot express the pain, the sadness, the loss the father feels. His son has left home, and no one can console him. After all that, could anyone blame the father if he refused to take his son back? No wonder the son worries as he slowly plods toward home. He has no idea what awaits him.

Smothered with Kisses

The Bible says that while he was still a long way off, his father saw him. This is a great moment. ***His father sees him first.*** His father saw him and was moved with compassion. Day after day the father watched for his son. Night after night he waited for his return. Nothing deterred him, not the weather, not the jeers and jokes of the sceptic's, not the doubting looks of his friends. Deep in his heart, he *knew* his son would someday come back home. Then it happened. One day, late in the afternoon, when the sun was beating down and sweat covered his face, he saw a figure slowly come over the rise and begin to walk hesitantly toward him. Throwing all dignity aside, he ran to meet his son, embraced him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The word Jesus used means he smothered him with kisses. In that one moment all questions were answered. The son's fear melted away in the tears and hugs.

No one could ever have predicted what happens next. It is for this that we love this story. We read it over and over again, we cling to it, believe it, hope in it, stake out lives upon it—all because of the father's welcome to his erring son.

There are five signs of the father's welcome:

1. **The kiss**, the sign of forgiveness.
2. **The robe**, the sign of honour.
3. **The ring**, the sign of authority.
4. **The sandals**, the sign of freedom.
5. **The feast**, the sign of a joyful welcome.

Verse 24 brings the first part of the story to a close with these wonderful words of hope: "So they began to celebrate." At the father's command, a party begins that lasts for hours. How does the father feel about his son who has come home? "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke

15:32). Back from the dead! Found! Alive again! Home again! No wonder the father said, "Let's have a party." It was the Father's love that made him run to the son while his son was still a great distance away. And that same love caused him to kill the fatted calf and throw an enormous party. The son who was lost had now been found. Even during the darkest days and the longest nights, the father never gave up hope that one day his son would come home. That's what God's "loyal love" is all about.

The father is a picture of the Heavenly Father. God waits patiently, with loving compassion to restore us when we return to him with humble hearts. He offers us everything in his kingdom, restoring full relationship with joyful celebration. He doesn't even dwell on our past waywardness.

But we must never use the word Father in regard to God cheaply, easily and sentimentally. This God whom we can call Father, is the God whom we must still approach with reverence, adoration, awe and wonder. God is our Father in heaven, and in God there is love and holiness combined. That is why the next sentence is "Hallowed be your name" which we are not going to discuss in this sermon.

Good news! Good news! In Jesus Christ we have discovered the greatest news of all-that our God is not some impersonal deity, not fate or chance or some karma, not a God who's so far off he doesn't care. In Jesus Christ we've discovered the most important truth of the universe. Our God is a father. He loves you so much that he did something we would never think of doing. He gave his own Son to die for you. He loves you inconceivably because he did the inconceivable. He gave his Son for you while you were still dead in your sins, proving that he is a Father who truly loves his children.

All that a good father is to his children God will be to his children when they approach him in prayer. And since God is your Father, He invites you to pour out your heart to Him. Take a 3 x 5 card and jot down three prayer requests that are on your heart right now. At the top write "Ask, Seek, Knock – Matthew 7:7-11." Use this as a simple reminder to bring all your requests before your Heavenly Father.

Lord God, you have called us out of darkness into your marvellous light and by grace you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. All things are ours because all things are yours and we are your beloved children. We claim no merit of our own but cling to the imputed righteousness of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for the privilege of calling you Father. In Jesus' name, Amen.