

## **Our Father**

*Matthew 6:7-15 ~ November 13, 2016 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

Some of my earliest memories in life are focused on what we called, “wrestling with Dad.” My father used to lie on the couch in the living room on Sunday afternoons to watch the football game. That was always an invitation for us children to curl up with him, around his knees, or anywhere we could find enough couch to hold our little bodies. We knew enough to not mess around too much while the football game was on. Dad was a pretty serious football fan and did not like to be distracted, especially during crucial plays. But commercials were fair game. Then we were allowed to wrestle.

In this context, wrestling was a game that could also have been called, “King of the Couch.” Father was the undisputed King of the Couch by virtue of his size and weight. But us kids were determined to change that. So when a commercial came along we would begin to worm our way in between father and the couch. We would scrunch down in and push out with all our might. We would get our hips against the back of the couch and push with our legs as hard as we could. Sometime we would work together and sometimes we seemed to work against each other. Sometimes dad would come alive like a big scary monster and push us all on the floor. This of course delighted us and only hardened our resolve to get him on the floor. And after while, usually as the commercial break was winding up, he would let us finally roll him off onto the floor. It was almost perfect joy to jump off the couch and pounce on our Dad as he lay on the floor. He was king of the couch no longer until the football game started up again. Then, of course, he would resume his throne; and we began to formulate our plans for the next commercial break.

Today we are going to talk about prayer. It may seem odd to begin this discussion with a story about children rough housing with their father. But prayer is not so much about words, needs, requests, and answers; as it is about our relationship with God. Wrestling with my father as a little boy was a very important part of the relationship he forged with me. Our relationship with God comes to us in precisely the same way. It comes from the time we spend together, meaning the time that we focus on him in prayer. This brings us to the question, “how should we pray?”

This is a fundamental question for Christians. It is the kind of question that takes us into our Bibles to seek guidance and understanding. Fortunately, the Bible is filled with very helpful instruction on how our prayerful relationship with God works. But no single

place in scripture has the wealth of understanding that comes to us as we study the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is the best resource for learning how to pray there is.

One of the first issues that comes to us in learning to pray from the Lord's prayer is to decide whether we should use the exact words of the Lord's prayer or should we use the Lord's Prayer as a model to guide the formulation of our own prayers. The best answer involves both these methods because the Bible presents both approaches as wise.

When we look at the Lord's Prayer in Luke's Gospel, Jesus suggests that we use his very words when we pray. Luke 11:2 reads:

***When you Pray, say: "Father, hallowed by thy name..."***

People who like to say the Lord's Prayer itself as part of their devotional life are strongly supported by what Jesus teaches in Luke. Jesus no doubt taught the disciples about prayer several times. He likely did ask them to use the exact words he taught them some of those times. Just like a good teacher can be quite strict about what students are to do for learning exercises. Luther himself advises all Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer and recite the Apostles Creed when they get up in the morning. When we first wake up we are a little muzzy. Using Jesus very words can help us orient properly to God at the beginning of our day.

The Lord's Prayer is an important part of Christian life. We use it in our worship every Sunday. We teach it to our Children at an early age. We spend a full unit in confirmation carefully studying what each petition means. It becomes so built into us that when someone starts saying it, we can join in without even thinking. And I have been at the death bed of dying saints when they are past being able to speak, but they still join the family in saying the Lord's Prayer in their dying moments. Luke's Gospel is right, the words themselves as we have them are very powerful and useful.

However, it is possible for us to let the words of the Lord's Prayer become a mindless recitation. Saying prayer that way is useless and approaches the very thing that Jesus warns us about when he commands us:

***And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.***

This is probably why the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel has a different take from Luke's version on how the Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is very critical of the use of empty phrases that are heaped up in order to

make a prayer sound impressive. What was important in praying was not how articulate it is. Clever words only serve human listeners. Jesus is concerned that people learn to pray in straightforward speech. Prayer needs to say what it means in the simplest way possible so that it communicates clearly from the heart. Prayer is not a contest where we convince God to do what we want with our clever words. As Jesus points out:

***...our Father knows what you need before you ask him.***

In that context Jesus offers the Lord's Prayer as a kind of model, which guides us in developing our own prayers. In Matthew, Jesus does not seem concerned about our using his words, instead he wants to help us establish a relationship with God that will enable us to have ongoing conversation with him. The words of the Lord's Prayer serve as a structure on which we build our own prayers.

This structure begins with an open acknowledgement of how important it is that God be God. And so we pray for God's name to be holy; we pray for his will to be done; and we pray for his kingdom to come. Beginning with a reinforcement of God's Godhood is absolutely crucial for getting us lined up correctly in our prayer to God.

Once we establish in our prayer and our minds that God's kingship is first, then we can proceed to what that Kingship brings us. It brings us such things as daily bread and all that it implies. Luther describes daily bread in his small catechism in this way:

***Daily bread includes everything required to meet our earthly needs, such as food, drink, clothing, home, property, employment, necessities; devout parents, children, and communities; honest and faithful authorities, good government, seasonable weather, peace, health, an orderly society, a good reputation, true friends and neighbors, and the like.***

According to Luther, we spent a lot of time thinking about daily bread this last week, didn't we? Well that is actually okay as long as we also remembered to establish our confidence in the sovereignty of God. From Daily bread we move to things that deeply trouble us, forgiveness, temptation, and avoiding evil. We are free to use the words Jesus supplies in the Lord's Prayer, but we should also put our concerns into our own words following the pattern Jesus supplies. This is the best way for us to move away from an empty, repetitious kind of prayer into a prayer that engages the living God. Engagement with the living God is the real reason for prayer. It is an engagement that is more like wrestling than anything else. We seek for places to take hold of God. We are caught in the pressure of our own need. We are both stretched by God's silence and stunned by his emphatic, amazing responses.

But what is this wrestling really like. It has everything to do with the nature of the relationship. Jacob wrestled a stranger at Peniel. We surmise from context that his struggle was against God come in the form of a supernatural being. That wrestling match left Jacob limping with a new name. But it is still filled with mystery and uncertainty of meaning.

For us it is different. In the Lord's prayer Jesus teaches us:

***Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven..."***

We should always start our prayer like that. We should begin by calling on God as our father. He is a Father that loves us. So like Jacob at Peniel, our prayer is also a kind of wrestling match. There is pulling and pushing. There are moments of victory and moments of defeat. There are many surprises. But our wrestling is not with a stranger. It is not a struggle in a dark and foreign place. Our wrestling with God in prayer is like playing "King of the Couch" with Dad. It is an intimate rough housing with God our Father who loves us and wants us to hold on to him with all our might. He wants us to push and pull to our hearts content so that we can learn to delight in his strength and to take comfort in his constant spiritual presence in our lives.

God knows that you need to feel his presence in your life. And so he lets you wrestle with him just like children do with a loving father. He takes your struggles, your heartaches, your desires very seriously. But he is not a Supreme Court judge. He is not a customer service agent. He is not the ruler of a country. He is your Father. He is your heavenly father. He is the one who loves you more than you can ever know. In partnership with Jesus he has made you his own for eternity. Your prayer is now the heartbeat of your relationship with him. It may be that you can push him off the couch, but only if he decides to let you. But whatever happens he is bent on drawing close to you and establishing a bond with you that lasts into eternity. Prayer is a key aspect of this. No one says it better than Martin Luther when he explains why we begin this prayer with, "Our Father..."

***Here God encourages us to believe that he is truly our Father, and that we are truly his children, so that we may boldly and confidently pray to him, just as beloved children speak to their dear father.***

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.