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Reformation
& Revival



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The disciples wanted Jesus to teach them how to pray. I am reading from Luke, chapter 11:

He was praying in a certain place, and when He ceased, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father'" (Luke 11:1-2 RSV).

Why Did They Ask?

Why do you suppose they wanted this kind of teaching from Jesus? Had they never prayed before? Of course they had. They all had grown up in Jewish homes where prayer was offered three times a day. This was an Old Testament pattern, remember? The Psalmist says, "Evening and morning and at noon will I pray and cry aloud" (Ps. 55:17 KJV). It was said of the godly Daniel that "he got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God" (Dan. 6:10), even at the risk of his life on one occasion. It was apparently the practice among all first-century Jews to have a prayer time in the morning and in the evening and at the hour of the afternoon sacrifice. Sometimes the family would recite what is called *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4-5). There would follow a string of benedictions in which they gave praise to God for all His mighty works. The Jews were a people who called upon God, so all of the disciples had heard prayers being said in their homes and had probably participated in them. Prayer was certainly not a foreign or unfamiliar thing to any of them. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (their God) had been known in Israel for generations by this name, "O Thou that hearest prayer."

The disciples were apparently looking for something more than they had known in their past. They asked, "Lord,

teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” Apparently, John the Baptist had instructed his followers in a certain way of praying. John had been calling people to a new repentance and readiness for God, showing them perhaps how to pray in a crisis time. Now Jesus’ disciples want from Him a way of praying that will be especially appropriate for His followers. “How ought we, Jesus, as a community gathered around You, to call on God?”

It is striking that they did this right after one of the occasions when they had seen Jesus Himself praying. We get the sense that they were asking, “Lord, show us how You do it. Teach us to pray in Your way, as Your disciples, those following in Your steps.”

The disciples had already noticed a number of things about Jesus’ praying. For one thing, He seemed to prepare by prayer for all the major moments, all the great milestones, in His life. For example, Luke tells us that when Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, He was praying as the Spirit of God descended upon Him like a dove. The disciples had learned from Him, also, that on the night before He chose them to be the inner circle of His followers, He had spent the whole night praying!

Just before Peter had made his great confession of faith, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus had been seen at prayer. Luke tells us that when Jesus went up on the mountain with Peter, James, and John and was transfigured in their presence, He had gone up there intending to pray. Further, it was while He was in the act of praying that the miracle happened—the glory of God seemed to come shining through His life. Just before, or in the midst of, these moments of revelation, these in-breakings of God’s power, Jesus was always at prayer.

The disciples began to sense that this was the secret of His remarkable poise and power. This was a new kind of praying. Prayer for Him was not confined to traditional

times and seasons. It went on at all hours of the day and night, sometimes for extended periods, and it was closely related, somehow, to the marvelous things that happened in Jesus’ ministry.

The disciples began to notice a distinct pattern in His way of living. He would be pouring Himself out in serving the needs of people—preaching, teaching, healing, driving out demons. Suddenly He would withdraw from these crowds to some lonely place for communion with His Father, for prayer. Then He would return to the same scenes of busy ministry until, after a while, the cycle would be repeated. Work and worship. Ministry and prayer. That was the rhythm, the music of His life. It was obvious that for Jesus, prayer was not peripheral, but central; not incidental, but dominant. It was the key to everything else. It was the dynamic that energized His whole ministry. The disciples were wistful as they watched Him. “Tell us about it, Jesus. What is Your secret? Teach us to pray as You do.”

Maybe you can identify with this longing for a new way to pray. Maybe prayer has been, for you, something out on the fringes of life, not really vital and central. Maybe it is something you remember from your childhood vaguely but have largely laid aside in your adult years. You are more familiar with the forms of it than with the heart. Maybe prayer has never been something exciting and life-changing in your experience.

If that is so, maybe the thought of Jesus praying as He did awakens a yearning in you, also, to know something about that. You are almost ready to enroll yourself in the Lord’s school, to learn from the One who prayed so constantly, whose whole life was communion with His Father. Maybe you want to say, as I do, “Lord, teach us, teach me, to pray.”

How He Responded

Jesus promised, didn’t He, that those who ask will receive?

He never turns anyone away who looks to Him for this kind of vital instruction. There is nothing He would like more than to see you and me established in a lifetime of vital praying. He responds to our request with the first key lesson for all praying people. Here it is: "Whenever you pray," Jesus said, "say, 'Father.'"

That seemed to be the way in which Jesus prayed. He always called God "Father" in His prayers. Read through the Gospels sometime, noticing all the places where a recorded prayer of Jesus appears. There are quite a few of those. It may surprise you to notice that, in every case except one, Jesus refers to God explicitly, directly, as "Father." The one exception among all of these is the prayer from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" That, as you remember, was a direct quotation from Psalm 22. In every prayer, then, that Jesus formed into His own words, He always included this designation, "Father." When you do that, you are following His pattern. You are praying as He prayed.

Further, Jesus used a special form of that word in His native language. It was not the ordinary word for Father (which we would translate *abh*). It was a diminutive form, *abba*. We know that He used the term because, at some points in the New Testament, the Aramaic *abba* appears untranslated. If you have an English translation of the Bible, or German, French, Japanese, whatever, they all include this untranslated *abba*. You can see that in Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6. It seems certain, then, on the basis of this evidence, that every time Jesus prayed, He used, in address to God, this very word *Abba*. In those simple syllables, we are overhearing, as it were, the Savior of the world at prayer.

That is of particular interest because no one, apparently, had ever used that word in prayer to God before. In all the Old Testament prayers, in all the prayers of Jewish believers

during the period between the Testaments, in all the recorded liturgies and expressions of worship still available to us, never once do we read of any Israelite referring to God in prayer as *Abba*.

That was not because the word was unknown—or even unfamiliar. In fact, it probably was not used by devout Jews in prayer because it was so *very* familiar. *Abba* was the tiny child's name for Father, like our "Daddy" or "Papa." The little baby just learning how to speak would call the father *abba* and the mother *imma*. And that is the word, that *abba*, that Jesus used to address God.

You know what that language is like. I always called my grandmother Maama, and my grandfather Papoo. They lived to be very old, but they were still called that in our family. Now our grandchildren refer to Helen and me as Mima and Papa. That is the kind of childlike, homely heart-language Jesus used when He prayed, *Abba!*

For Him, it was not simply a change in terminology either. It was a new kind of praying, because it expressed a new reality of relationship with God. *Abba* is a term full of affection. It is the cry of a little child, free and uninhibited. Most of all, it expresses childlike confidence and trust. Jesus wants His disciples to pray in that language, with that spirit, because they are His followers. He is giving them, you see, a share in His own relationship to God!

Always remember that, friends, about the Lord's Prayer. It is not a general religious document, appropriate to any setting, adaptable to any system of beliefs. No, it is a prayer for the followers of Jesus. It is the one He taught them when they asked for it. It becomes theirs because they believe in Him and, through Him, have become God's children.

Why That Comes First

Now, why is this the first lesson in Jesus' school of prayer? Because everything starts here. Our whole approach

to prayer depends upon how we think about God, what we most deeply believe about Him. It is easy to see why that is so. Suppose you are an atheist. Will you pray then? Hardly. In your system of belief as an atheist, God does not exist. From that standpoint, it would be futility—foolishness—to pray. For you, no one is there.

Suppose you believe in fate, a kind of rigid, deterministic system. What is to be will be. Will you have much heart to pray? Probably not. Your view of things has already told you that nothing can alter the way things happen. They simply go grinding on. But if you believe that God exists, and then think that He is powerless to change your situation, you will not ask Him, then, to do anything about it. Or, if you believe that He hates you, you will stay as far away from Him as you can. You will not think about coming to Him in prayer. As we believe, so we pray. Or do not pray.

Suppose you believe, as the old Deists did, that God is a kind of absentee landlord of the universe. He started it, wound it up like a giant alarm clock, and now is simply letting it run. He lets natural laws dictate everything, you think. He never intervenes. How will you pray then? You may admire His past works, but you certainly would not expect Him to change anything in answer to your prayers. You would not expect that praying to make a real difference. Your theological views have already settled that issue. Since God does not respond to your petitions, you think, you will not ask. But, if you can call God *Abba*, if you can follow Jesus in that way, you will pray confidently. I deeply hope you will. Thinking of God in *that* way will make a world of difference for you.

Sometimes we preachers tend to make people feel guilty because they do not pray, or do not pray enough. That is easy to do. All of us have an occasional twinge of conscience that we ought to be praying more than we do, but feeling guilty about that does not usually help much.

I have become convinced that there is a better way to encourage others in the life of prayer. Instead of belaboring the obvious, “You ought to pray! You ought to pray more!”, we can help them to know in a fuller way the One who hears prayer. When God becomes real to us as *Abba*, Father, prayer will not seem awkward or burdensome anymore. We will have discovered, in knowing and following Jesus Christ, a new way to pray.

Prayer: Father, thank You for the way Jesus prayed, for the way He approached You with such confidence and affection, for the way He lived as such a grateful, loyal Son, and thank You that in Christ we find a new way to pray. We can know You as *Abba*, as a marvelously gracious Father. May everyone sharing this message learn to pray in that new way. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Author

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