

WEEK ONE | THE INVOCATION

Pray then in this way... ***Our Father in heaven...***

The first thing Jesus teaches us, in this prayer, is an invocation, an asking for help, that points us toward the right address, in multiple senses of the word.

- Whom are we addressing? ***Our Father***
- Where is his address? ***In heaven***

Dallas Willard says that “addressing God is what distinguishes prayer from worrying out loud.¹” As soon as I speak or even think the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer, I’m pulled out of my self-focused reflection and into a two-way conversation.

Jesus could have taught us to address THE GREAT I AM or THE LORD MOST HIGH. Instead, he invites us to use highly relational, parental language. If God is Our Father, then we are his children. Fathers—good ones, anyway—are accessible to their kids and delight in giving them good things.

How we see our earthly fathers colours our picture of God as Father. Especially for those with father wounds, the image is easily distorted. Thankfully, Jesus shows us the heavenly Father in his person and in his parables. If you look at the father in the parable of the prodigal son, there is nothing the wayward child can do to “unfather” that father; it’s impossible to change his character or out-sin his love. This, Jesus tells us, is the kind of father to whom we come in prayer.

It takes Jesus only two words to reveal something powerful about the heart of God and his desire to act for our good. And with those same two words, he gives us our own identity. We are not needy, anonymous blips in an indifferent universe. No, we are needy, beloved children of a God who takes fatherly delight in caring for us.

Addressing God as Our Father gives us the basis for all the petitions to follow, because it assures us that God has the desire to act on our behalf. But how do we know that God also has the power to act? This is where the second part of the address comes in.

“*The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,*” writes the psalmist in Psalm 103:19, “*and his kingdom rules over all.*” By teaching us to pray to “*Our Father in heaven,*” Jesus is reminding us that the God we are addressing is on his throne and in charge of the universe.

While God’s heavenly address reminds us of his sovereignty and transcendence, it also assures us of his closeness and immanence. The biblical writers pictured the heavens not as a remote location but as the dimension where God reigns—the invisible realm that extends far beyond the farthest galaxy, but is also as near as the atmosphere surrounding our bodies. ***Our Father in heaven.*** With this brief address, Jesus gives us “the configuration of the reality from within which we pray.”²

THREE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INVOCATION

Jesus’ first followers would have experienced surprise when he taught them to pray like this.

Intimacy

Jesus gave them an astonishing level of access to God. We know Jesus addressed God as Abba—an Aramaic word that carries more respect than our term “daddy”, but also with all the tenderness of a healthy father-child relationship. In teaching us to pray ***Our Father***, Jesus is inviting us into that same sort of intimacy with the God of the universe.

Community

In these opening words, Jesus teaches that our connection to God is very personal, but it is not private. The address is, after all, not My Father, but ***Our Father***. And all the personal pronouns that follow in the prayer are plural. From the first word of the prayer forward, Jesus invites us to begin to understand our story within the

¹ Dallas Willard, “*The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*”, 1998, 255.

² Ibid, 256.

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context of a much bigger story. To pray this prayer is to find our individual lives situated within the body of Christ, within humanity, and within all of creation.

Vocation

There is a third, larger, we could even say cosmic dimension of the invocation that is easy to overlook unless we understand Jesus' teaching in the context of Israel's story. N. T. Wright points out that the first occurrence of the idea of God as "**Father**" comes during the dramatic scene, captured in Exodus 4, when Moses thunders to Pharaoh on the Lord's behalf: "*Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son... Let my son go that he may worship me*" (Exodus 4:22–23).

From that confrontation forward, to refer to God as "Father" is associated in the Jewish mind with the promise of liberation—freedom from slavery and oppression. By the time King David comes along, God is explaining that eventually there will be a new king, a Messiah, descended from David's family—and the God-as-Father motif continues. "*I will be a father to him,*" he says of the promised Messiah, "*and he shall be a son to me*" (2 Samuel 7:14).

When Jesus arrives on the scene, Israel has been waiting for this Davidic Messiah, the hope of Israel, for a very long time. They've suffered under the oppression of one regime after another, longing for the day when their Lord, Yahweh, will enact a new exodus and finally set his people free. When Jesus starts referring to God as his "*Father,*" it's a signal, loud and clear, that he is claiming to be the long-awaited emancipator.

And then, do you see what he does? It would be one thing if he taught his followers to pray to his Father. But instead, he teaches us to pray to our Father—which is to include ourselves in the mission.

Right here, in the invocation, at the beginning of this prayer, Jesus is inviting all who will pray this prayer to identify themselves as participants in the Father's great project of setting every captive free and overcoming evil with good, in every corner of creation. To pray to "*our Father*" is to find our life's ultimate vocation. It is to sign up for the revolution.

LIVING INSIDE THE INVOCATION

Is there an aspect of the invocation—**intimacy, community, vocation**—to which the Holy Spirit is drawing your attention? You are invited to centre your conversation with God in one or more of those areas.

Intimacy

- When you pray to God as "*our Father,*" are you picturing the Father whom Jesus described?
- Read through the Parable of the Prodigal Son [Luke 15:11-32] and ask God to reveal himself more deeply as the one who runs to you while you are still a long way off.
- What does this level of intimacy and access mean for the burdens that most concern you today?

Community

- When you pray to God as "*Our Father,*" you are invited to move from individualism to an awareness of:
 - Your place in the body of Christ
 - God's love for all of humankind
 - God's purposes for all of creation
- How does this awareness of being part of a larger community shape the burdens that most concern you today?

Vocation

- When you pray to God as "*Our Father,*" you are invited to say "yes" to being a co-revolutionary in bringing about God's kingdom.
- How might this affect your attitude and behavior in relation to your home? Your school? Your workplace? OCC? Orillia? Canada?