

How to Pray Part 3

How Do You Address God?

Several years ago my oldest son played for the high school basketball team. He was very good and so he was often on the court. The students and families who came to the games were notoriously quiet and were rather quiet most of the time. I may not have many skills but one I do possess is a powerful voice. Often, even on their home court, fans for the other team were much louder and supportive of their team and so it was a bit embarrassing to me how little vocal support my son's team got. I took it upon myself to use my skill to loudly cheer and encourage his team, getting the fans to chant defense and the team's name to inspire them. It got so at times the other parents would look to me to help them get started cheering. There was another parent who often sat next to me that became just as vocal as me, but he often got onto the referees if he thought they made a bad call. Sometimes one of us, and then the other would loudly complain about referee decisions but the difference between us, and I must say my criticisms were not nearly as frequent or as intense as his, was that my voice was much louder than that of the other dad. One game got really intense, and it seemed the referees were making lots of bad calls against my son's team. We two dads became more and more animated and vocal in our frustration and although both of us were sharing our "advice" with the referees on how they should be calling the game, it was me they noticed. In the third quarter, one of the referees stopped play and went over to the edge of the court, looked straight at me and announced that if I didn't quiet down, I would have to leave the game. That was of course embarrassing, especially since the other parents and my son's teammates knew I was a pastor, and I remained silent the rest of the game. It was not my finest moment as a dad and although we laughed about it together later, I know my son was not thrilled to have his father called out in front of everyone. Fathers, as we all know are not perfect, which is what makes the term Jesus chose for us all to use when we pray surprising and illuminating.

In Jesus' model prayer, He tells us to address God as Father. Our Big Idea for today is this. Everyone has a dad, but there is only one Father who can meet all our needs. The prayer famously begins, "**Our Father in heaven,**" (Matthew 6:9b NIV) It is strange, when you consider the various religions of the world, that Christ has told us that when we talk to the Creator of the Universe, we are to refer to Him as our Father. It's not "Almighty God", "Lord", "King of Kings", "YHWH" or "Jehovah", it is "Father". This is a profound and astounding declaration on Jesus' part. Now many have made much of the title Father in the model prayer as a statement on the Trinity. We are to pray to God the Father, as opposed to God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. This is not a theological pronouncement on the Trinity nor a ranking assessment of who is to get our prayers. We do not have time to discuss the concept of the Father as part of the Godhead or even explain the theology of the Trinity. Our focus now is to take a deep dive into praying to our Father. All that Jesus is telling us about prayer in the model prayer is that God, in His relationship to us is Father, our Father.

In order to address this adequately, we must first consider a rather disconcerting and astounding demand Jesus made. It has been largely ignored, downplayed, or misunderstood within the Christian community. Let's take a look at it.

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23: 8-12 NIV) A few years ago, someone from a Catholic background called me "Father" and with this teaching in mind, I gently told her I wasn't her father, but she could call me "pastor". But ironically, when I substitute teach, I never correct students who refer to me as "teacher". Is Jesus renouncing the use of the word father in particular in all circumstances unless when speaking of God? The Bible itself would seem to argue against that stance. Several times in the book of Acts, the term father is used to speak of specific dads. For example, **He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek.** (Acts 16: 1 NIV) This of course would be anathema if Jesus was decrying the use of the term "father" for anyone other than God. Paul goes even further, saying he is the father of the Christians in Corinth. **Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.** (1 Corinthians 4: 15 NIV) If you think it is just "Father" that is allowed in the no use three, "teacher" is one of the offices celebrated in the Church. **And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers...** (1 Corinthians 12:28a NIV)

Clearly the Church who knew Jesus did not interpret the use of the words father, teacher or even master in the way some Christians do today. They were not anathema titles in common usage. Jesus was simply making it clear that no one is Master, Teacher or Father in the same way as God. In fact it runs deeper than that. He used those three titles to make a critical point about God and people. This was Jesus' way of making it clear that no one is to be exalted above others in the same way we exalt God above ourselves. We all are spiritually on equal standing and there is no ranking in God's Kingdom. Kings are servants of God just as are the waiters who work their tables. There are no "superstars" among God's people. We equally are beloved by God and honored as His children.

Let's consider now the real point of calling God "Father" as we pray. Everyone has a father and the way that relationship went or is continuing certainly colors the way you approach the idea of Father. Some had alcoholic dads and others judgmental and critical dads and then there are those who had loving and supportive dads. It is not the sort of earthly father you have been given that is at the center of us praying to our Father. It is perfectly and wonderfully explained by Jesus how we are to approach praying to our Father in His parable of the prodigal son. You know the story. The younger son of a father wanted to receive his part of his inheritance from his father before his father even died. The father agreed and the son took off with his newfound wealth and went as far away from the father as he could. After the son wasted it all on partying and prostitutes, he was destitute, homeless, and starving. Without any better options, the son, with his tail between his legs returned home, planning on begging his father to let him become a household servant, just so he could survive. Here is the famous account of the son's arrival. **I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.** (Luke 15: 18-20 NIV)

Notice three clear characteristics of the father in the parable. First, his mind was fixed on the return of his son. While a "long way off", the father spotted his son. That would only have been possible if the father was actively looking for him, constantly scanning the horizon for his son. Second, the father had great affection for his son, even after he led a profligate and dishonoring life. Affection is too tame a term for it. Full of compassion, he ran to his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him. That sort of feeling is astounding and off the charts intense. Imagine having a father like that who loves you in such a way! Third is the way the father responded to his son's sinning and attempts at a confession. **The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.** (Luke 15: 21-24 NIV) The father didn't even bother listening to the quaking summation of wrongs done. He sped into overdrive sorting through a plan to celebrate publicly his love for his son.

When you start your praying, this is the beginning point of it all. You pray to your Father, not your earthly father, not to some image of a father or even what you have seen in other fathers you have known. You pray to this Father, the one who loves you beyond reason, who loves you despite your sins, your outrageous acts of rebellion and the quirks and flaws you possess; this Father who is unreasonable in how much affection He has for you, who despite appearances is wildly in love with you. The sin and chaos and tragedy found in this life makes it confusing and we wonder if our prayers are of any value. When you take in the immensity of the love and devotion the Father has for you, prayer takes a great leap forward. More than that, like the father in Jesus' parable, the Father has all you need to live a joyous and wonderful eternity with Him. His resources devoted to your wellbeing are unlimited. Here is the Big Idea. Everyone has a dad, but there is only one Father who can meet all our needs. Take a moment and pray, but not to God who is big and powerful and in charge of the universe. Instead, pray to your Father who loves you wildly and who always has you on His mind. Prayer is an exercise in faith and not everyone is willing to believe God is like the Father we see in the parable of the prodigal son but for those who realize it is so, or are beginning to believe it is so, prayer becomes the most wonderful and inspiring parts of the day.