

When You pray..

Introduction

[SLIDE 1] Some time ago a lady who was part of our congregation asked to talk to me. She was visibly concerned and as she began our conversation she said "I don't think God is very happy with me." I knew her as a faithful Christian so that was a surprise to me. She carried on "I'm just no good at praying!" Of all the concerns people talk about to me this is one the simplest to answer. I took her to Scripture where we could find a solution to her dilemma. I reminded her of what is called The Lord's Prayer or The Our Father. Here's what we read in the New Testament:

[SLIDE 2] One of his disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples." And He said to them, "When you pray, say.."

Every prayer

In His book I want to be a Christian J.I. Packer says "Every prayer of every Christian should be in some way or another a praying of the Lord's Prayer." So he proposes that this is not just an example of prayer but in Jesus' words - when we pray we should say The Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. So what did Jesus say we should say when we pray?

With Baited Breath

[SLIDE 3] As they began to listen to Jesus' instruction about prayer you can imagine that the disciples grew very quiet as they, faithful Jewish persons, knew that answer to the question: How do you address God? What do you call Him? The answer is "nothing" You don't call God a name - in case you misuse it! This what is called the [SLIDE 4] Ethic of Avoidance. I have a book entitled The Essential Talmud that says there are 4, or 12 letters or 42 letters in God's hidden Name, but the explicit Name of God was used only on the Day of Atonement by the high priest and it was drowned out by the priests' singing. To avoid coming under guilt by accidentally misusing God's name, Jewish scholars do not write or pronounce the proper name in most circumstances, but use substitutes such as "Adonai" ("the Lord") or "HaShem" ("the Name"). So the Name of God became a

mystical or magical formula. So the disciples would have expected Jesus to avoid a specific name in favour of a circumlocution. And yet Jesus shocks them by saying a name by which they could address God in prayer. [SLIDE 5] "When you pray, say Father." And probably speaking in Aramaic it is "Abba." This is a very personal term - the infant like expression that articulates the endearment of a child - Abba. Dada." I've heard some very elaborate and eloquent prayers in my day. And they are appropriate given the Person we are speaking to. He is the One who dwells in unapproachable light. He is the One in whose presence the angels call out the warning Holy, Holy, Holy. He is the One who Created the universe - 2 Trillion galaxies in it according to Canadian astrophysicist Hugh Ross. But He says, when you pray call Me Abba.

What's in a Name?

We are expecting a new grandson in August The whole family is weighing in on what he should be called. Some name that is in the family genealogy? A popular name from Hollywood or sports? For now the jury is out! The concept of Name in the Bible is the key to understanding many of the stories. The book of Ruth, for example is play on names. Elimelech (my God is king) is married to Naomi (pleasant one) and they live in Bethlehem-Judah (house of bread and praise). Sounds like an idyllic family, right? But they have two boys called Mahlon (sickly) and Chilean (pining). However, they are born into a famine in Bethlehem. So Elimelech takes his little family to Moab. Now the blessing of God for Israel is in the land, not a foreign place and Elimelech betrays the meaning of his name by disobeying God. And Elimelech dies. The boys take Moabite women (Ruth and Orpah) as wives, again against the prohibition against foreign wives. And the boys die. The text tells us that God has now visited Bethlehem ending the famine. So Naomi and her daughter in law Ruth return to Bethlehem. When the inhabitants of Bethlehem see the women and the state Naomi is in they ask in shock "Is this Naomi?" But Naomi says "don't call me Naomi call me Mara (bitter.) Now as you Amy know the story takes a lovely turn and has a happy ending. But the meaning of name is key. As it is in Jacob's name change (trickster) to Israel (prince) and Simon's name change to Peter (rock)

Character and Disposition

[SLIDE 6] A person's name discloses his/her character and disposition. That's what we mean when we're looking for a new mechanic to work on our car. So and So has a good NAME. Character is the answer to "what is he/like?" Disposition is the answer to "what is he/she likely to do?" When Jacob was wrestling with an angel he persisted in asking the angel's name. The angel (was it God?) Says why do you want to know my name?

Abba's name

It's so important to grasp the importance of beginning a prayer - in fact the whole of the Christian life with the understanding of Abba as a disclosure of character and disposition. What is God like? What is He likely to do? Start with a careful reading of the Psalms in which the size and grandeur of God is celebrated. Read God's two books - the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Now hear that God - the One beyond time and space, Almighty, Immortal, Eternal, Other, Transcendent. He says "Call me Abba!" I once hear Brendan Manning (author of the wonderful book Abba's Child and The Ragamuffin Gospel speak and I went to chat with him after. He said to me what I'm sure he said to everyone: "I'm your Abba is very fond of you.." That's it, right? That captures character and disposition in a moment. What is the best you can think of in an ideal world and an ideal family? I think Most of us are prodigals in one way or another. Remember Jesus' story about the wayward son? If He wasn't the storyteller we'd hardly believe it. :) But it was a story about the Father's character and disposition. Can you find yourself in the story?

Praying the prayer into life

[SLIDE 7] The prayer isn't done. Jesus follows the way we may address God as Abba with a perfect segue when He says "Hallowed be Your Name" or in a more modern vernacular "May Your Name be kept holy". What does "holy" mean? Merriam Webster says "dedicated as set apart" We understand it as "particularly special". In the Bible its opposite is "profane" [SLIDE 8] To profane something is to disregard its special nature of something and use it for less than its intended purpose. When I was young, I often profaned my dad's car. When I got to use it I realized that my dad was very proud of that car and had particular ways that he used it. He had the radio set at his favourite radio station. He always reminded me to keep it to the speed limit and all that. So when I got to use it I would back

carefully out of the driveway and drove slowly down the street as far as he could see me, and then I regularly profaned his car - changed the radio station, drove like a banshee and on one occasion crashed it into a parked car.. Here's the important question. What was my job in driving his car? It was to keep it holy. Whose job is it to keep God's Name holy? Israel was given to job in the Old Testament. God's Name was in their custody. By the way they lived among the surrounding nations God's reputation was in their hands. But by the time the prophets assessed their behaviour, speaking for God "But I had concern for My Holy Name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations" (Ezekiel 36.21) So declaring what He do because of their waywardness He cites His indictment that it was not for their sake but for the sake of His holy Name which they had profaned (repeated several times). Then we learn about the New Covenant which he would bring about and, long story short, was fulfilled through Christ for us. So the apostle Paul reminds us that "you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out 'Abba! Father!'"

So whose responsibility is the answer to the prayer we pray "May Your Name be kept holy"? It belongs to God's people who have received the promises of the new covenant with sins forgiven and the Spirit of adoption in our lives. It is a responsibility but also our great delight and privilege. The more we know God's character and inclinations and deep dive into our Sonship/daughtership and live them in our world we make His Name holy.

Your Father's name [SLIDE 9]

Many years ago my mom and dad were on vacation in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island and they were taking a walk through town and happened to pass a hardware store. As they went by the owner of the store stepped into heir way and began to talk to them. "Excuse me" he said " I know we've never met and you don't know me but I'll tell you where you're from. Mom and Dad were amused and thought he must have heard them talking to each other with their unmistakable accent. He said "You're from Northern Ireland." Now it is a pretty unmistakable accent, so they said "Right!" He continued though with "I'll tell you what County even - County Down". "Well done" they said but were beginning to think this was a bit weird. But he went on "and I know what village you're from -

Annalong in the Mourne Mountains." It's not too hard to spot a Mourne accent. In that area they don't think the letter Y was used enough in the English language so they put one everywhere they can in front of a vowel. So cat becomes cyat, car becomes cyar and so on. So this guy knew his accents and even could discern the specific Annalong version. So they started to move along with this interesting encounter in mind when he continued "I'll tell you who your father was - your father was Sam Campbell". My parents were dumbfounded - they had never met this guy and here he named my grandfather. He went on "I saw you up the street and I said to myself that's Sam Campbell's son - he walks like him. Turns out this man knew my grandfather from his Brethren Assembly in Annalong.

[SLIDE 10] Was my dad insulted by this intrusion into their vacation walk? Not at all, he took it as a great complement that he walked like his father. I remember the walk as a boy because I would go along with my dad and grandfather in their walks along the shore. I remember trying to mimic their walk (hands behind their backs..)

I tell you that story because it's exactly true, that our great privilege and responsibility is simply to walk like our Father. To reflect his character and disposition in and with all of our lives.