

The Lord's Prayer

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

“Hallowed be thy name”

Scripture

Matthew 6:5–13; Luke 11:1–4; Exodus 3:1–14; Psalm 103

Main Idea

The Lord’s Prayer is so familiar to Christians, so much a part of our liturgical practice, that we do not always consider its meaning. This session focuses on the meaning of the God-language in the first of the prayer’s six petitions.

Teaching Points

This session invites learners to consider:

1. The significance of Jesus’ use of the term *Father* as he addresses God.
2. The nature of God in our Reformed theological tradition.
3. The language and necessity of the prayer in the lives of disciples.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s books

Hymnals

Newsprint and marker

Leader Prep

The first petition of the Lord’s Prayer challenges us to explore our language for God. For some, the masculine imagery implied in using the term *our Father* may be troublesome. The discussion about God’s gender may draw others away from focusing on God. The challenge for you as the leader of this session is to keep those concerns in balance as you work through Dr. Gillespie’s theological points.

As you read through the Scripture, consider the larger context of the prayer in Matthew. In chapter 6, Jesus uses the word *Father* for God several times. Commentators have pointed out that in a time when fathers had final say in all things, Jesus is offering something quite different. Read the entire chapter, and consider what characteristic Jesus is attributing to God as our Father.

Throughout the study, consider collecting and reading together various versions of the Lord's Prayer. Encourage participants to search for different versions and consider creating a bulletin board in your meeting space to collect them. Also consider using a different version of the prayer to open or close each session.

In Heart, participants are asked to read, sing, or listen to hymns that contain images of heaven. Search the topical index in the back of a hymnal to locate hymns about heaven. Consider inviting an accompanist to lead the singing.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite group members to recall stories of learning to pray, such as naming those who taught them to pray, describing favorite ways to address God, and so on.
- Ask: *Is prayer difficult? Why or why not? How much is necessary to know about God in order to pray? How much is necessary to know about ourselves in order to pray?*
- Pray the prayer in the participant's book, or sing a version of the Lord's Prayer (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, nos. 589–590).

Head

- Read Matthew 6:5–13 and Luke 11:1–4. Ask: *What differences do you notice between these two versions of the Lord's Prayer? What phrases or petitions are not present in Luke's version that are present in Matthew's version? What does this say about what elements each Gospel writer considered most central to the prayer?*
- Commentators on Scripture have pointed out that the name and character of a person are intimately linked in the Semitic thought reflected in the Bible. *Abraham*, for instance, means "father of nations" in Hebrew; *Moses* means "drawn out" (as he was drawn out of the Nile). Ask: *What names or attributes of God can you remember from Scripture?*

- Read Exodus 3:1–14. God reveals the divine name (YHWH) to Moses, a mysterious name that is translated as “I am who I am” or “I will be what I will be.” This name seems to promise that God has been and always will be. Ask: *How do these verses complement or challenge Jesus’ use of Father as a name for God?*
- Dr. Gillespie writes: “As God transcends the world, so the word *Father* now transcends our experience of fatherhood.” Ask: *What would you say to a person for whom Father is a difficult name for God?*
- Review Dr. Gillespie’s argument about the metaphorical nature of the language in the prayer. Discuss his conclusion that we can deal with the father language by letting God define the image of a parent through Jesus.
- Ask: *What other forms of address to God do we use in our prayers? What do our favorite forms of address to God suggest about our self-understanding in relation to God?*
- Ask: *What does it mean to hallow a name, to make it holy? What would life be like if God’s name were considered holy by all?*

Heart

- Ask: *What’s your first memory of praying the Lord’s Prayer?*
- Read Psalm 103. Ask: *What emotional themes speak most clearly to you from Psalm 103? Which of these themes are echoed in the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer?*
- Matthew uses the phrase “which art in heaven.” Ask: *What feelings are invoked when you think of heaven?*
- Share that many hymns and spirituals are replete with images of heaven. Sing one or more of these hymns with the group. Give the participants an opportunity to share other hymns or songs that contain images of heaven. Discuss the group’s hopes for the future as reflected in their favorite songs and images about heaven.
- Cyprian of Carthage, a leader of the church in the third century, wrote, “It is a loving and friendly prayer to beseech God with His own word, to come up to His ears in the prayer of Christ.” He goes on to point out that “God is the hearer, not of the voice, but of the heart.”¹ Ask: *In what ways does this prayer inform your personal devotions?*

1. See ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.iv.html.

Hands

- The third of the Ten Commandments says, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:7). God’s name can be used to support wrong; it can be used carelessly, as in a curse or a pious cliché. Ask: *What would count as wrongful use of God’s name in saying the Lord’s Prayer? What counts as rightful use of the name?*
- Ask: *Is the Lord’s Prayer used rightly or wrongly in our congregation’s worship?*
- The community that prays “Hallowed be your name” acknowledges the holiness of God’s name and being; it also prays that the whole creation will know and glorify God and that all things will serve God’s purpose. Ask: *In what specific ways might our congregation call the world to proclaim the holiness of God’s name?*
- Ask: *If the Lord’s Prayer defined our church’s evangelism ministry, what would be our congregation’s three priorities for evangelism?* As a group, write a prospectus for evangelism based on the words “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

Depart

- On a posted sheet of newsprint, have the group rewrite the phrase “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” in their own words. At the end of each session in this study, the group will add a paraphrase of the petition that has been explored.
- Give each participant an opportunity to share one thing that he or she learned or thought about differently during the session.
- Read Psalm 103:11–13.
- Close the session by saying the Lord’s Prayer slowly, pausing for a time of silence after each of the petitions.

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“Hallowed be thy name”

Scripture

Matthew 6:5–13 and Luke 11:1–4 The two versions of the Lord’s Prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples.

Prayer

Our Father, teach us to pray the prayer Jesus gave to the disciples so long ago. Enable us to pray it with new understanding of what we are asking you to do and with fresh sensitivity to the implications of these requests for our lives, the life of the church, and the life of the world, should our requests be granted. Deliver us from a faithless familiarity with the words we have recited so many times as well as from a dismissal of them because they are strange and unfamiliar. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

The story is told of the Scottish boy who was being examined for confirmation. “Laddie,” the minister asked, “do you understand the catechism?” “Aye, Domine,” he replied, “I understand every word of it, and it dinna mean a thing.”

How can we understand every word of a text and yet claim that it doesn’t mean anything? Interpretation theorists like Paul Ricoeur or E. D. Hirsch Jr. would say the boy comprehended the *sense* of the catechism (what it says) but had no interest in its *reference* (how it says it) and therefore could not discern in it any *significance* for his life (the “So what?” question).

Possibly some have the same problem with the Lord’s Prayer. Recorded in the Gospels of Matthew (6:9–13) and Luke (11:2–4), it has been on the lips of believers (usually in the Matthean version) since Jesus taught his disciples to say when they pray.

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
—Matthew 6:9–13 (KJV)

Every Sunday these words are recited by millions of Christians (often from memory) in diverse languages, liturgies, and denominations at worship around the world. It is the one prayer of the whole church.

But what do these words mean to us? In what sense is “Father” God’s name? What is the “kingdom” of God about? What are the “bread” we need daily, the “debts” requiring forgiveness, and the “evil” that enslaves? Moreover, does any of this make a difference in our lives? Given our Lord’s warning against “empty phrases” in prayer (Matthew 6:7), the Lord’s Prayer merits a serious effort to understand it by those who say it.

This study addresses these questions in the light of New Testament scholarship and the Reformed theological tradition. This session focuses on the prayer’s address to God (which raises the God-language issue) and the first of its six petitions.

“Our Father”

Jesus taught his disciples to preface prayer by saying, “Our Father, which art in heaven.” Luke has simply “Father,” a rendering of the Greek *patér*, which translates the Aramaic *abba*—a homey, family term used by Jewish children to address their human father in a filial bond of affection and respect. This is how Jesus addressed God. In his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest, he cried, “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36). In this he was unique. First-century Jewish prayers often addressed God formally as “Father,” but the word *abba* implies an intimacy and a familiarity with God expressed only by Jesus. At his invitation, the word was adopted by his disciples and eventually even non-Aramaic-speaking Christians (cf., Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

The Gospels attest that “Father” was Jesus’ *name* for God. A concordance confirms this by the number of times it attributes the term to him. More importantly, Jesus frequently referred to God as “my Father” (Matthew 7:21; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16:17 and passim; Luke 22:29; 24:49), indicating thereby his sense of a personal relationship with God. Luke attributes this awareness to Jesus as early as his childhood visit to the temple with his parents: “Did you

not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (2:49). But this was no childlike anthropomorphizing of God based on his experience of a kindly Joseph at home. His adult testimony was that his awareness of God as his “Father” was grounded in God’s self-revelation:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father;
and no one knows the Son except the Father,
and no one knows the Father except the Son
and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

—Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22

To know Jesus as “the Son” is to know God as “the Father” of the Son. When Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you Simon-bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:16–17). This emphasis on God’s self-revelation to us, God’s coming to us first, has long been a staple of Reformed theology. “He is ‘God toward us,’” explains German theologian Otto Weber, “but not ‘God according to us.’”¹

Jesus not only spoke of God as “my Father,” however. He also spoke to his disciples of “your Father” (Matthew 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 8, 15; 7:11; 10:20, 29; Luke 6:36; 12:32). It is a relationship he shares with them, thus the plural possessive pronoun in the address to God—“our Father.” Put simply, Jesus invites the disciples (and us) into the same relationship with the “Father” that he himself knows and enjoys. When we accept that invitation, we discover we are part of a very large family of faith. This is to say that Christian prayer is always personal but never individual.

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“Which art in heaven”

God “our Father” is further identified as the One “in heaven,” in distinction from earthly fathers. *Heaven* refers to the sky, which is up from and above the earth. What this signals is not that God is distant from us, located in some inaccessible place “up there” in outer space, but that God transcends the creation and is thus Other than the

1. Otto Weber, *Foundations of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), I, p. 401.

universe in which we live. Put simply, it tells us that our heavenly Father is *God*. Transcendence necessarily entails difference but not distance. God is always both over us and near us. What better way to express this insight in prescientific times than by pointing to the sky—away from the familiar and well-known?

But if God is wholly Other than creation, including all its human cultures and languages, how is it possible to think of or speak to God in such earthly terms as “our Father”? The answer is by figurative language based on analogy, such as simile and metaphor. Some consider such tropes as mere rhetorical flourishes that tell us nothing about reality. Oxford professor G. B. Caird maintains, however, that this is to confuse the real with the literal. He illustrates his point by telling of the school girl who wrote in an essay, “Our rector is literally the father of every boy and girl in the village.” The reality she attested to was a clergyman known to his parishioners as “Father,” he explains. But the type of language appropriate to that reality is metaphorical and not literal.² A metaphor is the use of a literal term in a nonliteral sense based on a limited point of comparison between the two. Caird warns that metaphors break down when they are identified with the wrong point of comparison or taken to be similar to the literal sense in every respect.³ Thus the priest was really the “Father” of every boy and girl in the village in a pastoral sense only. But he was nonetheless *really* their pastor. The same applies to God as “our Father.” God *is* our Father, but not in every literal sense of the word.

For Jesus, this metaphorical sense has priority over the literal understanding of human fatherhood. He taught his disciples to “call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven” (Matthew 23:9). The word *abba* was also used in Jesus’ time to show respect for older men of distinction, and the context of this verse suggests that *father* has a titular sense and refers not to biological sires but to those who crave deference and respect. Jesus denies them that honor because the term has been redefined by the God who alone is worthy of the title. The point is that as God transcends the world, so the word *Father* now transcends our

As God transcends the world, so the word Father now transcends our experience of fatherhood.

2. See G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 131.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

experience of fatherhood, even when represented by “the best dad in the world.” When used metaphorically for God, *Father* is qualitatively more than its literal equivalent.

“Hallowed be thy name”

In biblical times a name was more than a label. It disclosed the nature of the one who bore it. Significantly, the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer is that God’s (revealed) name be hallowed. The verb

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in Greek, which means “be honored as holy,” is in the passive voice (often called the “divine passive” when speaking of God), indicating that we are calling on God to honor his name by being Father to us.

Sadly but understandably, the human honoring of God’s name meets resistance today from some Christians out of concern for gender equality and in opposition to social structures oppressive to women. Feminist believers object to any theological language that seems to sanction patriarchy by grounding it in divinity. If all fathers are male and God is a father, the logic goes, then God is male and men are by creation more godlike than women and thus privileged over them. No doubt the name *Father* has been used and abused in this way.

But this is theologically erroneous. For sexuality, with its gender distinctions, is a category of creation, not of deity. The God of whom the Bible speaks is neither male nor female. In the Genesis accounts of creation, Adam and Eve reflect the divine image, but God is not in the image of either (or both). Thus *Father* conveys no sense of gender identity when used metaphorically of God. The same is true of masculine pronouns that are grammatically anaphoric, deriving their sense from the nouns they represent and being “sexless” when those words lack gender identity.

For some, however, the word *Father* is still troublesome because of negative experiences of fatherhood. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us “to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father, able and ready to help us” (Q. 100). Some (women as well as men) have not had such a father, and the father they have known spoils the metaphor.

At a meeting of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) I was engaged in a small-group discussion of God-language. A young

woman seminarian was adamant in her opposition to all male-oriented theological terminology. She shared her story of a father whose abuse of her and her mother prevented her from relating positively to the phrase *our Father*. Her preference was to address God as “Mother” because that was the parent who showed her love. In response, a seminary professor told his story of how his experience of motherhood made it equally impossible for him to relate to any female imagery of God. We found ourselves at an impasse—until someone suggested we let God define the parental metaphor through Jesus rather than let it be defined by our experience of our parents.

Theologically, that is the correct move. For in honoring his name through Jesus God reveals himself to us as One who cares about us, takes us seriously, welcomes us into his presence, and engages us in our prayers.

Spiritual Practice

Consider memorizing the Lord’s Prayer if you have not already done so. Because the King James Version of the prayer remains the most common translation in use among American Protestant congregations at worship, it is recommended for memorization (see pp. 5–6). Afterward, meditate on the name that Jesus used to address God.

Questions for Reflection

Discuss the God-language issue in the light of the lesson.

In what ways is God seeking to hallow his name today?

How might we be involved in hallowing God’s name?