



ADULT STUDY PACK

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LEADER'S GUIDE: SESSION 1

Reflections on the Lord's Prayer

A Lenten Study

Goal for the Session

The goal of this study is for all of us to deepen our understanding of the Lord's Prayer and pray it with new energy. We will state the main point of each session in this section.

"Our Father [who art] in heaven" begins the prayer and immediately draws attention to the relationship on which this prayer is based. Not only is the relationship a personal one with God, but it includes all people, as shown by the word *Our*. "In heaven" reminds us that while God is with us, God is greater than anything we can imagine. The goal of the first session is to begin talking about the Lord's Prayer and consider this first phrase of the prayer.

Preparing for the Session

- Prior to planning the session, take a few moments to pray for each participant and for yourself. Then slowly pray the Lord's Prayer in the version and language most familiar to you.
- Print out the Participant Handouts for all six sessions for each person in the group. Distribute them ahead of time, and ask everyone to read the first one. Print two or three extras, as someone may forget his or her copy or you may have newcomers.
- Read the Participant Handout before you adapt this session so you are familiar with what the participants will read.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Paired Conversation

EXPLORING

- Setting the Context
- Goldfish-Bowl Discussion
- Poems

RESPONDING

- Meditation

CLOSING

- Prayer

- Look over the suggestions in "Teaching Alternatives" to see which ones might be of particular interest to your group.
- Set up the room in advance. Unless the group is large, a semicircle arrangement of chairs works best to encourage conversation among the participants. Place your chair in with the group, rather than in a position of authority.
- Have newsprint, easel, and markers at hand to record notes you want available for further conversation during the session or in a future session.

- If you do not know each participant by name, or if they do not know one another, provide nametags at each session.

Teaching Tips

- While the Lord's Prayer seems universal among Christians, be aware of persons who did not grow up in the church or who did not learn the prayer as a child. In discussions, qualify global statements about learning the prayer without memorizing it. If your group includes two or more generations, you may find that their different experience with the Lord's Prayer is due to age. Try to avoid getting into a discussion about school prayer, should some participants remember praying it at school each morning.
- When planning a session where you want the people to participate actively, be aware of helping each person feel comfortable in the group so everyone will contribute freely. See the suggestion under "Teaching Alternatives" for a way to help the participants get to know one another.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Lead the group in the following prayer or one of your own:

Holy and loving God, Jesus taught that you are always ready to hear our prayers. We pray that we will recognize your presence with us for we seek a deeper relationship with you. As we concentrate on the prayer that Jesus taught the disciples, open our minds and hearts to new understandings of its familiar words. **Amen.**

2. Paired Conversations

Invite the participants to find partners, preferably someone they don't know well, if possible. Ask them to talk about this question for a couple minutes:

- What do you remember about learning the Lord's Prayer?

Talking about this with another person rather than the entire group will allow people who do not have extensive experience with this prayer to speak in a smaller venue. There is no need to hear reports from the pairs.

Exploring (30 minutes)

3. Setting the Context

Ask the group to think silently about these two questions:

- When or why do you usually pray?
- How do you begin your personal prayers?

If the participants have read the Participant Handout prior to the session, they may need only a little time to consider these questions, but this moment will draw them into the topic.

In the Participant Handout, Ellsworth Kalas points out that the first two words of the Lord's Prayer set the tone and focus as we pray it. This is a reminder to us that we ought to center on the relationship between God and us. Jesus calls God "Father," a name that reminds us that God has birthed us. Ask:

- What other names or words for God help you to remember this intimate and personal relationship with God?

If the group seems hesitant, distribute copies of the page "Names for God." Invite them to look over it. They will spend more time with it later in the session. List any names or words they suggest on newsprint.

Some participants may want to comment on the use of the male parent solely in reference to God. As noted in the Participant Handout, this is a significant problem for many people, men as well as women. They may be helped by the comment on the Aramaic (the language Jesus would have used) by Neil Douglas-Klotz that the root "ab" in *abwoon* "does not specify a gender and could be translated 'divine parent.'" Encourage participants to try praying using names for God that they don't usually employ.

4. Goldfish-Bowl Discussion

The word preceding *Father* is *Our*. Kalas notes that it is a significant word as well and that we are never really alone when we say this prayer because the use of *Our* reminds us of all those praying with us. Set four chairs in a circle in front of the group. Ask for three volunteers to take a place in the circle and discuss this question:

- In this prayer, who does *Our* represent for you?

Explain that anyone else can enter the conversation by taking the empty chair in the circle. That person makes a comment or asks a question and then leaves the circle. After a few minutes and before the conversation halts, stop the discussion. Thank the participants who were in the “fish bowl.” Summarize the conversation about *Our*, emphasizing the images that were named of those who pray with us.

5. Poems

The remainder of the opening line of the Lord’s Prayer focuses us on the nature of God. God is in heaven and God’s name is hallowed. Have the participants read or review the section “In Heaven, Hallowed Be Your Name,” particularly the first three paragraphs, in the Participant Handout. Provide paper and pencils for them to write couplets describing the immanence and transcendence of God. A couplet is a two-line poem that may or may not rhyme. For example:

God is as close as the breath within us,
Yet God is larger than all creation.

The goal of this task is not the preparation of a perfect poem but for the participants to think about how to say who God is as a means of interpreting this first line of the Lord’s Prayer.

Responding (10 minutes)

6. Meditation

In keeping with the meditative atmosphere of Lent, the response in each session is a brief time for quiet meditation or guided meditation. If meditation is new to the group, explain that it often feels long initially, but they will become more comfortable with the silence as they do it more often.

Distribute copies of “Names for God,” if they were not used earlier. Invite the participants to select two or three names on the list and spend time meditating on them. Focus on how this way of addressing God might lead to a more personal connection with God. Suggest that they continue this meditative practice on their own.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Prayer

Print the following prayer on newsprint, or copy it to distribute to the participants so it can be prayed in unison:

O God, the One who birthed us and all creation, your name is holy. Thank you for this time to concentrate on how we speak with you. Be with us this week. Open our hearts to you. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- If the participants are not likely to know one another, or if your group might include one or two new people, forgo the paired conversation suggested for the “Opening” section. Instead, have each person introduce himself or herself with a sentence or two. You may wish to suggest a question for them to answer, such as “Where were you born?” or “What do you like to do if you have a free hour?”
- In *Prayers of the Cosmos*, Neil Douglas-Klotz works with the Aramaic words for “hallowed be thy name” and suggests that we must clear space within us for the residing of God’s name. To do so, we must let go of some clutter in our minds to free a space for God. One might liken this to opening space for a closet within you, a closet in which to pray as Jesus recommended to his followers in Matthew 6:6. Invite the group to talk about how they might do that.
- Invite someone adept in sign language to teach this line to the group. As you pray it together at the conclusion of the session, sign the parts that you have learned.
- Invite participants or others in the congregation to say the prayer in a language other than English during the “Closing” section.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 6:5–13

For More Information

Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

Emily Gwathmey and Suzanne Slesin, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: The Lord’s Prayer in Forty Languages* (New York: Viking Studio Books, 1994).

About the Writer

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Names for God

According to God's nature and activity

Creator
Defender
Deliverer
Love
Protector
Provider
Ruler
Shepherd
Sustainer
Sovereign

In metaphors

Fortress
God of Hosts
God of Vision
Light of the World
Mother Bird
Rock of Salvation
Shield
Source of Life
Stronghold
Strength

SAMPLE SESSION

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PARTICIPANT'S HANDOUT: SESSION 1

Reflections on the Lord's Prayer

A Lenten Study

Scripture Reading

Matthew 6:5–13

Introduction to the Study

Probably most of us can't remember the first time we heard the Lord's Prayer—or the Our Father, as many put it. That's because this prayer seems to be almost everyone's possession. Even in this time of so much biblical illiteracy, the Lord's Prayer is still part of the common possession of several billion people. And for many of us, not only can't we remember when we first heard this prayer, neither can we remember when we memorized it—because our memorizing was not a conscious effort; it was simply the process of hearing the words until they were part of our very persons. Not that memorizing this prayer is a great feat. It is only a few dozen words, so few that even when we speak slowly we complete the prayer in thirty seconds.

But these few words may be the most familiar collection of words on our planet. They have been translated into roughly two thousand languages and dialects, including those for probably 98 percent of the world's inhabitants. On any given weekend they will be spoken in unison in massive cathedral-like buildings and in mud huts and in open fields of worshipers. Every priest or pastor knows, as does many a nurse or hospice care specialist, that this prayer is one of the last statements made by those who are dying. All of which is to say that there is no prayer—indeed, no



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single collection of words—that can rightly be compared to this one.

And yet, with all of that, most of us don't know much about this prayer, and we're inclined to speak it without thinking. Martin Luther, with his penchant for saying things directly, described the Lord's Prayer as the greatest martyr, "for everybody tortures and abuses it." It is mostly, of course, the abuse of familiarity. Because we say it so often and because its words have the flow of poetry, we are likely to speak it without investment of either mind or heart. Jesus warned, "In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen, who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard" (Matt. 6:7 NEB). It's ironic, isn't it, that the prayer Jesus gave us is probably the most frequent instrument of violation for the warning he gave us.

So my aim in these coming weeks is for us to come to *know* this prayer that many of us have recited since before conscious memory. Some will feel this is unnecessary; after all, no prayer could be simpler, really, than this one. But of course that's just the point. It is the simplest words, scenes, and experiences that merit the deepest thought.

Others may be uneasy with the very idea of “learning” to pray. Prayer is instinctive to us, like loving; learning to pray can therefore seem an intrusion on the private places of the soul. Still, Jesus gave us this prayer as part of a time of teaching. Matthew’s Gospel includes it in the Sermon on the Mount, and Luke’s as Jesus’ answer to a disciple who asked to be taught how to pray.

In truth, if through our time of study we are caused to *think* as we speak this prayer, it may be that we are loving God with our minds as well as with rote emotions. And if by our study some familiar phrase comes to have enlarged and more significant meaning, that will be a still greater gain.

Where Prayer Begins

A great many prayers begin with *give*. In the nearly forty years as a pastor that I taught confirmation classes, I always asked my seventh-grade students if they prayed, and then I asked how often they prayed. I still remember the boy who answered, “Whenever I need something.” It wasn’t the answer I wanted, but I was grateful for its honesty, and I recognized that this boy was probably describing the prayer philosophy of a majority of people.

But this isn’t where the Lord’s Prayer begins. Nor does it begin, however, where more sophisticated theologians say prayer should begin; that is, with adoration of God. I appreciate the logic of the theologian, and perhaps I am only splitting hairs as I make my point, because certainly there is adoration in the term *hallowed* that comes so early in this prayer. But there must be a source from which adoration, as well as the petition for giving, comes.

That mood, that holy context, is a *relationship*. Everything that follows in this prayer derives its understanding, its strength, its hope, and its responsibility from this relationship. In prayer as with all the other major issues of life, ranging from family to international affairs, the foundational issue is relationship.

Now let me hasten to say that the moment we address any prayer we imply some kind of relationship. And that’s just the point, because the address has so much to say about all that follows. Let me also hasten to say that it is right and proper enough to begin a prayer with “Almighty God,” or “Thou Great Creator,” and that at times such a phrase may best catch up our particular emotions or needs of the moment. Thus I am not suggesting that every prayer should begin as Jesus began

this prayer. Prayer has different forms of address for different moods and occasions, just as our pet names for a spouse, a child, or a cherished friend vary with time and occasion.

But Jesus had a word, and his word was *Father*. Jesus wanted us to know, above all else, I believe, that you and I are God’s sons and daughters. And let me underline again that the relationship with which we begin a prayer has everything to do with what follows in that prayer. What we call God indicates what God is to us. If we think of the concept by which we are addressing God, it will determine what we ask of God, whether we feel we need to repent, and what we think we can expect. This is why the relationship that is implied in our addressing of God is so crucial to the whole experience of prayer.

But of course I have to interrupt myself before going any further to confess that the term of address in this prayer—*Father*—is for some an almost insuperable barrier. I’ve known people who wait until this word is past before they join in the congregational speaking of this prayer. That great Anglican of another generation, G. A. Studdert Kennedy, used to say, “When I try to tell a small boy in the slums that God is his Father, I often wonder what he makes of it when his idea about fathers may be that they beat mothers and are generally drunk.”¹ And of course this is only one possible misshapen image. Others might speak with equal bitterness about a father who was always absent (a dreadful picture to be imposed on God) or one who indicated by his use of time that he considered work, career, sports, or adult friendships much more important than children (again, a dreadful picture to impose on God).

I wish instead that all of us could echo George MacDonald when he wrote, “What are thou Father for, but to help thy son?”² Alvin Rogness said of MacDonald that he spoke to God “as a child to his father,” because his father, though poor, always was so generous to him. I repeat; I wish all of us might have such an image when we speak the word *Father*.

Because clearly this is the picture Jesus had in mind for us when he made this term of address the relationship term for this majestic prayer. We think, of course, of Jesus’ story of a man who had two sons. The younger asked for an early distribution of the estate so he could enjoy his inheritance—a quite unthinkable attitude in any generation but especially in the ancient world, because it was tantamount to telling a father that he

couldn't wait for him to die. Nevertheless, the father generously agreed to the request. The young man soon wasted this inheritance, leaving himself absolutely penniless. Yet when he returned home to ask forgiveness, the father welcomed him with a grand celebration. The older brother found no joy in his sibling's return. He complained that his father had never done anything special for him (though of course he had received his share of the estate), and the father responded to the older brother's unpleasantness by saying, "Don't be unhappy; you can have a party anytime you want it." Jesus said that God was that kind of father, a father who gave generously and forgave extravagantly, showing an astonishing measure of patience and mercy. Obviously this is the kind of picture we're supposed to keep in mind when we pray, "*Our Father* . . ."

The apostle Paul, in teaching the first generation of Christians how to understand the nature of God, instructed them to use a familiar word in addressing God—a word both common and intimate in their world. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15–16). *Abba* is a household word in the Aramaic language; it was so in Jesus' day, and it is so still today. I remember a preschool boy running to his father in an airport waiting room in the Middle East, calling out, "Abba! Abba!" As a village preacher once said, it's the kind of word you can say even if you don't have any teeth, a word for infants or the helpless. Paul understood what Jesus was saying about God when he called him *Father*.

I say this with some measure of caution because currently we live in a culture that is low in reverence and high on chumminess. Perhaps, unlike the first-century world, we don't need encouragement to be familiar with God. But mind you, this is a loving familiarity, not a presumptuous kind. Indeed, true love ought never to be presumptuous, whether it is love for God or family member or cherished friend. But when we speak to God as *Father*, it should be with a sense of confident relationship. We are using the word Jesus urged us to use, and when we use it we should remember the picture that was in Jesus' mind when he used the word.

Our Father

When we address God in this prayer, we don't say simply, *Father*. Jesus taught us to say, "*Our Father*." Whether we speak this prayer with a congregation of worshipers or alone in some private chamber, at this moment in the



The immanence and the transcendence of God are equally true and equally important, each so true that their concepts must be blended in one breath.

prayer—that is, at the very beginning, when we are setting the very mood of the prayer—we are not alone. We are praying as if someone—perhaps many someones—were praying with us.

I believe this is true in two ways. From a theological point of view, the *Our* in this prayer is made up of the one who is praying and the One who taught us this prayer—Jesus Christ. Each time you and I say this prayer, we can rightly sense that Jesus prays it with us. It is he who gave us this plural form of the pronoun, so when we say *Our Father*, we have reason to feel ourselves united to him in our worship and in our petitioning. This realization strengthens our prayer: we are never speaking these words alone but always with the One who gave them to us and who taught us to say them in the plural.

That is the theological mood of *Our*. But there is also a warm, embracing, demanding sense in the word as well, because it has also a social sense. Because of the plural pronoun with which this prayer begins, we dare not allow this prayer to become a selfish prayer. This prayer does not permit us to come to the place of worship alone. We are compelled to stand there with the whole of humanity, putting our arms around the entire human race. You may wonder on what logic I make the *Our* so inclusive. Might it not be that Jesus meant only those persons who believe as we do? I feel the word has to take in the whole human race because the Scriptures tell us that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16). I must conclude, therefore, that God wants the whole world to seek God. The degree to which they do so and the number who do so is not my concern; my only issue is that my embrace never be so small as to shut out anyone whom God would bring in.

When you and I pray *Our Father*, we look to one side and see the One who gave us this prayer and who even now joins us in praying it—all of which is a wonderfully reassuring thought as we pray. Then we look to the other side and see all those brothers and sisters—all the kin in the human race, the wonderfully varied throng of those who reach to the Father, however poorly or haltingly. It is both

inspiring and sobering to think of the multitude that is joined with us when we say *Our Father*. Human as we are, I suspect that there are times when we prefer a smaller circle. But the prayer will not allow it. Not if we pray in the spirit of the One who first gave us this prayer, whose name we attach to it.

In Heaven, Hallowed Be Your Name

But something more must be said. This prayer does, indeed, begin with a relationship, but if we stop with *Our Father*, we haven't captured the whole of the relationship—not even when we add the affective quality that comes with *abba*. Listen: “Our Father *in heaven, hallowed be your name*.” Yes, God is to be understood as our Father, but a Father whose dwelling place is heaven. And while we call God by this family name, Father—or even *abba*, which is equivalent to our use of *Daddy*, or for some, *Papa*—this name is to be spoken with accents of awe, because this name is *hallowed*.

See then what a fascinating tension we have in this prayer. The God whom we address is so beyond us that we identify the residence as heaven, and the name is so eternity shaping that we must acknowledge it as hallowed; and yet it comes to us in the most intimate of language, the relationship of breakfast-table and bedtime stories, of fun shared, and of tears comforted.

Over the centuries theologians have argued about the immanence and the transcendence of God. Some emphasize that God is infinitely immanent, as close as the air we breathe, while others reminds us that God is utterly transcendent, so much so as to be quite beyond our grasp. This prayer, in its opening phrases, gives us

a living answer. The immanence and the transcendence of God are equally true and equally important, each so true that their concepts must be blended in one breath.

So this is where prayer begins—not only this prayer that we call “the Lord’s Prayer” but all of prayer—it begins with a relationship. And while it is a relationship that we seek to capture in a human image, we recognize also that no image can adequately contain it. And no matter how private our place of prayer, we can never speak this prayer in the singular; it is always *Our Father*, because we speak it by the grace of the Savior who gave us the prayer and who empowers it, and because the God to whom we address this prayer has a heart for all humankind; if I shut out others while I speak these words, I deny the One who gave us the prayer and the One to whom it is addressed.

This is where prayer begins. And if we begin rightly and proceed in faith, this prayer touches the ultimate power of the universe—a power that can transform our daily lives and give new hope to our very universe.

About the Writer

Ellsworth J. Kalas is interim president and faculty member of Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as a United Methodist pastor for thirty-eight years in churches in Wisconsin and Ohio and on staff of the World Methodist Council. He has authored more than thirty books, including Grace in a Tree Stump and Men Worth Knowing.

Endnotes

1. G. A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Wicket Gate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 62.
2. George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), 116.