

The Greatest Prayer

Bible Text: Matthew 6:5-15

Lesson Focus: When we say the prayer Jesus taught us, we connect with God.

Big Question: What's the big deal about the Lord's Prayer?

Key Words: RELATIONSHIP, PETITION, EXAMPLE, ACCESS, HOLY

Prepare

QUICK PREP

- Jesus invited his listeners into a relationship with God that was direct and fundamental.
- Prayer works because God is faithful, not because we are.
- Jesus offered the Lord's Prayer as an example.
- We can pray for temporal and eternal things.
- There are no prerequisites for prayer. The lines of communication are always open with God.
- Luther divided the Lord's Prayer into seven petitions, an introduction, and a conclusion.
- Luther considered "Our Father in heaven" to be the introduction to the Lord's Prayer.
- The introduction holds in tension two great truths about the God to whom we pray.
- Jesus calls God "Father," a parental image that implies real intimacy in our relationship with God.
- Because of this metaphor, we can see God as close to us, deeply invested in us, because we are God's as children are related to parents.
- Jesus addresses the God in heaven. This way of talking about God helps us see that God is beyond the boundaries of time and space.
- God is at the same time both intimate and deeply mysterious. God is far more than we can ever name.
- We are invited to pray to God with a promise that we will be heard and that God will respond.
- Martin Luther believed that God's name is already holy. We pray this prayer to help remind us of our part in making God's name holy.
- In the Large Catechism, Luther talked about how our words and actions can contribute to the perception others have of how holy God is.
- As a community of faith and as individuals, Christians have been known to sin, both by actions we commit (sins of commission) and actions we should have done (sins of omission).

DEEP PREP

When Jesus first spoke the words we now know as the Lord's Prayer, it was in the context of a teaching on practical piety. His first hearers were deeply concerned with how they might express their faith. As in many of the stories we have received about him, Jesus was in the midst of compare-and-contrast rhetoric. In speaking about prayer, he suggested that prayer is best done in private, implying that the public prayer of hypocrites was less about communicating with God and more about communicating with those who observed the prayer. Similarly, Jesus pointed out how the Gentiles hoped that through their wordy phrases they would capture God's attention. In contrast, Jesus taught that God knows what we need even before we ask.

Nevertheless, we are urged to pray in the midst of our shortcomings. We can pray in our worst

moments and in our best. We can ask that we be saved from the time of trial, knowing full well that such times will come. And then we can also ask that we be delivered from evil when it comes upon us, or when it rises up from within. The God we see in Jesus does not demand perfection as a prerequisite for relationship. God hears our prayer as we are. It's a solid Lutheran notion—what makes our prayer work is not *our* effort, but *God's*. Prayer's primary purpose is to communicate with God, and it should not be a matter of show, which negates its purpose. (Martin Luther had similar complaints about the public prayer of his day. See his discussion of prayer in the Large Catechism.) Jesus then offered an example of how to pray (Matthew 6:9-13; see also Luke 11:2-4)—simple, direct, and broad reaching.

It seems that we humans persistently distort prayer in the very ways Jesus sought to debunk. Sometimes, because we seek to be faithful, we start keeping score, even with prayer. For example, many people are deeply uncomfortable praying aloud. You could say that private prayer is the preferred way. However, we are also invited to pray for each other, and there can be great power in offering the prayers of the community in a community setting. But if we are overwhelmed by worry that our prayer is not adequate, or doesn't measure up to what another person can do (a pastor or any other we might perceive as being more fluent or confident), we have lost sight of the point. We are invited by Jesus' own example to pray for both the deepest matters of our souls and the more temporal concerns of daily life. The Lord's Prayer shows us that nothing is too far-reaching or too mundane to pray for. We can ask that God's reign be manifest in our time, and we can ask for daily bread. Our entire lives are included between these brackets. We may also want to pray "beautifully" to glorify God, but what God seems to want most is that we simply pray—that we reopen and maintain the connection we have with God.

By addressing God as Father, Jesus reveals an intimacy with God. Framing God as a parent implies a relationship that bestows an identity and is generative in nature. The metaphor of Father suggests that we are the product of God's loving creation, that we have a place in God's family, that we are heirs of God's largesse, and that God's concern for our well-being will stretch beyond our own lives to the lives of our children, and to generations well beyond. We are bone of God's bone and flesh of God's flesh in so many ways. We sinners have been given a deep connection to the holy God—a blood connection—that cannot be denied or broken no matter how we may behave.

In his discussion about the first petition in the Large Catechism, Martin Luther wondered why we worry about making God's name holy. Isn't it already? God's name is holy because God is, not because of anything humans could do or say. But, Luther pointed out, what we do in God's name can also enhance or hinder the holiness of God's name. That is, our words and actions become a mirror by which others interpret or perceive God's holiness. On the other hand, when we look at the dismal record of Christian actions throughout history, we find plenty of examples of unholy behavior. Both on a large scale and on a smaller, more personal scale, we have not always lived up to the holiness and intimacy with God that we long for in this prayer.

The intimacy of "our Father in heaven" speaks of access. We have an "in" because we are in the family. We don't have to worry about whether we have the necessary status to get God's attention. We don't have to buy God's favor. As God's children, we belong. Of course, this metaphor breaks down after a time and may break down earlier for some than for others. If one who prays has never had a loving family, if he or she does not know the comfort of belonging, or if a parent was the one

needing care, then this metaphor might not carry the same deep meaning. Some would also benefit from pushing the basic notion of the metaphor—the intimacy involved in a parent-child relationship—beyond the role of father to include mother. There are even more ways to talk about God's loving care when the feminine is also included, but the foundation is the same. We are God's, heirs, and we are beloved.

Jesus also speaks to God "in heaven." This is the second great truth about the God to whom we address this prayer. While "Father" implies a God who is close to us and imminently accessible, "in heaven" implies a God who is at the same time far beyond our imagining. For most people, a God needs to be powerful in the face of forces and events that dwarf us and our ability to control and cope. We need a God who can stand up to the darker forces of life and come out the victor. In Jesus, of course, we see just such a God (albeit one with surprising ways of getting there). "In heaven" is less about where God is located and more about God's purview. Heaven is the preeminent place, a place where all else can be seen and considered, where the view is limitless, where wisdom is boundless, and where the needs of all can be considered at once. In faith, this God precedes time and space and is beyond them both.

So we have these three truths about the God to whom we are invited to pray. We reach out to (1) a God who is as close to us as our own flesh and blood, (2) a God who is as mysterious and vast as unknown solar systems and the stars that inhabit them, and (3) a God who has chosen to convey holiness to the world through us! What kind of gift is this—that we should be invited to know and be in relationship with such a God! When we pray, "Hallowed be your name," we are praying that the world might find God's name to be holy, and that we might be contributors to that reality. We can go a long way toward making God's name holy through our words and our actions.

Luther reminds us that we are not only invited to pray, we are commanded to do so. We can do so with confidence. We can speak from our deepest hearts. We can listen with confidence and hope. God will listen. And God will respond with both the tenderness of a loving parent and the power of the creator of the universe. Good work done by Christians can do much to spread God's holiness around. If we are riveted on God's welcome to all, if we view all of God's creation as equally worthy, if we trust that God will provide all that we need, and if we hear God's call to defend those who are marginalized in our society, think of the positive impact we can have, both on our world and on God's "brand identity."

ADOLESCENT CONNECTION

What's the big deal about the Lord's Prayer?

For teens (and adults), praying may be difficult and stilted. How should we address God? What is appropriate to say or ask? How can I tell God what is troubling me? Jesus understood human nature very well. When his disciples asked him how they should pray, he taught them. He provided instructions for how to pray to be in communication with God. This simple but beautiful prayer is time honored and appropriate for those who have lived a total life of faith, as well as for those just beginning their faith journey. When it becomes rote memorization and we race through it, we are losing the beauty and essence of our conversation with God.

BAPTISMAL CONNECTION

In the Rite of Affirmation of Baptism, a five-part question addresses each confirmand's intent to continue in the covenant God made with them in Holy Baptism. Here We Stand resources help students—with support from parents, leaders, and the entire congregation—prepare to answer this question as they continue in their lifelong faith journey.

Today's lesson focuses on the clause "to live among God's faithful people" (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 201; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 236).

In baptism we became part of God's family. With the Lord's Prayer, Jesus introduced God as a loving parent. Jesus invited his listeners into a relationship with God that was direct and fundamental. That same invitation is extended to all people, everywhere, every day. We truly are a family with God, and with all of God's faithful people!

Gather

WELCOME AND REVIEW

As students and leaders arrive, play upbeat music in the background. Welcome them, thank them for coming, and sing a few favorite songs with the group if that is your congregation's tradition. Thank adult leaders for their presence and for helping pass on faith to the next generation.

Ask students to recall the previous week's Lesson Focus, Key Words, and Big Question. Reward their efforts with small treats or prizes. (*Before serving any food, always check with caregivers for kids with food allergies.*) Ask for volunteers to capture last week's lesson in their own words. Affirm all genuine responses and keep going until you're satisfied everyone has been oriented.

Project this week's Lesson Focus, Key Words, and Big Question on the screen or write them in large letters on your presentation board or overhead slide. Invite students to recite them with you and repeat a few times.

Help kids dive into the Key Words by asking for definitions and/or providing these definitions:

RELATIONSHIP: what bonds people with each other and with God.

PETITION: a request one person makes of another.

EXAMPLE: something that serves as a pattern we can imitate.

ACCESS: the ability to gain entry to something or communicate with someone.

HOLY: a characteristic of a person or thing related to God.

GETTING STARTED

Choose one of the following three options to introduce the lesson. Then lead students in the Opening Prayer.

Option 1: Game Option: The Name Game

Sing "The Name Game," a popular song from the 1960s (Shirley Ellis, *Connoisseur Collection*, AISN: B00005A0XS). Use the names of class members as well as Bible names. See what happens when you try Obadiah and Ezekiel. Here is an example using the name Ruth: "Ruth, Ruth, bo-buth, banana fana fo-futh, mee mi mo-muth, Ruth!"

Debrief the game with these questions:

- Why are names so important?
- How did it feel to hear people play with your name?
- What would it feel like if people used your name as a swear word in anger? How does this change the way you think about using God's name when you're angry?

Option 2: Guest Speaker Option: Our Father's History!

Invite a rabbi to come to your class with a Torah scroll. Ask the rabbi to show you the name for God that was revealed to Moses, and to explain why Jews use the term *Adonai* for God.

Invite a Roman Catholic priest or a congregational member who grew up in the Catholic Church to visit your class. Ask them about the "Our Father" in their church. How is it prayed, and what does it mean to pray the prayer with a rosary? Ask the guest to bring a rosary to demonstrate this way of praying the "Our Father."

Debrief the presentation with these questions:

- How was our speaker's view of God as our Father like our church's? How was it different?
- Is God a parent to all people?
- How is God a parent to you?

OPENING PRAYER

Provide handouts or project the following prayer for all to see.

Leader: Hallowed be your name;

Group: Holy be our response to you.

Leader: Hallowed be your name,

Group: And may we call on you.

Leader: Hallowed be your name,

Group: In this kingdom and the next.

All: Amen.

Teach

MY FAITH STORY

Ask kids to respond to the Big Question: What's the big deal about the Lord's Prayer?

Then share a part of your own faith story using the suggestion below or another way to share about the prayers in your life.

Who taught you the Lord's Prayer? What prayers have surprised you the most in your life? Tell your students the truth about prayer in your life. Does it happen? Is it formal or informal? What would you like it to be? Tell them about someone you know whose life seems grounded in prayer.

OPEN THE BIBLE

Have students open their Bibles to Matthew 6, and ask for a volunteer to read verses 5-15 aloud. Assemble "Do" and "Don't" lists on a board, citing Jesus' specific instructions to the disciples regarding prayer. Invite a student to pick an item on either list and demonstrate it for the class.

Lutheran Study Bible page 1614: Read the World of the Bible sidebar for Matthew 6:5 together. Ask students why men prayed in public in Jesus' time. Imagine what it would be like if there were people praying loudly on every street corner now!

Lutheran Study Bible page 1614: Read the Bible Concepts sidebar for Matthew 6:9-15 together. Ask students to name some commonly used terms for "father," making a list on a board. Ask them which names they can imagine using for God. Are there names they can't imagine using for God?

Assign students five minutes in pairs to search their Bibles and find other prayers. They should write down the biblical references and be prepared to read these prayers aloud.

Bring a Bible in another language to class and make copies of the Lord's Prayer from that Bible. Practice reading this version as a group until the class feels the rhythm of the prayer in another language.

OPEN THE CATECHISM

Student Book page 301: Invite students to find the introduction to the Lord's Prayer in the Small Catechism. When Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray, he encourages them to ask God for what they want (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). How we ask depends on how we view our relationship with God. Demonstrate an appropriate prayer posture if God is so awesome and powerful that you would die if you saw God. What posture might you take if God is a wrathful judge just waiting for the opportunity to punish you?

Look at Luther's explanation of the introduction to the Lord's Prayer. How does Luther suggest we view our relationship with God? How should we ask God for what we desire? Create and demonstrate an appropriate prayer posture for a child approaching a loving heavenly Father. Consider how viewing God as Father helps us understand who God is and how we can approach God. What doesn't work for you about this image? Brainstorm a list of things you could ask God to

do that would benefit others. Write a prayer in which you ask these things with courage and confidence.

Student Book page 301: Invite students to look at the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, and ask a volunteer to read it with its meaning. Why is it such a big deal to call God something as personal as "Father" rather than "Your Highness" or "Most Mysterious and Important Ruler"? Notice, too, that it is "Our Father," not "My Father." The voices you hear praying with you are those of your family, your church family, a world full of God's children.

Student Book page 301: Invite students to work with a partner to find the first petition (request) in the Small Catechism. Luther points out that God's name is already holy—there is nothing we can do to change that. However, we do have the power to make God's name holy in all that we say or do. Think of situations from the last week. In which situations was God's holy name honored? Dishonored? (Use the second part of Luther's explanation to help you in this task.) Prepare a short skit of one of these situations. Have the class decide if God's name was being honored or dishonored. If God's name is being honored, pray, "Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven." If God's name is being dishonored, pray, "Preserve us from this, heavenly Father."

QUIZ SHOW

Host a quick quiz show to review what you've covered in the lesson so far. Project the PowerPoint slides where your contestants and other students can easily view the questions and answers. If practical, set up a quiz show environment with horns or buzzers for the contestants. Organize two or more teams. After you ask a question, the first team to answer the question correctly gets a point. If the answer is wrong, another team gets the chance to answer and win the point.

1. Jesus taught that God knows what we need . . .
 - a. most of the time.
 - b. even before we ask. (*Correct*)
 - c. but our moms think they know even more.
 - d. but needs to be reminded about what we want.
2. What is the proper posture for saying the Lord's Prayer?
 - a. Arms raised in a football-type victory position
 - b. The fetal position
 - c. Any difficult yoga position will work.
 - d. There is no "proper posture" except openness to God. (*Correct*)
3. Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer . . .
 - a. on a slow afternoon for fishing.
 - b. to emphasize their relationship to God. (*Correct*)
 - c. because he wanted to test them later on.
 - d. so they would be ready for confirmation.
4. "Our Father" reveals two great truths about God. They are . . .
 - a. that God is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments.

- b. that God loved to pray and raised Jesus to do so too.
 - c. too complicated to explain here.
 - d. that God is both close to us and mysteriously everywhere. (*Correct*)
5. We can pray to God as "our Father" because . . .
- a. we go to confirmation.
 - b. our parents give to the offering each Sunday.
 - c. God thinks of us as God's children. (*Correct*)
 - d. we have those words memorized.
6. Our Hebrew ancestors believed that knowing someone's name gave you . . .
- a. less embarrassment at a party.
 - b. something to name drop.
 - c. power. (*Correct*)
 - d. too many entries in your organizer.
7. When we pray, "Hallowed be your name," we are praying . . .
- a. that God will remember us.
 - b. that the world will find God's name to be holy.
 - c. that we might contribute to God's holy reputation.
 - d. all of the above. (*Correct*)
8. Christians who work to make the world a better place are . . .
- a. really rather naive.
 - b. just feeling guilty.
 - c. witnessing to the holiness of God's name. (*Correct*)
 - d. few and far between.

TAKE A BREAK

Take a break and have a snack. Pass out celery sticks and raisins to students. Ask them to put a few raisins on their celery sticks and then turn the celery upside down. What happens to the raisins? Tell the students you have something that will connect the raisins to the celery sticks. Pass around cream cheese and knives or craft sticks for them to use as spreaders. Have the students spread cream cheese on their celery and then gently push the raisins on top of the cheese. Ask them to turn their celery sticks upside down one more time before eating. What happened this time? As they eat, explain that the cream cheese connects the raisins to the celery just like Jesus' prayer connects us to God, even when it feels like our lives are turned upside down. (*Before serving any food, always check with caregivers for kids with food allergies.*)

Connect

GROUP CONNECTION

Select one of the options below to explore in your small group. Then finish with the Best/Worst

activity and prayer.

Option 1: Object Lesson Option: Identity Theft

Create some fake credit cards and bills in the name of God. Have the class imagine they are part of an identity theft ring. Check God's credit rating and statements and figure out how God spends money. Search God's wallet for the organizations God belongs to.

Debrief the activity with these questions:

- What did you find out about God from this activity?
- Are there prayers in God's wallet?
- What about God's identity might be surprising to you?

Option 2: Music Option: Jesus, Take the Wheel

Play the song "Jesus, Take the Wheel" by Carrie Underwood from *Some Hearts* (19 Recordings Limited, 2005). *Please preview this content to determine its appropriateness for your setting.*

As a young mother's car starts sliding on the ice, she starts praying desperately for the safety of herself and for her child. Her prayer is, "Jesus, take the wheel." Ask students to think about how and when they pray as they listen to this song.

Debrief the activity with these questions:

- What is prayer?
- It took sliding on the ice to prompt this young mother to pray. What prompts you to pray?
- In what circumstances can we pray?
- What are some ways you can communicate with God this week?

Option 3: Learning in Motion Option: The Labyrinth Walk

This project could last throughout the time you are studying the Lord's Prayer. Students can use tape or small pebbles (depending on your space) to create a labyrinth. Classic designs are easy to research. Many cities offer labyrinth experts who have portable labyrinths that unfold in large spaces. Your students can create their own labyrinth and walk it, discovering the power of moving prayer. On an even smaller scale, you can make copies of labyrinths and ask students to trace the path with a finger. Even this experience will trip something new in students' brains and open them to new ideas about prayer as meditation.

Debrief the activity with these questions:

- How is walking a labyrinth or following a maze like prayer?
- Is it hard or easy to pray silently as your body is moving? Why?

Best/Worst and Prayer

Go around the group and have each student share the best and worst thing from his or her week. Remind them to pay special attention to (for example) the person on their right, as they will be praying for that person in a moment. Alternate prayer partners from week to week.

Explain that Muslims pray five times a day, facing the direction of Mecca. Have students kneel with their foreheads touching the floor and pray silently for their prayer partners. Ask them what

they think it would be like if Christians stopped what they were doing five times a day, knelt, and prayed.

BIBLE CONNECTION

Pass out pencils and Student Sheets. Look at the front of the Student Sheet together. Pick a volunteer to read each bullet point aloud for the group. Talk about the points with students.

- Why does prayer work?
- What can we learn from Jesus teaching this prayer?
- How does it feel to know you have direct access to God?

Turn to this week's activity called "The Greatest Prayer: True/False Quiz." Let your kids pair up to work through the activity page together. After a few minutes, discuss the answers as a group.

CARTOON CONNECTION

Use the cartoon and questions on the Student Sheet to kick off a conversation.

- What do you think of your own name?

Some people like their names, some people don't. Regardless, our names are how people know us, and are important.

- How does it feel when someone gets your name wrong, especially if they say it wrong on purpose?

There's an old saying: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me." Is that really true? Names can be used to honor and respect, or to tear down and hurt.

- What are some ways we act as if God's name is not holy?

There is a commandment specifically about this. Direct students to look at the Second Commandment in the Small Catechism.

STUDENT BOOK CONNECTION

Student Book page 188: Read through "How to Tell the Difference between the Law and the Gospel" together. What parts sounds more like the Law? Which parts sound more like the Gospel? Are there parts of the Lord's Prayer that seem like both? Start with the first two words of the prayer: Our Father.

Student Book page 193: After reading "How to Pray" aloud, have three volunteers come forward and assume three different "prayer postures." Award the most creative one by applause. Ask students if certain prayer postures help them focus more on praying.

You could read the class some examples of "famous pray-ers' " prayers and quotes about prayer. For example, Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is 'Thank

you,' that would suffice." Print these simple quotes and prayers as bookmarks and pass them out for students to keep in their Bibles.

LIFE CONNECTION

Talk about last week's Life Connection. Ask your group what they did this week to live out last week's lesson. What did they learn? What might they do in the future to keep living out that Life Connection?

God is like a perfect parent who is always there for us. Are there things you can't tell your parents but can tell God? Direct students to look at this week's Life Connection on the Student Sheet. Encourage them to offer these things up to God in prayer, and ask them to report on these prayers the next time you meet.

Send WRAP UP

Kids this age have lots of questions about right and wrong, stories in the Bible, and faith and life. Provide time for them to ask questions. Remember, there isn't always a right answer, but encouraging discussion is great! Questions help kids explore their faith. Help them explore on their path to confirmation.

After their questions, ask one or more of the following questions to connect your conversations with the Lesson Focus:

- Do you think the Lord's Prayer is mostly about the words, or mostly about the comfort it gives us because we know it so well?
 - How are people to pray to God as "parent" if they don't feel close to their parents?
 - Why is praying so difficult sometimes?
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CLOSING PRAYER

Light a candle, dim the lights, and say the Lord's Prayer as a group. (*Before lighting candles, check your local fire codes and your congregation's fire policies regarding the use of open flames.*)

BLESSING

Before students leave, be sure to give each of them the following blessing as you trace the cross on their foreheads.

May you listen to God, the one who taught you to pray. In the name of the Father+, and of the Son+, and of the Holy Spirit+. Amen.

