

THE LORD'S PRAYER:
THE ADDRESS**'Our Father in heaven,**

What, exactly, is a prayer? What are we doing when we pray? Is it a wish? Is it a conversation? Is it a shopping list? Prayer isn't exactly any of these things. A prayer is the Christian's way of communicating to God, and prayer falls under the doctrine of the Second Commandment, where he commands us to use his name properly: to pray, praise, and give thanks.

In prayer, we speak to God. If, later today, you don't remember anything from this sermon except one sentence, then let it be this: In prayer, we speak to God, but prayer is not where God speaks to us. God speaks to us directly in his word and he communicates with us also in his Sacraments. But in prayer, it is us speaking to God.

When I am praying for forgiveness, I might remember that in God's word he says, "Your sins are forgiven," or "Neither do I condemn you,"^a but that's God speaking to us through his Scriptures, not through our prayers.

But God invites us and even commands us to pray. But think of prayer as an invitation and even as a request from God. God wants all his children—all who believe in him—to pray. And he hears us, always, or else he would not ask us to pray. Isaiah 59 begins: "**Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.**" But then Isaiah says, "**But your iniquities have separated you from your God...so that he will not hear.**" This and other passages like it tell us that God does not hear the prayers of unbelievers, because by rejecting Jesus, they have rejected forgiveness, and without forgiveness we cannot approach the throne of God, not even in prayer.

But since we are forgiven, and because we put our trust in Christ and his forgiveness, we are able to approach God's throne as if we were the Son of God himself. We are not—but God's Son, Jesus, has given us his status, as Paul says in Galatians 3: "**You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.**" This wonderful fact brings us to our text, which is the very beginning line of the Lord's Prayer: "**Our Father in heaven.**"

When we pray the first word, "**our,**" we are placing ourselves immediately into the family of all Christians; all who believe in Jesus Christ who was crucified for our sins. This is not only the present family of believers, but in the past as well. So when you begin to pray, "**Our Father...**" you are not alone in your faith. If you were the last living Christian on earth before Christ was

^a Luke 7:48; John 8:11

still yet to come on the last day, you could still pray, “**Our Father**,” and be correct, and be comforted.

The second word of the Address, “**Father**,” brings us right into God’s lap. Perhaps there are some here who don’t have any memory of a father. And perhaps there are some who did not have a kind or loving father. Those are some of the crosses that some of God’s people bear. But all of us have one loving Father, our Father in heaven. Imagine your ideal of a loving father, not a sinful man like your human father—like the one my four sons endure—but a perfect father.

- He is strict when we need his divine strictness.
- He is patient when we need his patience.
- He is gracious—always.
- He provides for us—always.
- He is forgiving—always.
- He loves us—always.

And he invites us to pray to him, to tell him what we desire. We usually classify our prayers under four headings or types, and if these help you to think about your prayers, then God be praised:

1. We pray for spiritual blessings—for forgiveness, for strength to fight temptation, for insight and understanding of his Holy World and how to apply it in our lives. God always says *yes* to these prayers.
2. We pray for earthly or temporal blessings—health, enough wealth to live on, rescue when we need rescuing, or guidance for our lives.
3. We also might intercede, or pray on behalf of someone else. For friends, family, government, and even for our enemies—that God would be merciful to them, that their hatred for us might be turned aside, and that they would come to faith in Christ.
4. Finally, we also praise God for what he has done, and we give him thanks. Our table prayers are included among these, as are most of the Psalms.

The word “**in**” is not something to be ignored, even though it’s a very short word. By saying “**in**,” we are confessing our faith in the God of the Bible, the one who is truly in heaven. An unbeliever or a doubter is someone who either would never pray at all, or who would wonder whether there really is a heaven at all, or whether there is a God who is there. But the Christian doesn’t wonder and doesn’t doubt, but prays boldly and almost without thinking: **Our Father in heaven**. It is as if we say, “What other God would we ever pray to?” And that’s exactly how God wants us to think of him. There is no other God except our one God, the Triune God: Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit. It isn't wrong to pray to Jesus, or to the Holy Spirit, but usually we either pray to the Father or simply to the one true God without distinguishing between the persons of the Holy Trinity. That's why we never say "they" or "them" as we think of God, but only "He" or "Him." The doctrine of the Holy Trinity transcends our human grammar, and we know that the Holy Spirit knows what we're saying even when we're not quite sure how to say it.

Finally, our Father is in **Heaven**. And right away, we remember that he is not only there, as if heaven is a prison he cannot leave, but rather it is his throne, and so when we say, "Heaven," we mean his eternal abode, his dwelling place, and the place he has promised to bring us to, as well, when the Resurrection takes place.

So you see that all of Christian doctrine is under these words, "Our Father in heaven," which cannot be prayed by someone who doesn't believe them, and which reinforce the faith of everyone who does pray them.

By praying these words, we can also be comforted by all that Scripture teaches—especially the forgiveness of our sins. Without that forgiveness we could never have been invited to pray this way. But because we are covered by all the words and works of Christ, and especially by the cross of Christ and the empty tomb from which he rose again, we are God's holy children, forgiven, purified, and sanctified. Our prayers are heard and answered by our loving God.

Here at St. Paul's over our 150 years, our predecessors and perhaps some who are here today used Luther's German translation for a very long time, and we have used the King James and NIV versions each for about the same amount of time since. It might be, that as we use this prayer, we might fall to not thinking about it as we pray it—which is also why we preach about it from time to time. We don't want to pray mindlessly, but prayerfully. And so we study this prayer along with all the Word of God, and we also pray that it will never become a thoughtless act, but the most thoughtful thing we ever do, taking every word and syllable to heart, as we carry our prayer to our Father in heaven. Amen.

END NOTE:
“...which art in heaven”
“Thee, thou; art, shalt, etc.”

The “classical” English pronouns like thee, thou, and thy were familiar pronouns. That is to say, they were the way you would speak to your friends, your spouse, your children, or your parents. If you met a stranger or were speaking formally with the king or doing business with the milkman, you would use the formal pronouns like you, your, and yours, which we still use today.

The old forms of certain verbs, like shalt, hast, and art, are the forms used with those intimate or familiar pronouns. A way of remembering what to use is, take the “t” from thee, thy, or thou, and tack it onto the end of the indicative helping verbs like “shall” or “will” or “has” or “are,” which because shalt, wilt, hast, or art. This was not true of the subjunctive or imperative, however, or participles, so you would not say “Thou shalt not kill,” but “Thou shall not kill.” And you would say, “Thou goest” for “You go,” but you would keep it at “Thou art going” and not “Thou art goingest.”

So if you’re going to use thou or thy but haven’t gotten to it yet in the sentence, your listen would already know that this was coming because you would be saying art or shalt, as we do in the older Lord’s Prayer translation, “Our Father which **art** in heaven, hallowed be **thy** name.”

Biblical Greek did not have two sets of pronouns the way Classical (really Elizabethan) English did. Greek was more like contemporary English. So the Lord’s Prayer sounded to the Greek ear more like our NIV translation sounds rather than the old King James version did.