

Enrolling in the School of Prayer: Class 1 of 6

By Major Brian Coles

[read slides 1-6, sound on]

[slide 7, blank] You're playing a game of golf with your buddies. But you're really struggling with your game.

After a particularly frustrating round, on your way home you get a call from Butch Harmon,

offering to fly you out to the Pebble Beach Golf Course, in California, and give you some tips on how to improve your game.

This is an opportunity to receive top flight instruction from one of the world's best golf instructors. Do you think you'll take him up on it?

You're working hard but still struggling financially. The bills just keep piling up.

Then you get an email from Warren Buffet, one of the most successful investors in the world,

offering to give you some guidance for investing and will even start you out with a small portfolio. Will you accept his offer?

Your latest trip to the doctor wasn't a good one. In fact, it was a wake-up call for you. You've got to lose weight and start exercising or risk a heart attack.

As you're thinking about what to do, the doorbell rings and it's Dr. Oz. Dr. Oz is Vice-Chair and Professor of Surgery at Columbia University.

He also directs the Cardiovascular Institute and Complementary Medicine Program at New York Presbyterian Hospital. On top of all that he has his own TV show.

Dr. Oz offers to walk you through a program to help you lose the weight and get fit. Will you take him up on it?

You're *struggling* with your prayer life. You feel *guilty* about your prayer life –

guilty that you don't prayer often enough, or guilty that you don't really know how to pray, or guilty that you can't stay focused when you do pray.

If you can relate to that struggle, you might just identify with this **[slide 8, run video]**.

I think most of us can identify with Ben Stiller's character in one way or another when it comes to prayer.

I won't ask you to raise your hands, but I'm guessing that the vast majority of us here this morning would love to have a better prayer life than we presently do.

So what would you do if a "prayer expert" came along who says he can teach you all you need to know to experience God more personally and powerfully than you do today?

Wouldn't you want to soak up everything you could from that teacher in order to more effectively communicate with God?

Well, the good news is we *have* that teacher - the GREATEST teacher who ever lived, though he is much more than just a teacher. His name is Jesus.

After noticing the deeply intimate and powerful connection that Jesus has with God through prayer –

one of his disciples gets up the courage to say to him in Lk. 11.1, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

And Jesus does. [slide 9] So on that day they all enrolled in the school of prayer. I’m going to invite all of us to enroll in the school of prayer too.

But before I do, like those first disciples of Jesus, we must make a request. And the request is this: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

In making this request, we’re going to have to make time to actually pray; to enter into the practice of prayer.

Otherwise this 6-week course will only be six weeks of words, and you don’t want that, neither do I.

If you’ll let Jesus be your teacher, if you’ll sign up to learn from him, and if you will practice his prayer,

six weeks from now you will pray differently than you do today. So let’s join Jesus in the school of prayer.

Your textbook for this course is the Bible, in particular, the gospels. You will find two versions of this prayer recorded there.

One in Matthew, which we’re looking at for our classes in this course, and one in Luke, which has small but interesting differences.

[slide 10] On the screen is an English translation from Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus.

Let’s read it aloud together.

Our Father in the heavens,
Let your name be made holy;
Let come your kingdom, Let be your will
Even as in the heavens,
So on the earth.

Give us bread that we need day to day.
Forgive us our debts,
Even as we also have forgiven our debtors.
Let us not enter into trial,
But deliver us from the evil one.

Thank you. [slide 11, blank] We often say the words of this prayer so quickly that we can miss the important things Jesus is teaching us.

So let's go back and revisit this prayer Jesus taught us. We'll begin by focusing on the first few words.

As we do, we will discover 3 of the most basic areas of confusion a lot of us have when it comes to this prayer.

As we seek to clarify these 3 areas of confusion, I think we will have a more meaningful sense of connecting with God when we pray.

[What then, is the first area of confusion we have when it comes to this prayer?]

[slide 12] The 1st area of confusion we have relates to WHO we are talking to when we pray.

In Matthew's account, c.6, Jesus begins this prayer with the words, "Our Father." This is a very important opening to the prayer, and I'll tell you why in a moment.

But first, let me ask you, “Do you ever find your mind wandering when you pray?” Psychologists refer to this condition as ‘mindlessness’.

For some of us, that’s a problem that we have from time to time. We’re physically present, but our minds are drifting off somewhere else when we pray.

One of the blessings of knowing this prayer so well – as many do - is that we can say it anywhere at anytime.

The downside of knowing it so well is that we can say it mindlessly. That’s why I had us read the prayer from an Aramaic translation.

Let me give you an example of how mindlessness works. I’ll ask you a question, and you tell me the first thing that pops into your head. Ready?

- The tree that grows from an acorn is called an? [Oak.]
- The dark vapour that rises from fire is called? [Smoke.]
- The sound a frog makes is called a? [Croak.]
- The white of an egg is called the? [yoke?]

See, that’s what I’m talking about. You just proved the point. The white of an egg is called an egg white!

That’s mindlessness, and mindlessness is one of the biggest obstacles to prayer.

Jesus says in v.7 of Mt. 6, “When you pray don’t keep on babbling like the pagans do” – like those who rattle their prayers off mindlessly.

Even for Christians, prayer can sometimes deteriorate into a mindless monologue.

And this prayer Jesus taught can become a mantra repeated mindlessly.

So, at the very beginning of this prayer, Jesus invites us to focus our minds by starting with these words, “Our Father.”

When you use a name to begin a conversation, you make a statement about the nature of the relationship you have with the other person; of how close you are to them.

For example, in a fairly formal relationship, you say Mr. or Mrs., Dr. or Professor.

If it’s a friend, you call them by their first name.

If it’s a really close friend you might have a nickname for them.

If it’s a family member there might be a name that expresses the fact that this is a uniquely close relationship.

For example, when my kids speak to me it’s usually “Dad.”

So if I answer the phone and the first word I hear is “Dad,” that establishes a certain context between me and the person who is speaking to me.

Everything else they say, any request they make, any question they ask, all takes place within the context of the relationship that’s expressed by that one word “Dad.”

Getting back to our prayer in Mt., there are records in the Old Testament of people using the *image* of a father to describe God.

But there is no record of anyone ever *addressing* God as “Father” in prayer until Jesus does.

The consensus among bible scholars is that [slide 12a] Jesus begins this prayer with the Aramaic word אַββֵּי, because Aramaic was the spoken language of his day.

In Jesus' day, אַבבֵּי was used to speak warmly of one's father [as in 'dear father'].

Now the Aramaic אַבבֵּי appears 3 times in the NT – Mk. 14.36, Rms. 8.15 and Gal. 4.6.

In each case the Gk. expression ὁ πατήρ [the Father] immediately follows אַבבֵּי for those who may not know Aramaic.

Evidently אַבבֵּי was so important to Mark and Paul that it was retained even when writing in Gk.

The reason for this is because Jesus himself uses אַבבֵּי as a name for his Father, and so he wants to teach his disciples to follow his example.

אַבבֵּי affirms both respect in addressing a superior and a profound personal r'ship between the one who uses it and the one addressed.

X'ns have often used the word 'Father' for God and given that word meanings based on experiences with human fathers.

That can be good or bad depending on the kind of father you have or don't have.

The way forward is to ask, "How did Jesus define the term 'Father' in his teachings?" The best definition I can find is in his parable of the prodigal son in Lk. 15.

In Lk. 15, the image of a father goes beyond anything his culture expected from a human father.

In fact, Jesus is creating a new image for father that he intends to use as a model for God.

He presents a portrait of God whose tenderness, love, forgiveness, compassion, and care has no limits.

This, I feel, is the only picture that legitimately defines אֱלֹהֵינוּ Father, whom we approach in this prayer Jesus' teaches us.

So this opening designation, "Our Father" establishes the kind of God to whom we pray.

When you pray, focus on whom you're talking to as you begin; let there be no confusion about who we approach in prayer.

Jesus, the master teacher, says, "Start with these words, "Our אֱלֹהֵינוּ – our dear Father,

whose tenderness, love, forgiveness, compassion, and care has no limits." That's the 'who' of prayer.

[What then, is the 2nd area of confusion we have about this prayer?]

[slide 13] The 2nd area of confusion we have relates to WHERE God is when we pray.

The prayer continues, "Our Father *in the heavens*" – both the Aramaic and Gk. noun is plural.

We can be confused and struggle with prayer because when we say, "Our Father *in the heavens, or in heaven*" we tend to think of God as being very distant from us.

The result of this kind of thinking is that God becomes remote and hard to access and we'll often express that in odd ways.

For example, Beth has a fear of flying. She is a Christian and her pastor reminds her, "You know Beth, Jesus does say, 'I am with you always.'"

“No he doesn’t” she replies. Jesus says, ‘**Lo**, I am with you always.’”

Of course the word ‘Lo’ does not mean low as in low altitude, but ‘Lo’ as in ‘Behold’ or ‘See’.

So it’s important to have a proper X’n understanding of what Jesus means when he says ‘Our Father in the heavens’.

The idea that heaven is a distant place, and thus God our Father is distant because that’s where he lives, is misleading.

Many influential writers, not the least hymn writers in the last few centuries, have been influenced by some form of Deism

which believes that God is far removed from this present world,

and so they have all too easily written about God’s dwelling place as ‘way beyond the blue’ and so on.

But a more biblical view of heaven is not as a place ‘out there somewhere’ but as an invisible dimension of our present reality.

Francis Schaeffer explains it this way;

‘there is an unseen portion [of the world] as well as a seen portion... They are not mutually exclusive but are parts of one reality...

To understand reality in our universe properly, you have to consider both halves – both the seen and the unseen realms.”

Heaven, then, is an unseen realm of our present reality where God is.

But what about all the references in the Bible to looking ‘up’ to heaven?

Surely that leads us to believe that heaven is a place ‘out there’ or ‘up there’ somewhere. Not necessarily.

It could be that the idea of heaven being 'up' is merely a way of stating its 'otherness'. Heaven, though usually unseen, is where God dwells in all his glory.

So the idea of 'up' reinforces the holiness and majesty of God while not necessarily saying anything about its location.

As Donald Guthrie puts it, "Looking up to heaven is a reminder that God is not earthbound rather than saying anything about its location."

Jesus clearly does not see his Father as dwelling in a place 'way beyond the blue'.

As he prays to his Father in the heavens he speaks as if God is right next to him.

That helps us when we pray; to know that God, though unseen, is near to us, and hears us when we pray.

So when you pray, "Our Father in the heavens" you're not saying, "Our Father in a galaxy far, far away."

You're saying, "Our Father who is exalted and majestic yet is near to me; is closer to me than the air I breathe; is right here, right now."

[What then, is the 3rd area of confusion we have about prayer?]

[slide 14] The 3rd area of confusion we have relates to WHAT we are to pray about.

What should we pray about? Well, God wants us to pray about everything. And we'll look at that in more detail as we progress through this course.

But for today, [**slide 14a**] the very first thing we should pray about is that God's name be made holy.

Traditionally we say, "Our Father in heaven, *hallowed* be your name."

What does hallowed mean? Few people today understand what it means to 'hallow' something

and are quick to associate 'hallow' with Halloween or 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows'.

[slide 15, blank] The word 'hallow' comes from the Gk. ἁγιάζω [hag-ee-ad'-zo] which means 'to make holy'.

And to make 'holy' is to make something 'different, distinguished, or distinct'. And God's name is different, distinguished, or distinct from every other name. It is set apart.

So when we pray this part of the prayer we are setting apart God in our lives and living.

We are treating him with the honour and respect due his name.

We are recognizing his supreme worth and attaching great value to his name.

In OT times, the primary name for God, YAHWEH, was considered so sacred that the Israelites would not even speak it.

To speak it would somehow cheapen or dishonour God's name.

Now, 4,000 years later, we live in a world where his name is spoken so casually and profaned so frequently.

Even Christians sometimes respond carelessly to something with the phrase, "O MY GOD" without ever realizing what they're saying.

But Jesus says, "As you begin your prayer, make your first request to hallow God's name; to make his name holy in your life."

Martin Luther has a very helpful take on this. He says, “God’s name is already holy... but we ask in this prayer that it be made holy in us.”

In other words when we pray this part of the prayer, we are saying to God, our $\text{\AA}\beta\beta\tilde{\alpha}$ Father,

“Help me to live with such an awareness of your presence in my life

that my character and conduct reflect your hallowedness, your holiness, as I interact with those around me.

Hallowed be your name in my life, Lord. May I make you name holy in my life as I represent you to the world.”

When you think about it in that light, it’s a bit sobering, isn’t it?

To think that, for some mysterious reason, God, our $\text{\AA}\beta\beta\tilde{\alpha}$ Father, has allowed the holiness of his name on this earth

to be bound up with the character and conduct of his people; with you and with me.

We are to be a reflection of the holiness of God to the eyes of a watching world.

When we pray this part of the prayer with THAT in mind, we realize the great privilege and responsibility we have...

and the phrase, “Hallowed be your name,” – “may your name be made holy - in my life and living” - takes on a whole new level of significance as we pray it.

And that’s just the beginning of this prayer.

[slide 16] Over the next few weeks, with God’s help, you and I are going to learn from Jesus the greatest prayer ever prayed.

And if you'll enrol now to be with us during these classes, you will learn to pray like you have never prayed before.

Major John is going to play an arrangement of *The Lord's Prayer* for us while we take time to consider enrolling in the school of prayer with Jesus as our teacher this fall.