

her death a pastor friend of his used and ancient prayer to give them peace as they prepared for Madeline's death. These are the words:

Our thoughts are not your thoughts O Lord and our ways are not Your ways. We confess to you that we cannot see Your divine hand in the suffering of Madeline. Help us, we beg You to see that in this evil there is some purpose, beyond our grasp and comprehension. Our minds are confused. Our hearts are in distress. Our wills are lost and weak and our strength is gone. ...Lord have mercy on this child. Do not prolong the agony. Do not allow pain and suffering to increase. We know not what to ask You; give us the grace only to say "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us faith for we believe O Lord; help our unbelief. Be with your child Madeline and suffer with her, heal her and save her according to Your own saving plan, established before the creation of the world. For you are our only hope O God and in You we take refuge. Father, Son and Holy Spirit now and ever and unto the ages. Amen.

This prayer writes Smith prepared his wife and him for the moment of his daughter's passing. How? It took our story of father, mother and sick child and put it in context of God's story. It places suffering in the proper place of God's own saving plan. It reminds us that God is good, and God is still in control and God's kingdom is never in trouble.

Smith comments:

When we join our story to God's story in which our good and beautiful God gets the last word, then everything begins to make sense. The pain is still real but it becomes bearable. We can then in time begin to move on. And we can begin to see beyond the suffering and look toward the wide spread mercy that surrounds us.³

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil- God is faithful. God does not lead us anywhere or through anything that God is not already there with us.

When we say heavenly father we are saying God is faithful.

On this Father's Day many of us will spend time with our Father or some of us will reflect on a Father now in heaven. Some of us will give thanks for Godly fathers and some of us will sadly either have no reflection of an earthly father or maybe one that is not positive. We

cannot make the mistake that the woman did after the class on prayer. We must not project our misgivings about fatherhood on the heavenly father, but instead see the heavenly father as one who shows us true fatherhood. In that terminology of God, as father let us also affirm, the goodness and love that this term is meant to reveal. What do we mean when we say father in reference to God? We mean that our God is the God of the Jesus story. We mean that our God is strong and able. Our God provides our every need. Our God is loving and forgiving. Our God is faithful and will always lead us to that which is the best for us. That is what we mean when we say father.



What We Mean When We Say Father

John 14:6-14, Matthew 6:9-13



As James Bryan Smith ended a session on prayer, he began his prayer with "Dear heavenly Father..." A woman approached him after the prayer and session full of tears. She said "I love that you taught us about prayer, but when you started your prayer by calling God Father you lost me. I had a terrible father, and I cannot think of God as my Father." Smith comments, "While I felt badly for this woman, not using the word Father is not the solution. The problem is that we begin with our understanding of what father means and then project it upon God." Smith goes on to explain that when Jesus describes God as Father we need to let Jesus define what the word means and not our own experience.

Quoting Karl Barth, Smith asserts "It is not that there is first of all human fatherhood and then so called divine fatherhood, but just the reverse; true and proper fatherhood resides in God and from this fatherhood what we know as fatherhood among us men is derived."¹

Smith raises an important question with his response that applies not only to our topic this morning of the use of the term Father for God, but also in other considerations. The woman who approached Smith had made a terrible mistake that we all make and that is to project our experience, as the definition of what is true instead of the God's Word.

It is easy for us to say yes that is what the Bible says, but that is not my experience or my feeling and we then easily project our experience upon the scripture. When we think our experience is the truth more than God's Word, then it can lead us to sin, misunderstanding and missing God's good intent for us. So it was for the woman Smith describes in his book. She had obviously had a horrible experience with an earthly father. She had obviously projected those characteristics upon the heavenly father. Her only recourse she thought was to dismiss the words of Jesus and the overwhelming use of the term in the scripture. In doing so she not only erred, but also at a deeper level missed the fullness of understanding God and God's love. She also missed the opportunity to transform

her thinking of fatherhood from a human perspective.

I share this story today because on this Father's Day I want us to consider what we mean when we say Father in referring to God. Jesus uses this term describing His own relationship with God. Jesus tells us that when we pray we should pray in this way "Our Heavenly Father." What then are we saying when we say Father in reference to God?

As Smith suggests, we should let Jesus define Father for us in regards to God the Father.

Before we think about what do mean when we say Father it is important for us to also say what we do not mean when we say Father in reference to God. When we use the term Father or even a masculine pronoun concerning God we are not saying that God is male in the sense that we are male or female. God is not like you and me. God is not gender specific as we think of the physical male or physical female. In Genesis 1 the name for God, Elohim, is not only a plural term but also a non-gendered term. As we spoke of a few weeks ago with our study of the Trinity, the first word about God in the Bible is a term that implies God in plurality and yet, singular in purpose. The term also does not have a sense of masculine or feminine. In fact, when God makes humanity in Genesis we find God saying let us make man, Adam, or humanity, in our own image. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female he created them.

This one verse in Genesis 1:27 asserts some incredible truths about God and us. First of all, God in plural or Trinity creates man, plural in God's image and that image both expressed in male and female. Thus, God is neither male nor female as we think of male and female and both men and women are created in the image of God. However, there is also something else here we must note and that is the use of the masculine pronoun in describing God. In pronoun use in scripture referring to God is a masculine pronoun. However, it must also be noted that masculine pronoun use is also considered a genderless use as well. For example the use of

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¹James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2009) 59.

²Smith, 68.

³Ibid, 66-67

man to describe all of humanity both male and female.

It is also important for us to note that there are feminine references to God's character in scripture. The Spirit in the Hebrew is a feminine term however when referenced there is the use of masculine pronoun. In 26 places in the Old Testament and New Testament some characteristic of God is used and we would term this a traditional female characteristic. A good example of this would be Jesus stating that he longed to gather Jerusalem to Himself like a mother hen gathers her chicks but they were unwilling.

So, here is what we can say for sure from this brief textual reflection. God is neither male nor female as we think about gender. God possesses the qualities that we would traditionally say are male or female. Both men and women are created in the image of God. The final thought is what I want us to focus on this morning and that is with all this being so, the Bible overwhelmingly portrays God with more masculine qualities and Jesus refers to God as Father throughout His own expression of His relationship with God. So, sometimes the mistake is made by some to dismiss God's fullness of character by dismissing the masculine characteristics of God because of their own projections upon the masculine terms their bad experience or their own misgivings. The sad part of this is that when we dismiss God as father or even dismiss some of the masculinity that is expressed about God, we miss the Bible's revelation of God's goodness and greatness.

For example to say that God is Father or that God is King implies God's reign, rule and headship over us. When we fail to use such terms, which are masculine, we miss the fullness of God's character.

So, what we don't mean by Father is that God is male and not female. God is Spirit and is neither. So the question is, why does Jesus use the term Father and teach us to pray "Our Father?" Well Jesus tells us by defining God in what we call the Lord's Prayer. Let's explore this idea of what do we mean when we say heavenly father.

First, to call God heavenly father as Jesus did is to identify the God whom we serve and pray too. What do I mean by identification? The word for God in Genesis 1 is a term for god or gods throughout the ancient near east. It could be refereeing to various gods. However, in Genesis 2 we get a new name. We get the name Yahweh. We get the name that identifies the God of creation as the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac. We identify just whom we are speaking about when we say God. The same is true with the use of the term Jesus teaches us.

I would assert to us that when we use the term heavenly father we are even as Jesus did identifying the God we serve. There are many false gods not only in the Bible, but also in our world. In our own culture there are those who make a reference to God. It might be at

work, or a celebrity at an award show, or even someone of another religion. In some cases we might assume that we are speaking of the same God. However, sometimes a conversation reveals that the god to which another is referencing is not the same God as revealed in scripture and fully in Jesus Christ. Some might use the term God and simply mean a Spirit behind the universe, or a god who is creator, or a god who is good. It might be a way of someone expressing a sense of faith in general revelation. The person who acknowledges that there is something beyond this experience and some "higher power" behind it all might use the term God. If that were the case, I would say that is great. That is a first step, but many times more conversation might reveal that the god of which they speak is a god of their own construct and not the God of the Bible as revealed fully in Jesus.

When we say the term heavenly father as Jesus taught, we are identifying the God we serve. We are saying we belong to this particular revelation and story of God. The God we are praying too, the God we serve is the God of creation, the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, the God of David, the God of the prophets, the God of the promise and most of all we are saying that God is the God as fully understood and revealed in the person of Jesus.

Jesus says it plainly in John 14. If you really knew Me, you would know my Father as well. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him. Phillip says, "show us the Father and that will be enough." Jesus replies "Don you know Me even after I have been among you such a long time. Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father."

When we use the term Heavenly Father we are making identification. This is the revelation we belong too. This is our story. Our story of God is the story of Jesus.

It is Jesus who shows us the Father. Let's look at those qualities expressed by Jesus.

The first characteristic I notice about the Father is that the heavenly father is strong. God is a ruler. God's kingdom is to come on earth as it is in heaven. God is a ruler of a kingdom and there is strength and might.

When we say Father we are saying God is one of might and strength. Our God is a stronghold. Our God is able. In our God is strength. The Bible gives testimony over and over again to the strength we find in the Lord. The Lord is my refuge and strength an ever-present help in trouble. Those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.

I preached a funeral for one of our members several months ago. As we sat talking with the family about this husband and father, one of the daughters made a comment as she thought on memories of her dad. She said my dad was so strong. I can remember as a child he

would come through the door and say daddy is home and then he would flex both biceps and we would run and grab hold and swing back and forth while he just smiled and laughed. My dad was the strongest man I knew.

Of course God's strength is not simple physical strength, but what an incredible picture that the children of God can find in the strength of God find that release to laugh and smile because our God is strong and mighty. When we say heavenly father we are speaking of strength.

When we say heavenly father we are speaking of provision. Give us this day our daily bread. It is the part of the prayer that makes us aware that God is our provider. We might work, earn and strive, as we should, however the one who acknowledges God as father also recognizes that even the ability to work and earn is a gracious gift from a generous heart. God is our provider.

The story is told of a little girl at her birthday party who wanted a particular gift that year. As she tore into the many gifts that were brought to her party, she one by one would open them and since it was not the gift she desired or the one she thought she deserved, she would roll her eyes or snub her nose when discovering it was not her desired gift. She simply tossed these many gifts into a pile completely disappointed and upset she had not received her desired gift. Those who came to the party had great discomfort as they watched the spoiled little girl discard gift after gift without even a thought. There in a big pile were gifts given in generosity only to be discarded as something of little or no worth.²

We must ask how are we different? Day after day God bestows on us out of God's generosity life, friends, housing, food, and for most of us in this room not just enough, but more than more enough and yet we would dare ask "Does God care for me? Does God notice me?" Just because we do not get what we want does not mean God does not provide. When we say heavenly father we are saying God is a God of provision.

When we say heavenly father we are saying God forgives. Jesus says we are to pray to the heavenly father to forgive us our debts or trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us. Jesus is saying that only do we need to forgive as God has forgiven, but we need to be forgiven by God. Today we give thanks to God for God forgives.

When we say heavenly father, we are saying we need forgiveness. Why do we need forgiveness? The Bible teaches us very plainly that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of us have missed the mark.

No matter how we try to do good, be moral, be kind, do what it right we can never be good enough to remove our sinfulness away from us. We, as human beings, are sinners. That is we must recognize that on our own there is this sin problem. This sin stands between God and us. It keeps us from having a relationship with the God who created us now and also for eternity. However, God loved us so much that when we could do nothing about our sin, God did something for us. God sent his only son Jesus to solve our sin problem. When Jesus died on the cross he did so for our sins. All of our sins that we have committed and will ever commit were placed upon

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Him and He became the sacrifice for our sins. Why did that have to happen? Because disobedience to a Holy God has consequences because God is holy and wants us to be holy. Thus, a price had to be paid. Jesus paid that price. So that our sin can be removed from us and we can be forgiven.

This is the way Paul describes it... "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." What we deserved was spiritual death. What we earned and was rightly ours was this death. Yet, God

through Jesus gives us a gift of forgiveness and life. It is a gift that we cannot earn. It has already been done for us. All we must do is receive it. All we have to do is admit to God that yes my sin is real and I need your forgiveness and confess that Jesus is Lord and we will be saved. We will be forgiven.

When we use the term heavenly father as Jesus used, we are affirming that this is the story. We are affirming that our God is a loving and forgiving God and through God's plan of salvation through Jesus we can be forgiven. This is what we mean when we say heavenly father.

When we say heavenly father we are affirming God's faithfulness. Jesus concludes by telling us to pray that we not be led into temptation, but delivered from evil. God will not lead us to any place that is not for our best and good. That is an affirmation of God's faithfulness. God can be trusted not only with our dying that is going to heaven, but God can be trusted with our living. God will not lead us to any place, situation, attitude or even test that is not for our good. That my friends is a mature place of faith. It is the mature Christian who can say like the patriarch Joseph what you meant for harm God has meant for good.

As maybe you can tell the book "The Good and Beautiful God" by James Bryan Smith was important in my reflection this week on this topic. So I want to share with you a word from his own personal experience of pain and suffering. In his book he shares that his daughter Madeline died in infancy after multiple attempts to save her from a terrible chromosome disorder. On the day of