

Jesus said, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, you Father will not forgive your sins.”

In his book, “The Finishing Touch,” Chuck Swindoll says, “I don’t know anyone who would build a summer home at the base of Mount Vesuvius. No family I know is interested in vacationing in a houseboat on the Suez Canal, or swimming in the Amazon near a school or piranhas, or diving with the sharks off the coast of Florida, or moving into a home on property that straddles the San Andreas fault.

Some things just make no sense at all; like lighting a match to see if your gas tank is empty, or petting a rhino to see if he’s tame. They have a name for people who try stuff like this: they’re called ‘Victims.’”

And yet there are Christians running loose today who take risks much greater than these. Who are they? They’re the ones who rewrite the Bible to accommodate their lifestyle. We all know some. Outwardly, they seem to be your basic believer, but down inside, they are fully engaged in “Operation Rationalization.” They’ve

become experts at rephrasing or explaining away the truth of the Bible. Here’s some examples:

“I can’t be happy married to her, so I’m leaving, and I know God will understand because I know that above all things, *He wants me to be happy.*”

“So I got in a little deeper than I intended. Yeah, the deal’s a little shady, but nobody’s perfect. *That’s what grace is for, isn’t it?*”

“I know that this has been considered immoral in the past, but times have changed. God gave me this desire, so obviously He wants me to enjoy it.”

“Hey, life’s too short to get all hung up on the small stuff – it’s not like we’re under law, you know.”

Whenever they run across Scripture verses or principles that attack their position, they alter them to accommodate their practice. That way, two things can occur: All personal desires are fulfilled, and, All guilt is erased. That way, everybody can do their own thing and nobody has any reason to question anybody else’s actions. If someone does, they’re a legalist.

This kind of thinking is but one consequence of bad theology, and it is this, among other things, that we’re trying to avoid as we continue in our series on theology and doctrine. We said last week that we all do theology, but we need to make sure that the theology we do is good and right.

We established a case for this last week. Today, we begin with the question, “Who is God?”

Now, of course you understand we’re never going to be able to answer this question fully in 20 minutes or so – that’s like saying, “explain to me the universe – in twenty minutes, explain to me the secrets of the earth, explain to me the mind of a woman...” you get the idea.

But there is a passage that I think paints a pretty comprehensive picture of our God. The passage is Matthew, chapter 6. Matthew 6, verses 5 through 15. You could turn there, if you have a Bible. This is Jesus’ teaching on the Lord’s prayer, and let me tell you why this is a great passage to begin to discover the character of God.

Earlier this year, I was dealing with some church business, and I had to communicate with a local man whom I’d never met, but I very much wanted our meeting to be positive. Well, Pastor Dwight knows the guy, so I asked him, “What’s this guy like? And so, in answering my question, he told me how to communicate with him. He told me what to say, what I should probably avoid saying, what kind of humor to use and to not use, what was important to him and what was not important to him.

You see, in teaching me how to communicate with the man, I was learning what the man was like. And the same principle is true here, only we have a much better teacher, no offense to Pastor Dwight. Jesus Himself,

God made flesh, as He teaches us to pray, reveals to us I think, in this very short encounter, the basic elements of the nature of God. Let’s take a look.

Verse 5 there, “Jesus said, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.”

The first thing I learn about God here is that He is a *God of integrity*, and He not only *appreciates*, He *demand*s integrity in those who follow Him. God does not play games...mind games, games of status or position. He’s not impressed by people who try to make themselves out to be something they’re not. He knows us – He knows who we really are. He’s not so shallow as to be impressed by our name-dropping and hypocritical acting. And so He says to us here, “Don’t waste your time trying to impress me by pretending to be someone you’re not – you’ll do just the opposite.” God appreciates integrity because He Himself is *honest*.

“When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. *Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*”

God is honest, and *God is honorable*. God doesn’t just sit around in Heaven making random edicts that

we're to follow...or *else*. With every command He gives, God is leading us somewhere, somewhere *good* for us. He rewards us when we follow Him; when we do things His way, when we do what He asks. His rewards may be divine – He may bless us in a supernatural way. Or, His rewards may be more natural – they may help us live in health and in harmony with His creation and its laws. God is honorable in that His goal is our good, not our destruction or our annoyance. In all that He does, God seeks our good. We can trust Him. He and His commands are honorable.

Verse 7: **“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”**

God is honest. He is honorable, and He is omniscient. He *knows*...without limitation, without qualification. Isaiah says that God looks to the ends of the earth.¹ Job says that He sees the whole of the Heavens.² The Psalmist says that He knows all of the secrets of the heart.³ Jesus tells us that God knows every sparrow that falls to the ground,⁴ and that He has numbered every hair on every head,⁵ some of us make that job pretty simple. Here, Jesus says that God knows what we need before we ask Him. God knows our hearts.

¹ Isaiah 46

² Job 28

³ Psalm 44:21

⁴ Matthew 10:30

⁵ Matthew 10:29

We can't fool Him. No matter what we do, we won't surprise Him.

Now, some throughout history have believed all this, but have extended the idea of divine omniscience to mean that, not only does God *know* all things, He *determines* all things. He *causes* all things.

But those who believe that have some problems. If God causes all things to happen, then God is the cause of sin, which Scripture clearly teaches could not be. It also means that the idea of human free will must be rejected. We'll talk more about this in the next couple weeks, but let me just say today that the Bible clearly, explicitly and implicitly, teaches that humans have the genuine ability to choose their responses to life, to others, to God and to His Word. In fact, the free will of humanity is perhaps the single most significant part of us that makes us like God – that's what it means to be created in His image. Just like God has the ability to freely choose, so we have that ability – we know we do because of the fall of Adam and Eve. You see, they were created good, and they were given the ability to choose what they would become, and we know how they chose.

We need not conclude that because God knows all – He *determines* all. God's foreknowledge of events does not destroy the reality of other influences than the divine influence. For example, God knows whether a marigold seed will bear a flower, but that knowledge doesn't take the place of all the natural forces other than God's own direct action, upon that flower.

In fact, almost all of the great theologians of the past – Origen, Justin Martyr, Athanasius, Augustine, Hilary, Aquinas, even Calvin...talked about God’s ability to know, not only the *actual* future, but even to know all the alternative futures that *could* be and *could have been* due to human free will – this is called “God’s knowledge of the hypothetical.” Try and get your head around this. God knows everything, not because He determines one path, but because He knows every possible path that has or would have resulted from every possible decision that every human being has ever made or will make.

Now I don’t know about you, but to me, that speaks of God’s glory much more incredibly than His simply creating a world and controlling it like a puppet on a string.

God is omniscient – He knows all things.

Verse 9: *“Jesus said, ‘This, then, is how you should pray:’”*

God is honest, honorable, omniscient, and *communicative*. God invites us to communicate with Him – directly. He’s interested in you and me. He is not aloof; He is not, as the Bette Midler song a few years ago suggested, ‘watching us from a distance.’ He invites us here, and in many other places in Scripture, to do what He created us to do. To walk in the garden with Him in the cool of the day. Our God wants a relationship with you and me and every person in the world. God communicates with us.

“This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven,’”

These opening words of Jesus’ prayer reveal to us the chief role of God. God is many things, to be sure, but He is first and foremost, a Father. All of His other roles should be seen in light of His Fatherhood.

Let me explain what I mean. We all fulfill many roles in our lives, but there is one role that has pre-eminence over the rest.

Who am I? What are my roles in life? Well, I’m a car nut. I’m a carpenter. I am a gardener. I am a pastor, a mentor, a counselor, a preacher (some of you may want to debate that one). I am a son of my parents. I am a father to my children. I’m a guide, a disciplinarian, an encourager. I am a husband, a provider, a lover, a friend. But while I am all these things and more, I am, first, a child of God. That fact colors every other thing I am – every other thing I do, every other role I fulfill.

In the same way, Scripture reveals God to us in many ways – He fills many roles. We know that God is a King – the King of all Kings. He’s the Creator. He’s our Redeemer. He is our Judge. God is a Friend, a Counselor, a Priest, a Shepherd – the list goes on.

But cover to cover, as He’s revealed Himself to us in Scripture, the preeminent role of God is Father. He told Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Israel is my first-born

son.⁶ In Deuteronomy, we're told that we're disciplined as God's children,⁷ and then that God is the Father of Israel.⁸ In Isaiah and the other prophets, Israel is referred to over and over as the "children of God," and God is said to be "their Father."⁹ In Jeremiah, God says, "I am a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born."¹⁰ In the Psalms, God is the "Father to the Fatherless and the protector of widows."¹¹ These are just a few examples.

Then, when we hit the New Testament, the Fatherhood image of God really takes off. The book of Matthew alone refers to God as Father 43 times. In John, God is referred to as Father 109 times.

This emphasis on God's Fatherhood doesn't mean that He or His other roles are lessened or weakened. He remains the Creator. He's absolutely the King. He's certainly the Judge. But what He's trying to communicate to us is that we're to see Him as the "Father-King." The "Father-Judge," which changes the nature of the relationship. The King is still completely sovereign. The Judge is still absolutely holy. But He wants us to understand that there is an intimacy in our relationship with Him. There is a blanket of love that covers the whole thing.

⁶ Exodus 4:22,23

⁷ Deut 8:5

⁸ Deut 32:6,18

⁹ Jeremiah 3:19,22

¹⁰ Jeremiah 31:9

¹¹ Psalm 68:5

At dinner one evening, little Tommy misbehaved. His father, always a strict disciplinarian, warned him, saying, "Tommy, if you don't behave, you'll be sent to your room." Tommy didn't listen. Ordered from the room, he heard his father's last words, "And there will be no more food for you tonight."

Later, in bed, Tommy's behavior began to bother him. He was hungry and he felt very alone and he began to cry.

Then he heard a noise on the stairs and footsteps coming closer to his room. His door opened and his father came in. Closing the door, he came over to Tommy's bed and said, "I love you son, and even though you have to stay here in your room, I've come to stay with you."

This is what Fatherhood does for the relationship, you see?

This emphasis on the Fatherhood of God we owe to John Wesley. He unwrapped this gift for the world to see. Now, I'll admit that sometimes Methodists have gone too far with this...they've made God too soft, too tolerant, too lenient...they've not taken seriously enough the holiness of God. And that's a grave mistake.

But to understand God apart from His Fatherly love is just as grave an error, if not more so, because it robs God of His most prominent role. In the eyes of many in our world, God seems to be nothing more than

an unfeeling tyrant, a crusty old man, or an emotionless force that rules with no compassion, that generates random decrees without a feeling in the world about who they help or hurt.

That's not the God of Scripture. God is honest. He's honorable. He is omniscient, He's communicative, and He reveals Himself to us as a Father, with all of the attributes that go with such revelation.

Is this the God that you know? He very much wants to know you – to be a good Father to you, even if you've never had a good father yourself. Let Him show you, let Him teach you, what the real love of a Father for His child can be.

A relationship with your Heavenly Father - it's here for us to receive, through Jesus, the son.

Children of the Heavenly Father, 44

Notice the balance of this hymn.

We're not even through verse nine here yet, so we'll do part two next week.