

BREAKING BARRIERS TO INTIMACY WITH GOD:

Overcoming Apathy

A Study of Matthew 6:9a

Characteristic of Completeness: Prayer

Big Idea: Pray hungrily.

Related Scriptures: 2 Chronicles 20:6; Psalm 56:8; 115:3; 139:13-16; John 8:42-44; 10:27-29;

Luke 15:11-24; Galatians 3:26; 4:4-6; Romans 5:8; 8:38-39

Introduction:

1. I hate to admit it, but until recently, I've had a struggle with apathy, particularly in my relationship with the Lord. And I think the Lord has been graciously but firmly dealing with me on it.

I'm not quite sure what brought it on this apathy, this spiritual fatigue, this numbness. But as I think about it, it's been like a slow leak. A slow, steady leak, dripping away my passion, until one day during my summer break I realized I'm running on fumes—fumes of prayerless determination. Tired. The things that break God's heart were not consistently breaking mine.

I can certainly rationalize it. I have reasons to be tired. After all, the hardest things to do in the church biz are a) start a church, b) grow a church, c) merge a church, and d) revitalize a church. In our short history, we've done the first three and now we're on to the fourth. If this were baseball, we'd be trying to hit for the cycle. And, of course, there are the hardships and the disappointments and the to-do list that's never done and on and on. In other words, life. This is not some woe-is-me saga. It's life. The life we face together. We all have reasons to be tired. We all have reasons to be apathetic.

But that doesn't make it right. I'm responsible for my apathy. I own it. I'm sorry. I repent. And, by the grace of God, I'm kicking apathy in the teeth. I'm tired of tired. And I'm excited about where God is taking us and I'm energized by the biblical text God has for us this morning.

2. Today we come to a part of the Bible that helps us overcome apathy. It's not everything; but it's a big thing.

We've been working our way through the Gospel of Matthew. Specifically, we've been considering what Jesus has to say about prayer. So ► prayer is once again our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. Overcoming apathy is going to have something to do with prayer.

Over the past several weeks, we've studied ► Matthew 6:5-8, where Jesus tells us to avoid praying like the hypocrites and the heathens.

3. Now, in ► Matthew 6:9, which is the text we're going to study today, Jesus changes direction. He's done presenting negative examples to avoid—the hypocrites and the heathens. He now gives a positive example of how we should pray. He ► says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:9 “In this manner, therefore, pray . . .”

Jesus is saying, “Let me show you how it's done.” “Here's a good example to follow.” “I'm going to give you a pattern for prayer.”

The pattern for prayer He gives extends from Verse 9 through Verse 13. It's commonly called the Lord's Prayer. We'll eventually get through all of it, but not today. This morning we're just going to consider the first four words which I believe hold an important key to overcoming apathy. The prayer of Jesus begins this ► way:

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:9 “. . . Our Father in heaven . . .”

There it is. There's the key: “our Father in heaven.” It's right there. See it?

Probably not. I didn't see it either. Not at first. To me, “our Father in heaven” sounded like just another familiar, routine, ordinary way to start off a prayer. Got to start somehow. So you say, “Our Father,” or “Dear God,” or “Oh, Lord,” or whatever. No big deal.

But it was a very big deal—a huge deal to the people who originally heard Jesus start this model prayer in this way.

I mentioned last week that Jesus is speaking to an audience of Jewish followers in our text. To the Jews of that day, addressing God as “Father” would have been scandalous.

You see, the Jews of that day were not even permitted to speak the name of God aloud, much less call Him, “Father.” This would have been viewed as way too intimate, way too friendly, way too chummy.

We have no evidence that anyone addressed the God of the Bible as “Father” before Jesus did. No one in the Old Testament refers to God as, “my Father.”¹ No one.

In fact, it is rare to find explicit statements of the general fatherhood of God in the Old Testament.² Before Jesus came, God is referred to as a father only 14 times and never in a direct address.³ Never.

¹ Ray Pritchard. *And When You Pray: The Deeper Meaning of the Lord's Prayer* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 34.

² Nelson Study Bible notes.

³ Morris A. Weigelt and E. Dee Freeborn, *Living the Lord's Prayer* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2001), 30.

In contrast, Jesus directly addresses God as “Father” over 60 times. In all but one of Jesus’ recorded prayers, He calls God, “Father.” And, in our text, Jesus tells us to call Him, “Father” when we pray.

Why? Why the scandalous change in the way God is addressed in the Bible? Why call Him “Father?”

I think the term, “Father” conveys some important things about God that we need to keep in mind when we pray—important things that will help us to overcome our apathy. Let’s consider together what the phrase, ► “Our Father in heaven” tells us about God and our relationship to Him. I want to make ► two very simple points.

- I. First, the phrase, “Our Father in heaven” tells us that ► God is fatherly. He is paternal. Somehow, we can look at the very best in earthly fathers and see some characteristics of God. Somehow, good earthly fathers reflect the image of God. How so?
 - A. Well, I looked up the ► word, “fatherly” in an English dictionary to make sure it fits. The dictionary says that the word “always ► suggests a kind, protective, tender, or forbearing attitude.”⁴ That fits. The Bible does indeed describe our Father in heaven this way.

And I looked up the original Greek word translated ► “father” in our text. It’s the Greek word, *pater*. The root of this word ► literally means, “nourisher, protector, upholder.”⁵ That’s what a good father does. That’s what our heavenly Father does. He nourishes. He protects. He upholds.
 - B. Not only does our Father in heaven nourish, protect, and uphold, He is also the ultimate source of these things. All true nourishment, protection, and upholding originate with Him. He is the starting place.
 1. You see, ► the biblical term, “father” can also refer to the creator or originator of something. Sometimes we use the term this way in English. For example, Abner Doubleday can be described as the father of baseball.⁶

So when Jesus invites us to address God as Father, in part, He is asking us to acknowledge that God created us and, therefore, He knows everything about us. The only One who knows us completely is, therefore, the only One who knows exactly how to nourish us, exactly how to protect us, exactly how to uphold us. Exactly.

In speaking to God, David says in ► Psalm 139, beginning in Verse 13,

⁴ The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, unabridged ed.

⁵ Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “πατήρ” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

⁶ God asks Job a question, recorded in Job 38:28: Has the rain a father? God is asking, “Who created the rain?” The implied answer is, “I did. I’m the Father of rain.”

^{NKJ} Psalm 139:13 For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. . . . 15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, . . . 16 Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me . . .

Good earthly fathers know their children. They know what their children need. Our Father in heaven knows us perfectly. Remember, Jesus tells us in ► Matthew 6:8,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:8 “. . . your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.”

In that way, He is fatherly. He knows what you need.

2. And ► not only does our Father in heaven have complete knowledge of our needs, He also has the power to meet them. He has the power to nourish us, the power to protect us, the power to uphold us. No one else has such power.

I get this from the ► last two words of our text: “in heaven.” You see, the common conception in Jesus' day was that there were actually three heavens. The first heaven is the earth's atmosphere, including the air we breathe. The second heaven is space, including the stars and planets. The third heaven is not actually a physical location at all; it is a figure of speech describing a place of power. It's the symbolic control center of the universe.

So, saying “our Father in heaven” is like saying “our Father who is in the driver's seat,” or “Our Father who on His throne,” or “Our Father who is in charge of everything.” The phrase, “our Father *in heaven*” carries the idea of rulership, authority, dominion, and power.

Psalm ► 115:3 reminds us,

^{NKJ} Psalm 115:3 But our God *is* in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.⁷

So, praying “Our Father in heaven” reminds us that God has the power to provide in a way that no one else does. We are hungry for what only He can provide.

- C. I'm ► no psychologist. But it's interesting that the term, “father hunger” has become popular these days in describing a child's need for a close relationship with an earthly

⁷ This seems to be an example of synonymous parallelism, where the second part of the verse is essentially a restatement of the first part. As such, “our God is in heaven” means “He does whatever He pleases.”

father. I did a brief web search on the term, “father hunger” and quickly found several books by that title and a host of related articles. One clinical psychologist and author describes it ► this way: “Father hunger is a deep persistent desire for emotional connection with the father experienced by all children.”⁸ When that hunger is not satisfied by the father, a child often looks elsewhere for satisfaction, to illegitimate and often destructive sources.

I wonder if this is an earthly reflection of a spiritual reality. The spiritual reality is that we’ve got a *heavenly* Father hunger that longs to be satisfied. A hunger that only our Father in heaven can satisfy. A starvation that only our Father in heaven can nourish.

I forget this. I forget that God is fatherly. Or maybe I just take it for granted. And when I do, my prayers are mumbled in apathy.

But when I pray, “Our Father in heaven” it helps me to remember the fatherliness of God—that He is kind, tender, and forbearing. That He is my nourisher, my protector, my upholder. Not anybody else. Not anything else. And when I remember that, I can pray hungrily, as a starving child to a nourishing Father. That’s the ► big idea of my sermon today: pray hungrily. Praying hungrily is the opposite of praying apathetically. I pray hungrily because God is fatherly.

II. That leads us to ► the second point I’d like to make from our text. The phrase, “Our Father in heaven” not only tells us that God is fatherly, it also tells us that ► we are His children. Hungry children. That’s the second point: praying, “Our Father in heaven” reminds us that we are God’s children—children with a heavenly Father hunger. When we see that clearly, it helps us pray hungrily.

A. There is a sense in which every person is a child of God in that God made us all. I suspect that’s the most popular notion—that we are all God’s children, every one of us.

That’s a popular idea, but not a strongly biblical one. In fact, when I say, “We are His children,” I’m probably not addressing all of you because not everybody is a child of God. Some are; some aren’t. Let me explain.

God created us all to have a relationship with Him—a relationship in which our Father hunger could be completely satisfied. Only one problem. We messed it up. We have all turned our backs on God. We’ve all done some things that we know we shouldn’t. And we’ve all failed to do some things that we know we should.

And, there’s not a thing we can do to make it right on our own. No amount of good deeds can patch things up with God. We dug a hole we can’t climb out of. We rang up

⁸ Margo Maine, “Father Hunger,” available at <http://www.laureate.com/services/ed/infamily/fatherhunger.asp>; accessed 19 September 2002.

a debt we cannot pay. By our own sin, we've become spiritual orphans, spiritual street kids.

But God loves us so much He'd rather die than live without us. Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins, the cost of adoption. Christ died and rose again to save our relationship with God. Christ took our punishment on Himself on the cross so that our Father hunger might be satisfied by being adopted into our Father's forever family.

But according to the Bible, only those who have trusted Jesus for their eternal salvation can call God, "Father." Only those who have believed in Christ for eternal life are adopted into God's forever family as His children. In speaking of Jesus, John ► 1:12 says,

^{NKJ} John 1:12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name

See there. Only ► those who believe are God's children. Only those who believe. Galatians ► 3:26 confirms it, saying,

^{NKJ} Galatians 3:26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

Elsewhere, ► Galatians 4:4-6 explains it all in Father-son terms, saying:

^{NKJ} Galatians 4:4 . . . God sent forth His Son . . . 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"

The term, ► "Abba" could be loosely translated, "Daddy." It is a term no servant was permitted to use of his master. It could only be used by a child of his father—a child who enjoys all the rights and privileges of being a son.⁹

The cry, "Abba, Father!" is a hungry prayer. It's the prayer of a hungry child running with arms wide open toward the Father. "Feed me, Daddy." "Protect me, Daddy." "Hold me, Daddy."

- B. You may be thinking, "Well, I'm a child of God. I have believed in Jesus. But I don't really feel like my heart is crying out 'Abba, Father!' To be honest, I'm just sort of numb, and come to think of it, apathetic."

I can ► relate. Apathy toward God can creep into my life. I suppose there can be different reasons for different people. Sometimes it can be because an earthly father figure has been so bad it's very difficult to see how our heavenly Father could be any

⁹ Faussett Bible Dictionary.

good. If that is your struggle, I invite you to seek some help. You can contact Pastor Jeff Bauer or me or any other member of our pastoral staff with whom you feel comfortable. We'll try to get you some help.

As for me, apathy toward God can creep in when I'm fooled into thinking that my Father hunger can be satisfied by something besides God. And I can try to satisfy my hunger through all kinds of illegitimate ways: through the accumulation of possessions, through the exercise of power, through perfectionistic performance, through obsessive reliance on other relationships, through the pursuit of pleasure or popularity or any number of things.

Well, what does our Father do when we, His children, stubbornly and blindly pursue satisfaction elsewhere? What kind of Father do we have? Does He write us off? Does He punish us? Does He disown us?

Jesus tells His followers what kind of heavenly Father we have by telling a story. The story is in ► Luke 15, beginning in Verse 11.

^{NLT} Luke 15:11 . . . Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons."

In this story, the man or father represents what our heavenly Father is like. The sons represent those of us who are His children. You may know this as the story of the prodigal son.

Now, if you are familiar with this story, I invite you to look at it in a way that might be a little different for you. I do *not* believe this is a story about how to become a Christian. This is *not* a story about how to become a member of God's forever family. In fact, family membership is not an issue at all in the story. There is never any real question about whether or not the prodigal son is his father's child. The real issue is where the son goes to satisfy his father hunger. This is a story about what kind of Father we have as believers. Let's pick up the story in ► Verse 12:

^{NLT} Luke 15:12 "The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.' . . ."

Here, the younger son basically says to his father, "I don't really want to have a close relationship with you. I want to pursue the things in life that will really satisfy me. All I want you to do is to give me what I need to do my own thing."

This is haunting because sometimes I hear the echo of this in my own heart. "God, I don't really want a close relationship with You. All I want You to do is to give me what I need to pursue my own satisfaction. Help me satisfy my hunger at work. Help me satisfy my hunger in my relationships with other people, in my portfolio, in my cosmetic surgery, in my performance at school, in giving me a girlfriend or boyfriend or husband or wife. Please bless my efforts to satisfy myself through everything the

world has to offer. I want my share of your estate right now to subsidize my selfishness.”

How hurtful this must have been for the father in our story. How does he respond? Verse ► 12 continues,

^{NLT} Luke 15:12 “. . . So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.”

The very first time I ever read this, I thought, “What a weak, permissive father.” Not true. In love, the father is merely allowing the adult son to experience the consequences of his own decisions. Our heavenly Father does that, too. He allows us to learn the hard way that our Father hunger cannot be satisfied with the cotton candy of this world. This is our Father’s way of discipline, to allow us to wallow in our own stubborn waywardness until we repent, until we decide to come back home.

Are you a child of God who wants to chase other things that you think will satisfy your Father hunger? Your Father will let you choose.

► ^{NLT} Luke 15:13 “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living.”

I’ll bet it was fun . . . for a while. I suspect the son thought it was gratifying . . . for a season. But, sooner or later the reality of unsatisfied Father hunger emerges—the truth comes out that our spiritual hunger cannot be satisfied by earthly things. Our heavenly Father will allow our circumstances to teach us that.

► ^{NLT} Luke 15:14 “About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ► 15 He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. 16 The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. ► 17 When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! ► 18 I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, 19 and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man.””

Maybe this describes you this morning. Maybe you’ve been chasing all the stuff this world has to offer. And, you’re ashamed and don’t even feel like you deserve to be a member of God’s family any more. You feel unworthy. And in this moment, you realize that all the stuff you’ve been chasing doesn’t really satisfy your Father hunger. Only your Father can satisfy. You are broken. You want to come home to your heavenly Father. You’re starving.

But, will He take you back? What kind of Father do you have? Let's ► see.

^{NLT} Luke 15:20 "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him."

I can imagine the father in our story gazing toward the horizon, day after day, waiting for the silhouette of his returning son to appear. Then the day comes. His boy gradually appears on the horizon at mid-morning. The father rubs his eyes to make sure he's seeing right. He cannot yet make out the face, but he recognizes the walk. His gaze riveted to His son, the father drops his shovel, and begins to run. And, as he runs, love and compassion flow down his cheeks as he waves his arms in anticipation of the reunion. Finally, they embrace and the Father kisses him.

► ^{NLT} Luke 15:21 "His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'"

Then, the father says, "You got that right. You should be ashamed of yourself, dumping me like that. You're going to pay back every cent you squandered. And, if you think you can just waltz right back in this house and carry on like nothing happened, you've got another think coming!"

No. The father is not like that. Verse ► 22 continues:

^{NLT} Luke 15:22 "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. ► 23 And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, 24 for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

That's the kind of father we have. That's the kind of father we should remember when we pray, "Our Father in heaven." He's the only One who can satisfy our Father hunger. So we pray hungrily.

Some ► of you have been out running around chasing who knows what. And you're tired. And you're hungry. And you want go home.

Supper is waiting. The Lord's Supper. Let's go home for supper. Our Father has been waiting for us.

The Lord's Supper or communion is a time when the hungry children of God come home. We come home, abandoning our stubborn pursuit of lesser things. We come home to remember how fatherly God is and to give thanks for our adoption as children through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We come home to the Father to eat His bread of life and to drink His cup of forgiveness.

And we pray hungrily.