

## ***Our Dear Father***

Trinity CRC, January 5, 2020  
HC on Lord's Prayer; focus on prodigals

**Exodus 4:19-23; LD 45**

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Dear family of God,

Our dear Father has a lot of prodigal kids. The whole nation of Israel at the time of Moses was basically astray in Egypt. Yes, the people were slaves, but they were also away from God. Not all of them but many—if not most—had succumbed to the idolatry of Egypt. It is their default faith at the point of Exodus 4. It shows later when we see them in the desert after God has rescued them. Aaron makes a golden calf and says to the people, “These are the gods that brought us out of Egypt!” He’s stuck in the Egyptian way of picturing God as an idol.

But look at the heart of God. He’s the dear Father of his people. Listen to what he tells Moses to say to Pharaoh.

*Ex 4:22b ‘This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son,<sup>23</sup> and I told you, “Let my son go, so he may worship me.”*

This may seem like a strange verse to focus on for prayer. But I want us to begin looking at the Lord’s Prayer by looking at God as he reveals himself here. Look at the love he has for his people: “Israel is my firstborn son... Let my son go.” And later he says, “Let my people go!” When we read these things, we must ask, “What is the heart of God?”

## **Seeing Our Father’s Heart**

It will help our life if we see our Father’s love for his children!

Author Leo Buscaglia was asked to judge a contest for “the most caring child.” Sounded like a weird sort of contest to me but the winner was a four-year-old boy. The boy’s next-door neighbour was an old man whose wife had recently died. The story goes that the boy saw the old man crying in his backyard one day. The boy then got through the gate, approached the old man and climbed up on his lap and just sat there. When his mother asked him what he said to the neighbour, the little boy replied, “Nothing! I just helped him cry.”

Did you ever picture God as the one whose heart for the lost is bigger than ours? We love our children. We love our family and friends. We love those loved ones who don’t know the Lord or aren’t following him as they ought. But God loves them even more than we do! Way more than we can even imagine!! They are his children before they are ours! Sometimes we might think that no one cares about our wayward or prodigal loved ones. We think we are the only ones. But then we must refocus our vision of God. We must see that he is groaning for his loved ones like the old man grieving the loss of his wife. Now when we pray, we climb up on his lap and help him cry for his lost children! We join him in his grief. You see, it is God who has the bigger heart for the lost than we do.

Do you remember what God says in the ten commandments about his heart for us in relation to idolatry or waywardness? He says, “I, Lord your God, am a jealous God!” (Ex 20:5). That’s not jealous in the sense of greedy or envious. No, jealousy is a quality of his love! He loves his children so much that he is filled with passion for us when we go astray. I think of the word ‘jealous’ here as being more like zealous. The Father’s love for his children is passionate, warm, protective, and wanting the absolute best for his kids! That’s jealous in every good possible way.

Augustine, our brother from an earlier time in church history, wrote that our ability to love other persons is just an image of the internal Trinitarian love that we were created to reflect. Prayer is our way of entering into the heart of this great God. We commune with him in a way that mirrors—images—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit commune with one another. Prayer helps us see the heart of God. We climb up on his lap. When we pray, we connect with his heart and we “help him cry”—whether its tears of joy or tears of sorrow.

### **Syncing Our Heart to God’s**

So perhaps a good way to think about prayer is syncing our heart to God’s. In computer lingo, when I sync my phone to my computer, it means the same messages are on both devices. But in regard to prayer, what we want is for God’s messages—if you will—to be uploaded to our hearts. We want our heart to hear the heart of God. Or as some people put it, our heart ought to break for the things that break God’s heart. In that way, our heart should be in sync, in line, in agreement with, or connected to the heart of God.

The catechism says we must pray from the heart. But our heart needs to be tuned to God’s heart otherwise we’ll be praying for selfish desires. That’s not God’s heart. We must pray, says Q&A 117, to the one true God revealed in Scripture. Not a god of our own making—like the Egyptians prayed to or like many in our world today pray to—but the God of our salvation who speaks to us in the Bible. The one True God! The God who hears our prayers because we are connected to him; we are his children because of Jesus’ his Son.

Look at Moses, for example. Part of syncing his heart to God’s meant that Moses recognized his own need for God and God’s grace. Q&A 117 talks about our need to recognize “our misery and humble ourselves in God’s majestic presence.” If we start with our agenda, rather than God’s, we’re probably trying to get God to sync up with us. But it’s supposed to be the other way around. It needs to be the other way around.

Augustine said, “You must account yourself ‘desolate’ in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be.” In other words, writes Tim Keller, “The scales must have fallen from your eyes and you must see clearly that no matter how great your earthly circumstances become, they can never bring the lasting peace, happiness, and consolation that are found in Christ. Unless you have that clearly in view, your prayers may go wrong.” (Prayer, p. 84)

So prayer enables us to see our heart as God sees it so that we can put it in line with his heart. Just beginning to pray by saying, “Father in heaven” or “Almighty God” is enough to put life into perspective. We acknowledge in our opening words already that God is on the throne and we need to look to him for direction. Prayer humbles us so we say, “I’m here to serve your agenda, Lord. Show me your will, your desires for me and the world so I can pray into that. Give me what I need to join you in the work you are doing!”

In Exodus 4, God told Moses to go back to Egypt. Moses, the prince of Egypt who grew up in Pharaoh house, ran away from Egypt because he was afraid of getting killed after he had killed an Egyptian. He was trying to live life his own way. Now here in chapter 4, God tells Moses what’s on his—God’s—heart. “I want my people freed from bondage in Egypt and I want you to be my servant.” And we read there in v.20,

*Ex 4:20 So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt.*

Moses syncs his life up to God’s direction. He sets his heart where God’s heart is set.

That’s another way of saying that we need to trust God. And we can trust him. Prayer is about giving our will over to God and following him. Yes, trusting him to get our heart to line up with his, not simply getting what we want.

A guy who is nicknamed, John “Praying” Hyde grew up hearing about the need for overseas missionaries and prayers for the Lord to provide labourers. When he later went to seminary, John committed himself to foreign evangelism and, following graduation, he sailed for Bombay.

Initially overcome by difficulties of climate and language, John preached from village to village but grew discouraged as there were very few converts. Then one day he came upon Isaiah 62:6-7, which speaks about the Lord posting watchmen on your walls of Jerusalem who will never be silent day or night. And those watchmen, says Isaiah, will call on the Lord, and give themselves no rest, but also give the Lord no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth. John took that verse as his calling and motto. He began praying with remarkable intensity—skipping meals, meetings and even preaching assignments. He spent days and nights in prayer and revival began to happen in India.

At the beginning of 1908, he prayed earnestly to win at least on soul to Christ each day. By December 31, over 400 people were recorded as converts. The following year, the Lord laid 2 souls per day on his heart and again his prayers were answered. And the next year he prayed for four people to be saved each day with similar results.... Hyde’s great missionary work flowed from his prayer life like water from a faucet, and he finally wore himself out in prayer, staying on his knees, night after night, year after year, reminding God of his promises and giving the Lord no rest (as Isaiah said). He life was short. The great prayer warrior died on February 17, 1912. His last words were spoken in the Indian language, *Bol, Visu*

*Masih, Ki Jah!* which means “Shout the victory to Jesus Christ!” (told in Prayer for the Prodigals by Dutch Sheets).

John Hyde humbled himself before God. For us people, the catechism talks about humbling ourselves in God’s majestic presence. We are humbled and grateful because we know how gracious and—at the same time—how mighty God is! We know he loves the world. We know we are his children. We know he can change any and every heart. So, if we are working at syncing our hearts with God’s, we’ll increasingly have the peace that he’s in control and has a good plan for our lives. Then we’ll continue to pray, “Lord, help me get my heart to pursue you and your kingdom which will last forever more than the things of this world that are passing away.”

### **Asking for What is in Line with God’s Heart**

That brings us to our final point about prayer. If we see the heart of God and if we begin to sync our heart with God’s heart, then we should be free—and even bold—to ask for what is in line with the heart of God!

For years, Chrissy had prayed for her wayward brother to come to the Lord. Late one night, the phone rang while Chrissy was asleep. After fumbling to get it, she answered and heard her older brother’s voice on the line. “Sis, I just invited Jesus into my life!” he shouted. “I’m saved! The preacher said to tell someone immediately, so I knew I had to call you because you’ve prayed for me for so long.”

The praying sister sat speechless with the phone in her hand. This brother of hers—the one who had mocked and screamed at her at the mother’s funeral when she tried to share Jesus with him—this rebel was calling to say he’d accepted Jesus. She could hardly believe it!

Why is it, writes the teller of this story, when our loved ones are saved in answer to prayers we’ve prayed for years, we are always surprised? Could it be that we secretly doubt whether our prayers will really change anything? Or that we’ve written off the person as hopeless?

To be sure, we are not God. We do not and cannot always clearly know God’s sovereign plan. But we can know some things that should give us confidence in our prayers for the wayward, confidence that we are praying in line with the heart of God.

The biggest thing to remember is that we are God’s children. The passion in God’s words through Moses is unmistakable.

*Israel is my firstborn son,<sup>23</sup> and I told you, “Let my son go, so he may worship me.”*

God calls Israel his sons, his daughters, his children. God’s people—you and me, don’t forget it!—are dearly loved children of our heavenly Father. We are made children of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And Jesus himself

reminds us that even human fathers will do their utmost to provide their children with every good thing that they need. Then he says,

*Mt 7:11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*

So, we certainly know as God's children that we have the ear of our dear Father. Therefore, we must pray. We must talk to God. We must pour out our heart to him. And we must especially pray for the coming of his kingdom and all that honours him. All that God has in his heart. We know, for example, as Paul writes to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:4), "*God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.*" We can certainly trust then that God desires that our loved ones be saved. It's his heart, as Paul said to Timothy.

It's not that our faith saves others. God alone saves people by his grace. Yet it pleases him to work in answer to our prayers at times. Think of John "Praying" Hyde. Or remember the mother of the man we call St. Augustine. Her son was a prodigal—who like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable—was wasting his life on wild living. However, she never stopped praying for him. And she is remembered for saying, "A child of so many prayers cannot be lost!" When he was still far away from God and seemingly hopelessly lost, she trusted God with her son's salvation and she prayed fervently to God to work that salvation in her son Augustine.

Do we love people who are not saved? Parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, other family and friends? Of course we do. God loves them more than us. He desires such people be saved, said Paul. We should too. And pray for that like we believe it and mean it, trusting that God's heart is for them even more than ours is! Because of Jesus making us God's own children, we should be able to pray so confidently that we will be shocked if God does not answer our prayer for their salvation! But we leave the time and way of answering to God.

One of my fondest memories of ministry is the time I prayed for an elderly widow on her death bed. It was a Friday evening and I was driving home from somewhere. As I passed by the nursing home, I felt an urge to go in, suspecting I might meet this lady's children. Sure enough, I met her two sons in the room. Neither of them had been in church for 40 years. They were nice guys. Hard workers, still in the dirty work clothes. Their mom was asleep and had laboured breathing. I prayed with them for the Lord's dying grace for their mom. And when I said, "Amen" she breathed her last at that very moment. One of her sons was so moved, he said, "I'll be in church on Sunday!" And as far as I know he's still there every week. This elderly mother's heartfelt prayer for her sons was answered with her dying breath! It was God's way and God's time for this one son. Her prayers were answered. And the prayers for her other son will not go unanswered.

If we don't believe that God will hear and answer our prayers, we will be less likely to pray faithfully and consistently. We can and ought to pray confidently and persistently for the salvation of loved ones. The catechism reminds us that prayer

is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us. Once we know we are saved it is impossible not to be thankful. Salvation cannot be received without thankfulness. When you've been rescued from certain death, you're going to be thankful to your rescuer. And this same God who rescued us has the power and grace to rescue others who are as lost as we once were.

Maybe this is what the catechism is getting at when it also says that "God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly..." The little boy I spoke of earlier was groaning with the old man in his sorrow. So if God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray for it, then we must join him in groaning for hard hearts to melt under the warmth of God's love. The lost are not praying for God's grace and Holy Spirit. That's our calling. No one is outside of God's reach. No heart is too cold to be warmed by God's love in Christ. No one too far gone to not be changed by God's grace! He desired Israel to leave their Egyptian bondage and to worship him. And he desires for our lost loved ones also to be freed from slavery to sin and be worshipers of him as well.

Let us be faithful pray-ers whose hearts pray for the things that bring honour and glory to God. Amen.