

# OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

## Matthew 6v9

So, God is intimate (“Father”) and He is also transcendent (“Father in Heaven”). Now we see that He is also “**Our** Father in Heaven.” Even though prayer is for God’s eyes and ears only, Jesus says pray: “Our Father”. Plural!

### 1. Praying “Our Father” says we are not solitary believers.

There is no concept of solitary Christianity in the New Testament. This is a great theme for us on the week after launching our first church in the county - the Sunday after identifying those who are already “on board” with us in County Church. We are part of God’s worldwide church, but we are also built in to this local congregation of that worldwide church.

God does not want us to be alone, as people or believers. It was God who said to Adam: *“It is not good for the man to be alone.”* (Genesis 2v18) This, despite the wonderful one-on-one relationship he enjoyed with God. Adam needed community. And so do we! We need relationship in order to love and be loved. Just like God Himself. The doctrine of the Trinity is the glorious theological background to all this. There is community within the Godhead. God has never been a solitary. He did not create humanity because he was lonely. There is, and always has been, love and relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. And this love overflows to us, enabling us to love.

God does not want us to be alone. Every time you pray “Our Father” you say *“I am not a solitary believer”*. This is not just abstract theology.

1.1. It is an encouragement for those who are cut off from other believers. In some nations Christians have little opportunity to meet for worship or prayer with others. But they say “Our Father” and remember that they are part of God’s worldwide church. The same applies to some here. You may live by yourself; your genetic family may be scattered far and wide or you may be the last of your line; there may be no other believers in your school, street, family or office; but you pray “Our Father” and know that you are not alone.

1.2. It is a reminder of how much we need the fellowship of believers. (See Acts 2v42) When we are struggling we are prone to hide away from fellowship. Yet it is exactly what we most need. Sometimes illness or some other circumstance cuts us off and we long for the fellowship of believers. During the week in one of our cell groups someone who has come among us recently and has suffered a long period of illness said he had improved since being among God’s people again. We want this church to be a healing community where “our Father” meets people’s deepest needs as only He can through worship, prayer, Scripture, acceptance, encouragement, forgiveness, bread & wine, kindness, hospitality, laughter, smiles, affirmation. All these things should be found in the church, and will contribute to our healing.

1.3. It is also a safeguard against the dangers of individual spirituality. Charles Colson wrote a book about the church back in the early 90's, called 'The Body': He says: *"Many Christians have been infected with the most virulent virus of modern American life, or what sociologist Robert Bellah calls 'radical individualism'. They concentrate on personal obedience to Christ as if all that matters is 'Jesus and me', but in so doing they miss the point all together. For Christianity is not a solitary belief system."* There is a striding edge to walk here. On the one hand, we all need our own relationship with the Father and to learn to hear from Him. If we always look to other people to hear God for us we will stay immature and could be controlled by strong personalities. But we also need to listen to others and allow others to save us from going off course. When there is no accountability and individual guidance is sacrosanct we can easily stray into the super-spirituality and elitism. We pray "Our Father" and are saved from individualism.

God want a people. This is so important for the advance of the Kingdom of God. Charles Colson again: *"Any genuine resurgence of Christianity, as history demonstrates, depends on a reawakening and renewal of that which the essence of the faith –that is, the people of God, the new society, the body of Christ, which is made manifest in the world – the church. As we will argue in these pages, there is no such thing as Christianity apart from the church."*

The advance of the Kingdom of God in Northumberland has been seriously affected because hundreds of believers living in this county are no longer built into a local church. Many of these people have not given up on their faith, but they *have* given up on His church. Our prophetic calling as a church to be a place of recovery for such people is not just for their personal well-being; it is also about the advance of the Kingdom of God.

## **2. Praying "Our Father" reminds us that we belong to a family.**

The very word "Father" speaks of family. But what do we mean by family? Too often the word sounds exclusive. In the Bible it was much more inclusive. Family then was extended in form, and included grandparents, parents, sons & daughters (and their families once they married), adopted children, uncles & aunts (married or single), cousins, nephews; and servants too if they had them. Our stereotype family has been that of a mum and dad with 2.4 children living under one semi-detached roof; but the extended family in Biblical times was much wider and more inclusive. It was also non-residential and had a strong sense of kinship which continued through the years & the generations.

The most dramatic example of how big such a family could be and how strong the bond remained is found in patriarchal times in Genesis 14v14 where Abraham could call on 318 trained men *"born in his household"* to ride out to rescue nephew Lot and his family from the armies of four invading kings. By New Testament times a typical household would have been much smaller of course, but the concept of family was still a wide and inclusive one. When you pray "Our Father", you are reminded that you belong to a wide and inclusive family, where we are individuals but still enjoy community; where we are different but still one. The word we use is "diversity".

In a local church like this we are joined together with people very different from ourselves. Look around you this morning. All ages are represented here. Some are single, some married or widowed; many of us have suffered bereavement and some have gone through the trauma of divorce. We come from different nations or have regional accents. Some have been believers for years and others have recently come to faith. Our personal histories are very different, and our present circumstances vary.

Consider the diversity of our personalities & temperaments, our likes & dislikes, our interests, our sense of humour, our hairstyles, our fashion sense; some like Marmite and some hate the stuff! This is the wonderful thing about God's family. It is so gloriously varied. There should be nothing dull and monochrome about it; nothing one dimensional. The variety and diversity can be a challenge at times, but it is also a great strength.

I know that some put forward strong arguments for homogenous groups in church life, because "like" attracts "like". This is why some churches have groups for young couples, singles, musicians, retired people, and single mums. But our cell groups gather right across every type. We believe this makes an important statement. It is possible for Christ to break down dividing walls. We are God's new society. We are family!

But we are not interested in being an exclusive family. We want this to be an inclusive family. We want the family to get bigger and have even more variety. Some of you have come among us recently. You are so welcome. Finding the right church is like coming home. We hope you will find this among us.

### **3. Praying "Our Father" unites us with all other true believers.**

We are also part of God's family around the world and across the generations, and in this nation and around the county of Northumberland. Even as you pray "Our Father", tens of thousands of other believers are praying the same.

But have you noticed something about the Lord's Prayer? This way of speaking in the plural continues throughout. We are not just praying for ourselves but for other believers as well. This means you are not just praying about *your* daily bread – but daily bread for others too; not just *your* temptations but other's temptations also, not just *your* need to give or receive forgiveness, or *your* need of deliverance from evil, but others' too.

This week I had an e mail from Nigel Ring who travels widely helping *newfrontiers* churches in different nations tackle issues of poverty and agriculture and health. He was passing on a request for prayer from Edward Buria who leads our churches in Kenya. It concerned a terrible disease raging through the population called RVF; it is now in 47 Districts of the nation. *"We need serious prayer before the whole thing goes out of control. RVF is now in Nanyuki. We are spraying and vaccinating all animals. It is so scary! We have our church praying. RVF symptoms are similar to malaria but are made worse by very high and uncomfortable fever, joint immobility, severe headache and*

*body ache. Within very few days this interferes with the red cells and eventually the patient dies by haemorrhaging through all body outlets. It's bad! Nigel, what we need most is prayers."*

We can pray too for persecuted believers in other nations. We can pray for Christian missions. We can pray for the church in the UK as it faces new challenges. We can pray for other churches in this county of Northumberland.

Perhaps there is also a key here for unity between believers and churches with different styles & traditions and theological emphases. The best way to start relating to other believers is to pray with them. The best way for churches to start working together is for their leaders to pray with one another.

When we say "Our Father", we are reminded to pray for others in the wider church.

**John Wilthew. January 2007.**