

# Our Father Who Art in Heaven

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Matthew 6:7-15

**Sermon Series:**  
**Pray Daily: Igniting**  
**Our Passion for God**

*What do you  
assume God  
feels when you  
come to mind?*

David Benner begins his book *Surrender to Love* with the words, “Take a moment and try a simple exercise. The result will tell you a great deal about the nature of your spiritual journey. Imagine God thinking about you. What do you assume God feels when you come to mind?”

“When I ask people to do this,” he writes, “a surprising number of people say that the first thing they assume God feels toward them is disappointment. Others assume God feels anger. In both cases, people are convinced it is their sin that first catches God’s attention. I think they are wrong—and the consequences of such a view of God are enormous.”

Brenner argues sin isn’t the first thing that catches God’s attention when he thinks of you. Regardless of what we have come to believe about God, the first thing that catches God’s attention is love. God is deeply and passionately in love with you. God loves you extravagantly.

The most important thing in life is to know that we are loved. Being loved is what enables us to love in return.

But doesn’t the Bible declare us to be sinners? Yes, but not even our sins can eliminate God’s love for us. God doesn’t obsess about our sins; God delights to show us mercy.

Christians who imagine God is preoccupied with sin tend to adopt the same focus. They regard it as their moral duty to tell people how disgusted God is with them. There is no room in their moral equation for grace.

Parents who are good at what they do know all too well their children’s flaws, but that doesn’t deter them from loving their children. If earthly parents can love their children unconditionally, surely God, in whose image parents have been made, can do the same. What a small god we have if divine love is contingent on good behavior.

God loves people unconditionally. There are no conditions or limitations to God’s love. God loves us absolutely—no strings attached.

Some of us imagine God loves us so long as certain conditions are met. God loves us as long as we are obedient and deserving of love. If God loves us conditionally, some of us will desperately try to meet these conditions. We will try to earn God’s approval. I must get my own act together before God can really love me. God doesn’t love me as I am. I must earn God’s love. I must prove to God that I am lovable. But, if I invest all my effort in trying to win God’s favor, how will I ever recognize the unconditional love of God?

God’s love can never be earned; it is freely given. I can never merit

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God's favor. The Bible calls this kind of love "grace." "By grace you have been saved through faith. This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:9).

My obedience, then, is not contingent on duty but on devotion. Apart from love, obedience becomes an act of obligation. But as a response to love, duty becomes an act of devotion. God desires our devotion, not simply our duty.

God sent Jesus Christ as the perfect personification of divine love. "God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten son..." (John 3:16). Jesus the Son reveals the character of God the Father. God the Father loves people extravagantly; so does Jesus the Son.

Jesus said to his followers, "I no longer call you servants... I call you friends" (John 15:15). Imagine that—we are not merely Jesus' servants, we're his friends. Servants don't know their master's business, they simply do what they're told. Jesus draws us into intimate friendship with God. Jesus developed a reputation in his day for being a "friend of sinners" (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). Jesus never tires of pursuing lost sheep and prodigal children.

Jesus makes us family. That's why he invites us in the Lord's Prayer to call God "Our Father."

We want you, this summer, to cultivate friendship with God. Our church will devote the summer to the practice of prayer. The first half of the summer, we will center on The Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught his disciples in

response to their question, "Lord, teach us how to pray." The second half of the summer, our focus will be on the Psalms, which serve as the original prayer book for God's people. As indicated on your bulletin cover, we have arranged these sermons as a series of questions on prayer.

Today, we start at the beginning. What is prayer? Prayer is talking with God. If Jesus calls us friends, then prayer acts as a conversation among friends. Jesus gives us access to God. He invites us to approach God as friend.

To say that we could enjoy friendship with the eternal Son of God, Creator of the universe, sounds, at first blush, like an act of outrageous hubris unless it is true. C. S. Lewis said, "God loves us, not because we are lovable, but because God is love."

Does God ever talk back to us in prayer? I have never actually heard God's voice in prayer. Perhaps that's merciful on God's part. If I ever heard God's audible voice, I might freak! God's restraint is merciful, not unkind.

Sometimes, like a great novel, you cannot see until you get to the end that God has been leaving clues for you all along. God's voice is often mediated through other people. God speaks through the still, small voice of conscience. God speaks through Holy Scripture.

We invite you to join us for 90 days of prayer this summer. Why 90 days? Because there are 90 days between June 10th and the first Sunday after Labor Day, the traditional start of the fall season.

**“...prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you cannot imagine.”**

- Kathleen Norris

This 90-days-of-prayer focus highlights the first practice of our seven covenants—Pray Daily. We want you to join us in the discipline of daily prayer. We have designed this prayer series so you can participate whether you are vacationing at the beach or traveling on business.

Next Sunday, we will distribute a prayer guide to help in this practice. This devotional aid will provide a daily Scripture reading, a question for reflection and a suggested application.

Let me forewarn you: prayer is not simply a devotional exercise. Prayer will show you what God wants you to do with your life.

Kathleen Norris writes in her book *Amazing Grace* about a Christian friend who has been in constant pain for years and is now confined to a wheelchair. He says of prayer, “Often all I can do is to ask God, ‘Lord, what is it you want of me?’” Norris concludes, “From my friend I have learned that prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you cannot imagine.”

The 1986 movie *Hoosiers* relives the Cinderella story of the Hickory Huskers’ unlikely march to the Indiana state basketball championship in 1952. One of the players, named Strap, a backup power forward, had a quirky way of expressing his religious fervor. Whenever the Huskers would warm up before the game, Strap always knelt in prayer before stepping on the court.

In a game with playoff implications for the post-season, one of the Husker’s star players, Everett, becomes injured in the 4th quarter. The coach looks down to the end of the bench and calls out, “Strap, you’re going in for Everett.” Then, remembering Strap’s difficulty getting the ball in the hoop, he adds, “And don’t shoot the ball unless you’re under the basket all by yourself.”

Breaking the huddle, the Huskers jog back onto the court. But Strap doesn’t budge, kneeling on the hardwood next to the bench with head bowed. The gym reverberates with noise from competing fans, but Strap remains motionless, kneeling by courtside.

“Let’s go Strap,” his coach calls out, but Strap doesn’t budge. So Coach Dale kneels down beside him and whispers in his ear, “Strap, God wants you on the floor.” Strap looks up with a broad smile and rushes on the court. He ends up scoring the next two baskets and leads the Huskers to an unlikely win.

God doesn’t only want us on our knees, He wants us on the floor, contending for what we know to be true. Prayer serves as God’s catalyst for change. During the 1st and 2nd Great Awakenings, prayer became the impetus for world evangelization as well as spiritual awakening.

If prayer is the primary means God is known to us, why don’t we pray? Some of you will say, I tried prayer once, but it didn’t work. I prayed for something, but nothing happened.

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- G. K. Chesterton

I am reminded of something English journalist and critic G. K. Chesterton said: “The Christian ideal hasn’t been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.” Prayer has been left untried because it’s difficult. Prayer is the great untapped resource in the church today.

My favorite Super Bowl commercials appeared a few years ago. FedEx ran a commercial as a take-off on the movie *Castaway*, in which Tom Hanks’s plane went down, stranding him on a desert island for several years. A FedEx worker, looking like a bedraggled Hanks in the movie, knocks at the door of a suburban home with package in hand. When a woman comes to the door, the FedEx man explains that he survived five years on a deserted island. During that time, he kept her package to deliver it to her. She offers a nonchalant thank you, takes the package and is about to close the door, when the FedEx man asks, “Ma’am, I’m really curious. If I may ask, what’s in the package, after all?”

As she opens the package, she says, “Oh, nothing really, just a satellite telephone, global positioning device, compass, water purifier and some seeds.”

The year 2007, promises to be a year of renewal for our church. Renewal begins with daily, intentional prayer. The leaders of the Great Awakenings called it concerted, prevailing prayer. The spiritual resources to facilitate

growth and strength are available to every Christian. If only we would take advantage of them!

