

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer
Part Four: "Hallowed Be Your Name"

Based on Matthew 6:5-9

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July 18, 2021

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The Second Petition: "Nethqadash shmakh / Hallowed be your name"

The Lord's Prayer (New Revised Standard Version)

Matthew 6:5-9 ~ ⁵ *"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

⁷ *"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

⁹ *"Pray then in this way:*

*Our Father in heaven [Abwoon d'bwashmaya],
hallowed be your name [Nethqadash shmakh].*

Rev. David Leiniger shares a story about “a minister going from Sunday School class to Sunday School class one morning to meet with the students to see how their studies were going. He came into one first-grade group and began to question them as to what they had been learning. They had been studying about God and eagerly, the youngsters shared their knowledge. One little boy said God created the whole world and everything in it. A little girl said that God loves us very much. Another little girl said that God had a son named Jesus who came to earth to save us from our sins. Needless to say, the pastor was quite pleased with all the responses until finally one little lad piped up, ‘I know what God’s name is ... it’s Harold, same as mine.’ The preacher looked askance at the little fellow prompting the boy to continue: “Sure, we say it all the time. ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be Thy name...’ Sad to say [Rev. Leiniger continues], there are many adults who do not have a much better understanding of ‘Hallowed be Thy name’ than young Harold did. About the only time we use the archaic word ‘hallowed’ is in the Lord’s Prayer, and ‘name’ to most of us is nothing more than a convenient form of address. The result, of course, is an understanding of this ... petition in Christ’s pattern of prayer for many that is down near the lowest elementary level. It does not mean much at all.”¹

Today we are going to spend some time reflecting on what is meant by the second part of the phrase “Our Father in heaven, **hallowed be your name**” as we look at the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke to his disciples and also set this verse in a larger context. Let’s begin by widening our aperture a little bit further out by looking at what Matthew’s Gospel recorded that Jesus said right before teaching his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus reminds his disciples that prayer is not to be done so as to bring attention to self by using flowery obsequious words. Even though the Lord’s Prayer begins with the words “Our Father,” pointing to the fact that it is a communal prayer we say together in unison, we still come as an individual person joining our own singular voice together with the great symphony of voices who have prayed this prayer in all times and places, past, present, and future. As we do so, Jesus asks us to assume a certain soul posture: “**But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you**” (Mt 6:6).

What kind of a room are we to go into? A literal understanding of a room and a door doesn’t work. After all, back then when Jesus was teaching his disciples this prayer, they were outdoors. There were no literal doors to be shut. When they were indoors in their homes they were surrounded by other people.

¹ David Leiniger, The Lord’s Prayer: Hallowed Be Thy Name” in www.sermons.com

Only the extremely wealthy had their own rooms. Large extended family units lived together sharing just one or two rooms (the men and women with children separated of course). One was always with other people. So Jesus speaks metaphorically and mystically here. The room refers to the secret chambers of our hearts. Jesus asks us to “*withdraw from the outside, so that we might be attentive within. ... When we pray, we withdraw into that secret place of the spirit to commune with God.*”²² Once we have entered into the room of our hearts, we are to try to shut the door to all distracting noises not only without but also within. Those disrupting voices that, while we are trying to pray, are balancing our checkbooks, or thinking about our to-do-list, worrying about work or our health, or daydreaming about our upcoming vacation, or harboring the grudge against our relative or co-worker for a perceived slight, or wondering if the minister is ever going to stop talking so we can get a seat at the restaurant. We are to shut the door to all that attempts to distract us while we focus on ***Abwoon d’bwashmaya, Our Father in heaven.*** And the very first thing that Jesus instructs his disciples to do after they are in that room and have addressed their prayer to Our Father in heaven is to hallow God’s name. ***Nethqadash shmakh [nith-qah-dahsh shm-ah-kh].*** Let’s say it together: ***Nethqadash shmakh [nith-qah-dahsh shm-ah-kh].***

When we turn to the original Aramaic of the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “***nethqadash shmakh / hallowed be your name***” we will see how this metaphorical interpretation of “going into your room and shutting the door and praying to your Father who is in secret” in a place that is set apart also applies to God’s name. For we are not only to go to a secret internal room that is set apart but we are also to focus on a sacred name that is set apart. For that is what the word Aramaic word “***Nethqadash***” means: set apart. And that which is set apart is understood to be holy or hallowed. You can see this really easily when you look at the word. Do you see the ‘***qadash***’ at the end of the word? ***Qadash*** is the Aramaic word for ‘holy’ or ‘set apart’. In the related Hebrew language, they use the word ‘***kasher***’ or ‘***kosher***’. You have heard of things being kosher, right? There are many Jews who will only eat kosher food. It is food that has been specially prepared, that is set apart for a special purpose, that is pure and holy. In fact, the communion bread that we use every Sunday is ‘kosher.’ It’s written right on the package! This bread is set apart to be used on Sundays.

Nethqadash: hallowed, holy, sacred, set apart.

Shmakh: name. God’s name, or “Shmakh” is qadash, kosher, special, holy, set apart.

²² Richard W. Chilson, *Yeshua of Nazareth: Spiritual Master*, p. 94.

God's name needs to be set apart from all other names as worthy of special praise and special attention. As it says in Psalm 8:1: "***O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!***"

Shmakh. Names are so important. The Aramaic shows us that all names (***shem***) have something of the divine in them. People of all times and places have wanted to choose exactly the right name for their child, intuitively knowing that naming bestows a person's identity, even influencing a person's standing and role in life. Names communicate something of the very essence and potential of the person. Indigenous peoples, for example, tried to sense the animal spirit in their children, giving them names like Brave Running Bear, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Flying Eagle. I know that when our daughter was born we initially gave her the name we had chosen months earlier before meeting her in person: Raya Katherine. Yet, over the course of a few days, we realized that name did not match her essence. She so resembled in looks and spirit her paternal Jewish grandfather that we officially changed her name on her birth certificate to the Hebrew name Rachel. And she later told us how happy she was that we did so. Each of you was given a special name by your parents that indicated something about how they hoped you would be. My parents gave me the first name "Ruth" to connect me with the Gentile "Ruth" in the Bible who courageously left her native home and family to make a brand new start in a foreign country. Maybe that's why I have loved traveling so much and have moved so many times (the longest I have ever been in one place is here in Murray). Ruth also means "companion" or "friend" and I hope that I have been a good friend to others. My middle name "Drucilla" connects me to a great great great grandmother so that her amazing story of courage in the face of adversity will be remembered. What is your name? Some time I'd like to have a gathering where we share the stories of our names together.

Names and naming were extremely important to our Judeo-Christian ancestors. Our creation story begins with God giving our Ur-ancestor Adam the great honor and sacred task of naming all the animals. Genesis 2:19 says that: "***So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.***" Everything that exists was given a name. Each of us was given a name by our parents. There is only one being that was not given a name and that, of course, is God. Only God could name God. God's name is so holy that it is set apart from all other names and is to be hallowed or revered.

In the first part of this sermon series, I shared with you that the Lord's Prayer has direct connections to prayers such as the 'Kadish' that had been said by the Jewish people for generations before Jesus. When Jesus tells his disciples that they are to pray by saying ***"Abwoon d'bwashmaya, nethqadash shmakh, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,"*** he refers them back to the Ten Commandments. God's name is so incredibly important that hallowing it is at the top of the list of the Lord's Prayer just as it makes the "top ten" of the commandments we are to live by.

The third commandment states: ***"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain"*** (Ex 20:7). This story of this third commandment also needs to be seen in a larger context. When Moses returned to the base of Mt. Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments from God and told the people ***"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain,"*** he was in the same location where earlier he had tended his father-in-law Jethro's flock. God had suddenly appeared to him in a burning bush, telling him he was sending him off on "mission impossible" to free the Hebrew people from slavery under the Egyptians (Ex 3:10). Moses argued with God and then asked God to reveal God's name, not just because he wanted to know God's credentials and because it would be a sign of the authenticity of the message Moses was to deliver but also because he truly believed that knowing God's name would provide him with the power and protection that he needed to be successful in his mission. When Moses asked for God's name, ***"God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' ... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations"*** (Ex 3:14). My name is ***Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh***: I am who I am. I shall be as I shall be. I am Being. I am Life. This is what Jesus was getting at when he used the Aramaic word ***"Abwoon"*** for God: the Oneness or Unity behind all that is and has brought everything that exists into being. No wonder we should be careful about taking the name of the Lord in vain! It is so far beyond our grasp. ***Abwoon d'bwashmaya Nethqadash shmakh. Our father in heaven, hallowed by your name.***

Scripture indicates that the Israelites believed in the power of God's name. Psalm 20:1, for example, states: ***"May the name of the God of Jacob protect you."*** Note that it is not "May God protect you," but "May the name of God" protect you. The Jewish people were so concerned about the sanctity of God's name that they came to believe that the most sacred name for God, YHWH (*Yahweh*), could only be spoken out loud on Yom Kippur and then only by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies within the Temple.

God's name is not spoken otherwise but is instead pronounced *Adonai* during prayer or when reading from the Torah.³ Jews, and some Christians, additionally show respect by spelling God incompletely (and in flux) as G-d. In ordinary speech Orthodox Jews show deference for God by referring to God simply as *HaShem*, meaning "the Name".

"In his catechism Luther asks, "*How is God's name hallowed amongst us?*" and his answer is, "*When both our life and doctrine are truly Christian,*" that is to say, when our intellectual convictions, and our practical actions, are in full submission to the will of God."⁴ How does Luther make this leap from entering into the secret room of one's heart and hallowing God's name in prayer to saying that we hallow God's name through what we think, say, and do? Well the answer is very simple. In Jesus' time a name pointed to certain qualities and characteristics. Today we might give a child a name because we like the sound of it or because it was a character in one of our favorite movies. Jews had different customs related to naming. To the Jews a name reflected a person's nature and their mission in life. The same goes for God. When we hallow God's name we are hallowing these qualities that make up God's very essence. We set apart those qualities and state that they are important. We then are called upon to manifest these very qualities in our lives so that we are making God's name proud.

There are so many scriptures that I could refer to that speak to this connection between name and essence but Psalm 145, written by King David, gets to the heart of it because it begins with a statement of blessing (hallowing) God's name and then describes God's qualities. We are now going to do a little exercise together. I would like you to find Psalm 145 on your handouts. Please underline each place you see the word "name". Please circle all those places that indicate a quality or characteristic of God.

***¹ I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.***

***² Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.***

***³ Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable. ...***

***⁸ The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.***

³ The word "LORD" when spelled with capital letters stands for the divine name, *YHWH*, which is here connected with the verb *hayah*, "to be"

⁴ Barclay, Matthew. Vol 1, pp. 209-210.

*⁹ The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made. ...
The LORD is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
¹⁴ The LORD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
¹⁶ You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.
¹⁷ The LORD is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.
¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth. ...
²¹ My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.*

We see from this Psalm that we hallow God’s name by hallowing those qualities that characterize God. We bless and hallow God’s holy name when we too are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, good, compassionate, filled with gratitude, faithful in our speech, gracious in our deeds, just, kind, when we uphold all who are falling and bowed down, give people food, open our hands and satisfy the desires of every living thing. Note the words “every living thing.” Last Sunday we saw that there is something of the divine in every thing in the universe: all light, sound, the tiniest atom, every name. We hallow God’s name as we hallow every living thing. *Abwoon d’bwashmaya. Nethqadash shmakh. “Our father in heaven, hallowed by your name.”*

Let’s join our voices together as we read these beautiful yet challenging words in what has become known as Psalm 145, which poured out of the heart of King David and speaks to the greatness and goodness of God. *(Read Psalm 145 in unison).*

We should never lose sight of how hallowed, powerful, and wondrous God’s and also Jesus’ names are. Should we lose sight of that in God, we also run the danger of losing sight of it in ourselves and others.

As J. Ellsworth Kalas so rightly says: *“I’m quite sure that if you and I were truly to honor God’s name, we would honor the very principle of names—our own included! ... When I understand the power that is in the name of God, I will also be more respectful of the names I give to others. How dare I call someone by a derogatory name—nigger, kike, stupid—when God carries a name and ordains the very business of names. ... Names are serious business, because it is by the name of God, and of Jesus Christ, that we enter into the possibilities of our faith.”*⁵

Yes, names are serious business. James Merritt says that *“One of my favorite stories is one about Alexander the Great. He was a brilliant military strategist and a mighty conqueror and was absolutely fearless in battle. Many times he would be at the front of his men, riding his horse, leading them headlong into the fight without any concern for his own personal safety. There was not a cowardly bone in his body. During one particularly fierce battle, he was exhorting his troops trying to rally them to victory and he noticed a man running away. He caught up with him and said, “Soldier what is your name?” The man said, “Alexander, Sir!” He looked at him and said, “What did you say your name was?” He said, “My name is Alexander. Just like yours, Sir!” He said, “Were you deserting?” He said, “Yes Sir.” Alexander the Great got off of his horse, walked over to this man, took his face by the hands, got nose to nose with him and said, “Soldier, you either change your direction or you change your name.”*⁶

Yes, names are serious business indeed. We all have been given names by our parents. But we also are given a particular name as a group of believers. Acts 11:26 tells us that ***“it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’.***” Do you know what the word “Christian” means? It literally means, “little Christ” and that is what we are to be. Since we hallow God’s name by all we say and do, perhaps we too should take Alexander the Great’s warning that if our character reflects poorly upon the name “Christian” we call ourselves by, then we should “either change our direction or change our name.” Hopefully though we will all do God’s name justice as each week we enter into the secret chambers of our hearts, and from that sacred space join our individual voices together with all those who have chosen to use the sacred name of “Christian,” praying: ***Abwoon d’bwashmaya. Nethqadash shmakh.***

Our father in heaven, hallowed by your name. Amen.

⁵ *The Ten Commandments from the Backside*, pp. 42-43.

⁶ James Merritt, Name Dropping, www.sermons.com