

The Center of the Sermon on the Mount: Twelve Truths About Our Father in Heaven

June 15, 2018

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All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

— Matthew 11:27 —

Perhaps of the most surprising (and edifying) aspect of the Sermon on the Mount is the emphasis Jesus makes on his Father in heaven. While we may consider the Sermon as a explanation of the Law (see 5:17–48), or instructions for true piety (see 6:1–18), or a warning to walk in the true way (see 7:13–28), the heartbeat of the Sermon is a love for the Father. And more than that, the Sermon is about how disciples of Christ might know and enjoy the Father's love.

The importance of this Father-centered vision of the Sermon cannot be understated. As John 14:6 indicates, Jesus came to bring us to the Father. Likewise, Matthew's own Gospel identifies how Jesus seeks to reveal the Father to those whom the Father has given (see above, Matthew 11:25–27). Therefore, it is worth noting how in his first discourse, the Father plays a prominent role. In what follows, I've notated twelve truths about what Jesus tells us about his Father and his Father's love for those who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Twelve Truths About Our Father in Heaven

1. Jesus speaks to his disciples, the very ones who have left their fathers behind.

And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4:21)

There is immense comfort in knowing that in leaving family, friends, and fathers behind, Christ's disciples will be more than compensated by an intimate relationship with their heavenly Father.

2. Those who make peace (like their Father in heaven), will be called sons of God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9)

What proves our allegiance to God is a family resemblance to make peace. Christ is the great peacemaker, and we who follow in his ways bear witness that God is our Father in heaven.

3. As disciples of Christ walk in righteousness they glorify their Father in heaven.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Just as obedient sons and daughters bring joy and honor to their earthly fathers, so children of God will glorify him as they do good, like he does.

4. Love for the unloveable and especially love for our enemies displays the Father's love.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:43–45)

This verse comes as the final of six statements on the Law in Matthew 5:21–48. Clearly, love like our father in heaven is what fulfills the law.

5. The disciples calling is to be perfect like our heavenly father is perfect.

You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

The word *perfect* leads us astray on this verse. The word for perfect (*teleios*) is better rendered "complete" or "whole," and carries forth the idea of maturity more than philosophic perfect. God the Father is perfect in every way, but that word (in our English understanding) tends to confuse the picture. The goal is not rigid perfection, but rather that the righteousness, love, and peace that characterize the father would be true and increasing in the disciples of Christ.

6. Righteous living is not for the fame, glory, or praise of men.

¹ "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

This verse opens a section on true worship/piety. The goal in all three phases (giving, praying, fasting) is intimacy with the Father in heaven.

7. The Father will reward those who *give* in secret, *pray* in secret, and *fast* in secret.

³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁶ But when 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.

¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:3–4, 6, 17–18)

This, in my estimation, is the main point of the sermon. What is the goal of the Sermon? To commune in secret with our heavenly Father. He is our great reward and Jesus is teaching us how to know and enjoy him.

8. Intimacy with the Father is the center of the Sermon on the Mount.

⁹ Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:9–13)

This model prayer addresses the Father and teaches the children of God how to long for his glory and live with dependence on him. Essentially, the Lord's Prayer is less about repeating mindlessly various petitions; it is about seeking and sharing the Father's heart.

9. Confidence in the Father is the foundation of prayer.

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 6:7–8; 7:7–11)

As with the Lord's Prayer, communion with the Father is the chief motivation for prayer. Jesus teaches us that when we approach God, we can trust him as a Father who loves us. He is not a distant deity we must work to impress; he is a Father primed to care for his children.

10. Anxiety comes when we don't know and trust our heavenly Father.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. ³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matthew 6:25–34)

The converse of trusting prayer is anxiety. Yet, Jesus teaches us again that with our heavenly Father we do not need to run around worried about tomorrow. Rather, we can trust him for all things. And when we start to fear, we can again return to prayer.

11. Salvation does not depend on doing the works of the law (impersonal rule-keeping), it depends on knowing the Father (personal knowledge).

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:21–23)

There is a great measure of warning in this verse: Jesus indicates that it is possible to do works for God, all the while not knowing him. Thus, the disciples' chief aim is not working for God, but knowing him as a loving Father. All good works will flow from that starting point.

12. Following Jesus means prioritizing the Father above all.

¹⁸ Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. ¹⁹ And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." ²⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ²¹ Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ²² And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:18–22)

Finally, just after the Sermon on the Mount, we find another "hard saying" of Jesus. He calls his disciples to "leave the dead to bury their own dead," and he sets this in the context of families and fathers. While it is too much to say that Jesus is teaching a callousness towards earthly fathers (see Mark 7:1–13), he is saying that in following him (Christ) our first priority is our heavenly father.

Indeed, this is the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount: Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness! And when we embrace this call, it leads us to know and enjoy the Father's love, and with that infinite supply of grace, we are equipped to do all Jesus commands in the Sermon.

A Christ-Centered Approach to the Bible Must Bring Us to Father

In the end, one of the things we learn from hearing Jesus' emphasis on the Father is to remember that any Christ-centered approach to the Bible must bring us to the Father. Just as the Father created the world to glorify his Son (Col 1:15–20), and he sent his Son into the world in order to glorify his name (see John 17 and Philippians 2:5–11), so Jesus as the obedient Son came to magnify the glory of the Father.

Hence, a true Christ-centered approach to the Scriptures is one that does not end with the Son. Rather, in seeing how all roads (in the Bible) lead to Christ, we see that Christ has come to lead us to the Father. Indeed, the Christian religion is one established by a triune God. And thus, when we learn to see that all Scripture speaks of Christ (John 5:39), we also discover that all Christ says leads us to the Father.

And lest, we think for a moment that the Holy Spirit is neglected, we remember that it is the Spirit of God, sent by the Son, who comes and enables us to perceive these truths. Indeed, a

Father-centered approach to the Sermon on the Mount is the fitting and fulfilling complement to a Christ-centered approach to the whole Bible.

With that in mind, let us continue to draw near to the Father, through the Son, by means of the Holy Spirit.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds

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