

"OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN"

As we saw last week, at its most basic level the structure of the "Our Father" consists of an address (the one to whom we are praying, *Abba*) followed by a series of petitions. Tonight's class will examine the prayer's address. Our task is two fold: 1) First, to examine Jesus' understanding of God as *Abba*; 2) Second, to examine what it means to pray to God as "*Abba*". As we will see tonight, this simple address, "*Abba*", summarize the entire prayer and the entire gospel.

Abba in the NT

As we have already noted, there are differences between Lucan and Matthean version of the prayer, and the prayer's address is one of these differences. The address in Luke is much simpler than in Matthew. Luke begins with "Father" while Matthew begins with "Our Father who art in heaven. Matthew clothes the naked address of Luke, "Father" with "our" and "who art in heaven".

No doubt the exact Aramaic word that Jesus used for our English word "Father" is the word "*Abba*". *Abba* was the affectionate term that children would use to address their biological Father. It is best translated not as the formal "Father", but as the informal "daddy".

Abba was the most common title that Jesus used for God. Rarely does Jesus refer to God as God or Lord. For Jesus God is *Abba*. Most striking are his references to God as *Abba* in prayer. In those few instances that we have a record of the prayer of Jesus we see that he prayed to *Abba*.

In Lk 17: 21-22 we are given a prayer that Jesus recites in Thanksgiving after the return of the 72 who have been sent on mission in Lk 17:1. When they returned "full of joy through the Holy Spirit", Jesus said,

"I praise you, **Father**, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Notice that the prayer is directed to the Father by Jesus.

In the garden of Gethsemane we find Jesus at prayer once again and his prayer is directed to the Father. The Marcan version of the Gethsemane prayer is of particular important because the prayer is addressed to "*Abba*, Father". In the Lucan and Matthean version of the prayer the *Abba* has been removed and we just have reference to Father.

Mark 14:35-36: Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "**Abba, Father**," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

In the Lucan passion Jesus prays to the Father for his persecutors:

Luke 23:33-34 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "**Father**, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Also in the Lucan passion Jesus delivers his spirit into his Father's hands:

Luke 23:44-47 It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "**Father**, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man.

Jesus referred to God as *Abba* outside of prayer. Many of his teachings about God are teachings about God as *Abba* or Father. A good example of this is the parable of the prodigal son in which Jesus uses a parable about a forgiving father to teach about the Forgiveness of God our Father. Another example would be the teaching of Jesus about the providential care of the Father in Mt 6: 19-34 from the Sermon of the Mount.

Finally, he invited his disciples to refer to God as *Abba* also.

Mark 11:25: And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Luke 6:36: Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Matt 23:9: And do not call anyone on earth 'Father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.

Matt 6:1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Matt 16:16-17: Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

Mt 18: 19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

This word "*Abba*" would have been the word that Jesus used to address God in his own personal prayer, in his references to God outside of prayer, and in his teachings about God. For Jesus, God was *Abba*.

Despite the constant and consistent use of *Abba* by Jesus there are only three places where the word can be found in the entire New Testament: Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. In each of these NT texts, the Greek word for "Father" is included along with the Aramaic word *Abba*.

Mark 14:35-36: Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "*Abba, Father,*" he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Gal 4:6-7 Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "*Abba, Father.*" So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Rom 8:14-16 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "*Abba, Father.*" The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

The reason that the exact prayer word of Jesus, *Abba*, is so rarely used in the New Testament is that soon after the death of Jesus Christianity broke the bonds of Palestine and moved into the Greco-Roman world. In the Greco-Roman world, the Aramaic word "*Abba*" would be meaningless since Aramaic was not commonly spoken. The vernacular was either Greek or Latin. Hence the Aramaic word "*Abba*" was translated into Greek

using the formal word “Pater” which literally means "father" and not "daddy". As a result while Jesus always used the word "*Abba*" for God there are only three remaining references to it in the New Testament.

Meaning of the word *Abba* outside of Jesus' use

As we have already noted the word "*Abba*" is a nonreligious, Aramaic word that can be translated as Daddy or Papa. It is not the language of religion or prayer. It is everyday "family" talk. The common language spoken in Palestine during the time of Jesus was Syriac or Aramaic, not Hebrew. It is basically child's talk, the term of a youngster for his/her own father. Some scholars translate it as daddy or papa, but others would say that it has no English translation.

It was not only used by children of all ages for their father, but also was a term of endearment for an elderly, respected person much as we might use the word uncle or godfather .

Comparative literature from the time of Jesus shows that *Abba* has a two-fold meaning. It has an authoritative dimension. It recognizes the authority of a father over a child who they are bound to obey their *Abba*. Yet *Abba* had another connotation. It describes love, intimacy, closeness, affection, and trust. Affectionate, trusting obedience is the underlying characteristic of this term.

To call one's Father *Abba* indicates qualities both in the father who is called *Abba* and the child who uses this term. The child recognizes that the Father has total authority, yet this is done with care, tenderness, closeness, simplicity, and active love. The child is obedient to their *Abba*, and filled with total trust in their *Abba*. This obedience and trust flows not out of fear, but out of tender affection for their *Abba*. It is the loving authority of *Abba* which calls forth this *Abba* response in the child.

Use of Father in Judaism

These references to God as *Abba* either in prayer or in his teaching are unique to Jesus. In fact one of the ways that scholars know that references to God as *Abba* can be directly tied to Jesus is that it could not have come from the Jewish culture of his day. Referring to God as *Abba* or Daddy would have contradicted with the Jewish spirituality of Jesus' time.

There are references to God as Father in the Old Testament, but not quite in the way that Jesus used the term. In the Old Testament God is considered a Father in a corporate or national sense. He is the Father of the Jewish people, and not of an individual. Also in the Old Testament God is referred as to be like a Father. In the Old Testament God is not addressed directly as Father in prayer.

Deut 32:1-6: Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth. Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants. I will proclaim the name of the LORD. Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. They have acted corruptly toward him; to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation. Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?

Jer 3:18-20: In those days the house of Judah will join the house of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your forefathers as an inheritance. "I myself said, "How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.' I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me. But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the LORD.

Against this pre-Christian Jewish background, the use of '*Abba*' is regarded as "striking and unusual" and even "quite extraordinary" (W. G. Kümmel, *Theology of the New Testament*, 40). Another scripture scholar named Jacob Jeremias wrote (*Prayers*, 16-29): "There is as yet no evidence in the literature of ancient Palestinian Judaism that 'my Father' is used as a personal address to God" (*Prayers*, 29).

This uniqueness of Jesus' use of *Abba* is amplified by two other factors. One is that not only did Jesus refer to God as Father, but he used the word *Abba*. *Abba* as we have already noted is better translated as daddy or dad. Such intimacy and informality with God are contrasted by the total and absolute reverence attributed to God by the Jewish people of Jesus' day. During Jesus' time and for centuries before, the Jewish people no longer spoke the Holy Name of God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3, "Yahweh": "I am who am" (3:14). Instead they referred to God as The Lord out of reverence for His Holy Name. The Holy Name of God was not spoken. Against a faith that had such a heightened reverence for the name of God this address by Jesus to God in the babbling sound of a child, *Abba*, must have seem blasphemous.

Meaning of *Abba* for Jesus

As we have already noted in Exodus 3: 14 God reveals his divine name to Moses, "I am who am" (Yahweh in Hebrew). Out of reverence for God the Jewish people would never pronounce this Holy Name, but refer to God as the Lord. This term "Lord" expressed who God was for the Jewish people. He was a distant King who was to be feared, respected, and yet loved.

Against the prevailing Jewish understanding and term for God, Lord, Jesus dared to address God as *Abba*. There can be no doubt that this is the term that He used for God. He used in as an address in prayer, but he also used it as the name for God outside of prayer.

Why did Jesus call God *Abba*? The purpose of words is to communicate. The Jewish term for God, Lord, must not have expressed how Jesus knew and related to God. To express how he knew and related to God, He took the informal address that children used for their father and applied it to God. For Jesus the babbling sound of a child better expressed how he knew, loved, and related to God than the prevailing word, Lord.

The use of the term *Abba* therefore is essentially an analogy or metaphor for God. The relationship between Jesus and God, or our relationship with God, is like the relationship between a child and their daddy.

As applied to God, what does *Abba* tells us about how Jesus understood and related to God, what he revealed about God, and how he invites us to understand and relate to God?

First and perhaps foremost, the term *Abba* expresses the closeness and intimacy between Jesus and God. God is not a distant "Lord", but a close and intimate "daddy". This is seen above all in that Jesus called God "*Abba*", which means "daddy and not Father.

One of the main characteristics of God as *Abba* is that he cares for all his creature, and most especially cares for his children. *Abba* knows what we need to live, and in his love will provide for our needs.

Luke 12:22-32 Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? "Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the

grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

In response to the providential care of *Abba* we are called to trust in his care as a child has trust in their parents. This is why in Mt 18: 3 Jesus says "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children you will not enter the kingdom of God." The quality in a child that Jesus finds important is the trust of a child in their parents. As His children, we must have the same trust in *Abba*. Such trust is modeled by Jesus during his passion. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus says at the moment of his death "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Lk 23:46)

The use of the term *Abba* also recognizes the absolute authority of God over our lives, and our need to be obedient to Him. A Father in ancient Palestine had absolute authority over their children, and children were expected to be obedient to the Father. The same applies to Jesus' use of *Abba* for God. Jesus recognized the absolute authority of *Abba* and his need to be obedient to the will of *Abba*. The greatest expression of this obedience to *Abba* is the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: (Mark 14:36) "*Abba*, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

As we can see in the parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15: 11-32) *Abba* is a forgiving Father. According to the parable, *Abba* forgives us in the same way as the Father in the parable forgave his Son. This means that *Abba* is waiting to embrace us with his forgiveness the moment we repent of our sins and return to Him. Just as the Father in the parable was waiting to embrace his Son with forgiveness when he returned home.

A final, characteristic of *Abba* is unconditional love. *Abba* loves all. He loves the good and the bad, his friends and enemies. His is a perfect love.

Mt 5: 43-48. (43) "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) in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (46) "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? (47) "And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48) "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

What does it mean to pray to *Abba*?

In Luke's gospel, it was the sight of Jesus in prayer which led the disciples to ask "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples to pray". There must have been something unique about the prayer of Jesus if the disciples wanted to learn how to pray as Jesus prayed.

The unique thing about the pray of Jesus is not a unique prayer method or a unique prayer, but a unique relationship with God. This unique relationship is expressed by the name that Jesus used for God, "*Abba*". As we have seen the title *Abba* expresses the intimacy between Jesus and God. He is not a distant Father, but an intimate dad. As *Abba*, God is a loving, caring, compassionate, and forgiving Father. As *Abba's* Son, Jesus trusts in the care of *Abba*, and is obedient to the will of *Abba*.

The prayer of Jesus flows from knowing, loving, and relating to God as *Abba*. It is the simple conversation between a child and a parent, between *Abba* and the Son. We can see this in the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*Abba*, everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I,

would have it" (Mk 14: 36).

When Jesus begins to teach his disciples to pray as he prayed, he invites them to address God in prayer as He addresses God: "When you pray say, *Abba* (Luke 11:1). But he is not merely inviting them to address God in prayer as *Abba*. He is inviting them to know, love, and relate to God as He knows, loves, and relates to God: as *Abba*.

This is the first and primary lesson that Jesus teaches us about prayer. To pray as Jesus prayed means that we know, love, and relate to God as Jesus knew, loved, and related to Him. Once again, the prayer of Jesus does not involve a unique method, but a unique relationship with God. It is only when we come to know God as *Abba*, love Him as *Abba*, and relate to Him as *Abba* that our prayer will be like the prayer of Jesus, and will be truly Christian. Our prayer will become the simple conversation between a child and parent.

This unique relationship with *Abba* is possible if and only if we are incorporated into the Son through the Spirit. In order to know, love, and relate to God in this way we must participate in the life of the Son. It is only the Son who knows God as *Abba*, and we come to know Him as *Abba* only as the life of the Son is planted within us, and "it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me". When this happens it is not I who pray to *Abba*, but the Son praying in me.

All of this happens through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the power of the Spirit received in Baptism which allows us to be incorporated into the Son, and to become adopted children of God: "Everyone led by the Spirit of God is a child of God. The Spirit you received is not the Spirit of slaves bring fear into your lives again; it is the Spirit of children, and it makes us cry out, "*Abba, Father*": (Romans 8: 14-15). Christian prayer is spiritual because it is the Spirit who gives us the power to be children of God, and pray to *Abba* as his children.

How does the word *Abba* Summaries the Entire Lord's Prayer?

The early Christian theologian Tertullian once wrote, and it has been echoed by many others, that the Lord's prayer is a "compendium [breviary] of the whole gospel". In the same line of thought, the prayer's address, *Abba*, is a compendium of entire prayer. The entire Lord's Prayer is summarized in the word *Abba*. All of the petitions in the prayer flow from and lead to *Abba*. In the Lord's Prayer we are merely asking God to be *Abba* for us totally and completely.

As we will see the first half of the prayer is essentially a plea for the coming of the Kingdom. The hallowing of God's name and doing the will of the Father are essentially extensions of the coming of the Kingdom. It is only in the kingdom that God's name will be hallowed by all, and his will done by all. The kingdom that we are pleading to come is the Father's kingdom. In the kingdom *Abba's* name shall be hallowed and *Abba's* will shall be done by all. As we see in Luke 12:32 the Kingdom is a gift from the Father that he joyfully gives us: "*Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*"

The second half of the prayer is also a plea for God to be *Abba*. In the gospels, Jesus focuses upon two divine qualities of *Abba*: care and forgiveness.

The three petitions for "daily bread", "lead us not into temptation", and "deliver us from evil" are essentially a prayer for care and protection from *Abba*. As we have seen in our examination of the meaning of *Abba*, a primary theme in the teaching of Jesus on the *Abba*hood of God is about *Abba's* providential care. In these three petitions we are asking for *Abba* in his providential care to provide us with the "daily bread" we need to survive; and also to provide us protection from the greatest danger we face as Christian, temptation and testing.

The second "our" petitions ("forgive us our debts") is an appeal for a second quality of *Abba*, forgiveness which

is a second divine quality of *Abba* in the teaching of Jesus. The moment we turn away from sin and return to Him, he will embrace us with his forgiveness as the Father does in the parable. In the second "our" petitions, we plea for this divine embrace as we promise to forgive others.

Mathean Additions: "our" & "who art in heaven"

In Luke's version of the prayer the "our" and the "who art in heaven" are not included. In Matthew the naked "Father" of Luke is clothed with "our" and "who art in heaven".

Most scholars believe that these are additions by Matthew and not subtraction from Luke. The original prayer of Jesus probably began in the way that Luke does simply with "Father."

The reason for these additions by Matthew would be to make the prayer more Jewish in character. The community of Matthew belonged was a Jewish Christian community, and not a gentile Christian community as for Luke. The Jewish faith during the time of Jesus greatly stressed the transcendence and otherness of God. In their reverences for God they did not say the revealed name of God, Yahweh, even in prayer. Given this tremendous reverence for God, the simple address "*Abba*" would have been much too irreverent for a Jewish Christian to use in address for God. The naked "*Abba*" of Jesus was clothed with "who are in heaven"

Not only does Matthew add "who art in heaven" but he also adds the word "our" before "Father". One might ask what is added to our understanding by the word "our," explicit in Matthew, and no doubt understood in Luke, who introduces the Lord's Prayer to the community of disciples with "Lord, teach us to pray."

The inclusion of "our" would have also established a Jewish dimension to "Father". According to the Old Testament the Jewish people are the people of God. They relate to the God of the Old Testament not as individuals, but as members of the people of God. In a similar way the Father is "Our Father" and not "my Father". An argument could also be made that our (Father) establishes not only a vertical relationship with God but also a horizontal bond among the members of the praying community. Since we have in common a Father in heaven, we are brothers and sisters in the family of God.