

Hallowed be Thy Name

Matthew 6.5-15

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Jesus teaches us to pray. He gave us the Lord's Prayer as a prayer to pray literally, and also as the standard for all of our prayers.

When we pray, we address God as our Father in heaven. Those words speak of intimacy, He is our Father. But the words also underline his greatness. He is in heaven.

That is the God we know; that is the God we speak to with boldness; with confidence.

We have our needs; family members need help; friends have problem. And our Father listens to your prayers. He is a Father - so loving. He wants to help his children. And He is in heaven. So mighty! He can help his children.

But what is the first thing Jesus teaches us to ask for? He sets priorities in our relationship with God. In our prayers.

It is about your name, your kingdom, your will. Not about I, me, mine.

This order is significant. We are not to be so taken up with ourselves that we rush into God's presence and give him a shopping list of our needs.

The first half of the Lord's Prayer is all about God. Bishop N.T. Wright warns us (Matthew for Everyone, p. 59):

Prayer that doesn't start there is always in danger of concentrating on ourselves, and very soon it stops being prayer altogether and collapses into the random thoughts, fears and longings of our own minds



The first thing to pray for, is that God's name be hallowed, that his kingdom come, that his will be done.

There is some overlap between these three requests, but we will treat them one by one. Today we will focus on the meaning of 'hallowed by thy name', and how this should help us to pray, and what it tells us about God and about ourselves.

1. The name of God

We pray, 'hallowed by thy name'. First something about that name.

In Hebrew, and in the Ancient Near East in general, the 'name' meant much more than just the name by which a person is called. The name meant the whole character of the person.

Psalms 9.10 says, "Those who know your name put their trust in you." To know the name of God, means to know the whole character and mind and heart of God; if you know that name, you gladly put your trust in him.

When Jews speak of the Name of God, they always immediately refer to the exodus of Israel from Egypt. When God sent Moses to Egypt to save the people, God revealed his Name at the burning bush. You can read about this in Exodus 3.

When God commanded Moses to go to Egypt, Moses prayed: 'God, if the people ask me what your name is, what must I say!?'

People in those days believed that you have to know the name of the gods, so that with magic tricks you could manipulate them. So, Moses asks, 'God what is your name? The people will want to know.'

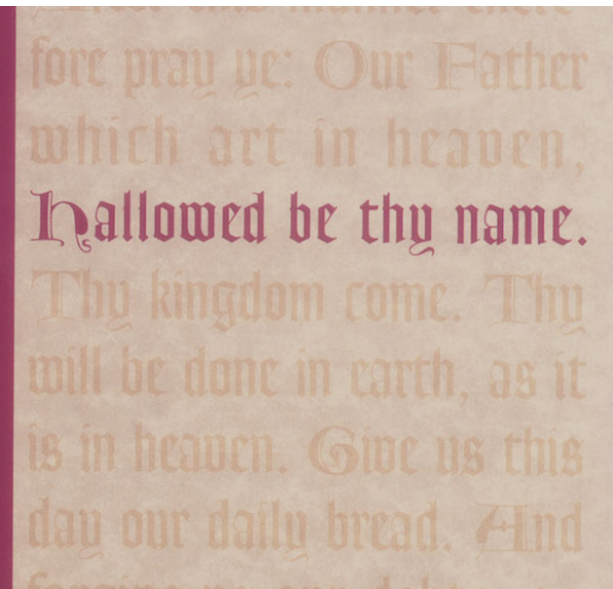
The Name that God reveals to Moses is strange, is it even a name? God says: my Name is JHWH. But is that a name? It means "I AM WHO I AM" or simply "I AM". It is as if God refuses to give himself a proper name.

The name of God, I AM, points to his being, to the one who always is. This also means, the one who never changes. Who can always be trusted. He is Our Father, and he never not Our Father.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, 'Our Father who art in heaven', he taught an intimacy in prayer that Jews in those days did not know. But when he taught his disciples to pray 'hallowed be thy name', for his Jewish listeners that was common language.

The Jews, even today, have a prayer that is very often used at important events. This prayer, called the Kaddish, says: "Exalted and hallowed be his great name."

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray 'hallowed by thy name', he did not delve into the deeper meaning of the name of God. But think of this. If God's name reveals his inner being, his action, who he truly is, then Jesus himself is part of that name of God.



Through his words and deeds, Jesus revealed that He and the Father are one. So when we today pray that the name of God must be hallowed, it is actually a prayer that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are hallowed.

This was in a very radical way expressed when Jesus instituted baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Have you ever noticed that we do not baptise in the names of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, but in the one name?

Hallowed be that Name.

2. Hallowed

But what does it mean, to 'hallow' that Name? The Hebrew word for holy, and hallowed is derived from that, simply means: 'set apart, different, exclusive'.

So, then, this petition means, "Let God's name be treated differently from all other names; let God's name be given a position which is absolutely unique."

Think again of Moses at the burning bush, when God revealed his Name. 'Take the shoes of your feet, Moses. God is here; God is holy, so treat him with reverence.'

How can we do this? The laws of Moses make this clear: Lev 22.31-32 states:

Observe [...] my commandments and put them in practice. I am YHWH [the Name!]
Do not profane my Holy Name because I am Holy in the midst of the children of Israel.

To profane the name of God is bad. Because He is our Loving Father and because He is holy. As Christians we have a great problem with profanities, and that is good. We should be upset when the name of God, when God himself is ridiculed or insulted.

But actually, in that verse from Leviticus, it is clear that to profane the name is God is not a matter of saying bad thing about God or using his name in vain. It says, 'Observe [...] my commandments and put them in practice', and the implication is clear: if we do not do this, we thereby profane the name of God.

We hallow the name of God by our lifestyle; by living for him.

God is Holy; when we pray, 'hallowed be thy name', we do not mean that anything has to be added to the holiness of God. He does not need that.

Some people therefore suggest that 'hallowed be thy name' is not so much a prayer, not a request, but a statement of fact. It is like praising God and saying, 'You are Holy! Your Kingdom is coming! Your will is being done!'

But that is not how most most language experts understand the words. It is really a request. May Your name be hallowed. But... God is already Holy.

Many of the Church Fathers therefore stress that the prayer is really a prayer for us to be more holy. We treat God's name as holy, by ourselves obeying, serving, loving God.

One of the most prolific preachers in the Early Church, St John Chrysostom, in one of his sermons on the Lord's Prayer, said:

The prayer to hallow Gods name corresponds with what Jesus has previously taught: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." In effect he is saying, "Enable us to live so purely that through us all may glorify you. [That all treat you as holy.]"
Chrysostom, The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 19.4

3. Into the world

I think that this missionary focus of St John Chrysostom is correct. We already know that God, our Loving Father, is holy. The name of God is hallowed if we live a life of love and obedience to God, yes, and that is extremely important.

But in both the laws of Moses and in the laws of Jesus - in his sermon in the Mount, it is clear that our loving service to God is aiming at making the whole world praise God.

Israel was called by God to be a light among the nations. So that the whole world would come to know God. And that is exactly what Jesus told us to do. "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

May God be glorified more and more by our words and deeds.

Yes?

Strange actually. I stand by everything I have said thus far, and I hope you agree. We have to live for God, we have to honor God, we have to praise his holy name, we have to invite others to live for God and to respect his holiness.

But I began by saying, it is not about me, or us, but the Lord's Prayer begins with three petitions that are about God. It is about 'Your name', 'Your Kingdom', 'Your will'. And the prayer is not: Lord, help me to make your name holy, help me to bring your kingdom closer, help me to do your will.

If anything, the Lord's Prayer forces us to realise that we are unable to glorify God, to build his Kingdom, to do his will. We ask God that He do it!



Israel's task was to make the holy name of God known among the nations. And they failed. We have same task. And are we so succesful? We only have to look at the ungly revelations about child abuse in the church worldwide, and we realise... We have done a dreadful job...

The name of God is reviled because of us. It is our own behaviour that profanes God.

By all means, let us apply the Lord's Prayer to ourselves. We can see in it a commandment to live an upright life to honour the name of God.

But the Lord's Prayer is a prayer, not a moral lesson for us. If there is any moral lesson for us, it is: only when God makes his own name great, he will be praised by us and by the nations.

"Please Holy Father, make your real identity known so that we and the world will recognize and honor you as you really are." "Please sanctify your dishonored name in the world."

And sure, we do all we can to proclaim the holy name of God. By our words and our life. But we realise, don't we, our efforts are very ineffective and feeble. We need God himself to act, to reveal his glory, to us and to the world.

We need that now, but I think, the prayer really looks to the day when God will glorify his name in all the earth in a definite and complete way.

God had already initiated the eschatological era. By the great deeds of Jesus, God revealed the Holiness of His Name. And only as part of his community, as people who pray Our Father with Jesus as our prayer-leader, can we today glorify the name of God.

Actually, praying the Lord's Prayer by itself is part of that process of hallowing the name of God. Because we express in word's taught to us by God, that we are part of the community of Jesus, that God is our Father, and that we desire God's name to be held up high in the whole world.

Conclusion

And so, concluding, when we pray 'hallowed be thy name', let us by all means d what we can to be a praise to God. That has to do with our words of praise, but even more by our deeds that glorify God.

But as we do all we can, we are so aware that all our efforts our so imperfect. We fail again and again to really live for God.

But that is exactly why we pray, Lord, please, you have to hallow your own name. You have to glorify your name in our lives and in the world.

We depend fully on you, our Father. Our Holy Father. Please reveal the greatness of your name in all the earth.

+ Amen