

Praying as God's children

Images of God and the Lord's Prayer

Ben Woodward-Breckbill

In spoken prayer, humans are challenged to articulate an image of God. The variety of verbal images of God in Scripture is appropriate to the limits of human language and the variety of human experience of God. Every life situation may yield a new encounter with God and a new way of putting to words who God is. Each metaphor tells a story about how the one praying relates to God.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, he instructs them to address God as *father*. This metaphor tells a surprising story: that followers of Jesus relate to God as children to a parent. In this essay, I journey through the Lord's Prayer, collecting biblical, theological, and ethical insights to explore Jesus's rich verbal image of God.

Our Father in heaven

My modest suggestion for anyone praying during public worship is to try not to lose your congregation's hearts and minds as you begin your prayer's first line. For several years in my congregation we prayed "the prayer that Jesus taught" weekly in worship. Members of the congregation would sometimes question the use of the prayer, specifically in calling God *father*. Isn't a male-gendered word like that exclusive of women in the congregation? Doesn't referring to God as father excuse or even bless violent and cruel fathers? Hasn't the male language for God contributed to the mistreatment of women and children throughout Christian history? The horror of patriarchal and gender-based violence throughout Christian history requires biblical, theological, and ethical reflection that this essay does not take on. Even so, these questions draw attention to the fact that our images of God matter. The metaphorical language that we use to address and express the ineffable has practical consequences worthy of our attention. And for some in the congregation, the words *our father* removed them from receptivity to prayer.

In an effort to honor this difficulty and to continue to pray a version of the prayer Jesus taught, we would frequently pray to *our mother* or *our creator*. Sometimes the rest of the prayer would stay in its traditional form, while other times we would use paraphrases. Yet this had the

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same effect of jolting congregants out of receptive prayer: in changing familiar words, we engaged their analysis of our images for God. The images are worth critical thought, but such analysis is not the intent of a congregational prayer for church and world.

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emotions and disorienting questions. Our discomfort and disorientation often makes us combative: Is God more male or female or something else? What human traits does God have, and to which human gender do we assign those traits? Who gets to be the image of God by better matching our verbal image for God?

May your name be holy

In the second line of the prayer, Jesus immediately undercuts any attempt to turn a verbal image into an idol. We are not the God to whom we pray. God is holy—God is other—and our words cannot capture or contain God. The word *father* asks disciples to relate to God as children to a parent, not to identify as God—or fathers or men. Jesus asserts God's holiness to distance us from over-identification with God or even our images of God. There is something telling here about our social disregard for children and our own extreme self-regard: when encountering Jesus's prayer, we would sooner identify ourselves with the transcendent Lord of creation than we would identify ourselves as children. In our jockeying to be the image of God, we forget that we are not God. Instead, we are disciples learning to pray.

Disciples are invited to be children. Being a child can mean any number of things, and we may be tempted to define *childhood* as some kind of essence: youth, biological descent, or level of maturity. In this prayer, though, childhood is relational. God is parent by having children, and the disciples are children by having a parent. It is the nature of the relation-

ship with God that defines the disciples' childhood before God. Jesus has a well-developed idea of what a childlike relationship to God looks like.

May your kingdom come

Jesus's view of childhood before God emerges, perhaps surprisingly, from examining the core petition of his prayer: that God's kingdom would come. First Jesus invites the disciples to claim to be God's children; then

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he instructs them to pray for God's kingdom. This is not the only time when Jesus connects childhood and the coming of God's reign.

In two other notable stories from the Gospels (Matthew 18:1–5 and Matthew 19:13–15, both with synoptic parallels), Jesus teaches his disciples about the importance of children in the coming

of God's kingdom. In her examination of these passages, Judith Gundry-Volf argues that Jesus identifies children as *recipients*—perhaps even paradigmatic recipients—of the reign of God and as *models* of entering the reign of God.¹ Jesus's disciples would have been shocked to hear such a thing because “nowhere in Jewish literature are children put forward as models for adults, and in a Greco-Roman setting, comparison with children was highly insulting.”² Yet Jesus makes this comparison not only in two explicit teachings on children but also as he teaches his disciples to pray.

For example, in Matthew 18:1–5, Jesus's disciples are contesting who among them will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3–4). Becoming like a child is essential to entering into the kingdom, and being like a child is connected to *humility*.

Being *like* a child can mean any number of things, so it is helpful for Jesus to narrow his focus to humility. In this context, humility and greatness are not to be understood as states of heart. The disciples are not

1 Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 37–42.

2 Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” 39.

seeking to *feel* greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They are seeking status and power. Jesus draws attention to a child and calls them humble, not great. The child's lack of social status and power is key to greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Embracing childlike humility is essential to entering the kingdom of heaven. The disciples are to be like children.

May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Being a child in our world does not connote only a lack of social standing or a relationship to a parent, though both are important. Much reflection is required about both our misconceptions of, and our best theological insights on, the role of children in relationships, families, and societies. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, in her book *Let the Children Come*, identifies several ways that modern Westerners might misunderstand childhood: we are heirs to puritan understandings of “depraved” children and idealized romantic notions of “innocent” children, along with capitalist visions of children as valued potential consumers, on one hand, and drains on parental resources, on the other. None of these is adequate, and Miller-McLemore investigates biblical, theological, and feminist perspectives on childhood to suggest a new view.³

Miller-McLemore, as she constructs a theology of childhood, focuses on children as *labors of love* and as *agents*, approaching childhood from the perspectives of both parent and child. In human parent-child relationships, as with God-disciple relationships, there is a decided difference in power. We are challenged, in such a situation, to chart a relationship that works within an imbalance of power but that respects the agency and personhood of both parties in a relationship that “aims at mutual-

ity.”⁴ We see the move toward mutuality, taking into account the power differential, in the three subsequent petitions of the Lord's Prayer. All three are presented as the disciples' petitions to God, but the triad takes on new meaning when we take seriously the petitions' parallels to child-parent relationships.

3 Miller-McLemore provides an overview of these historical “reinventions” of childhood in the first chapter of Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 1–23.

4 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 127, quoting Christine Gudorf.

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Give us today our daily bread

Children are dependent on their parents in many concrete ways, and parents, in a healthy and whole relationship, offer the care their children need. This is the relationship that Jesus points to with his “Father in heaven” later in the Sermon on the Mount:

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“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:9–11). Jesus’s

portrait of God’s parenthood in the Sermon on the Mount shows God caring for the disciples’ needs, even more than human parents already care for their children.

We must be aware that there are and have been many human fathers who do not match this generous, nurturing ideal. Human parent-child relationships are too often marked by abuse, coercive control, and neglect. But when Jesus invites *all* of his disciples to be “children of the heavenly Father,” he has a portrait of a nurturing, generous parent in mind.⁵ In pointing to God as a model of true relational parenthood, Jesus makes an implicit rebuke of human parenting that does not care for the child’s basic needs.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us

There is more to the parent-child relationship than total dependence, a one-way provision of children’s needs by a parent. If children are to be *agents*, afforded their full humanity, they also need independence. And with independence comes the ability to do harm to self and others; with agency comes the possibility of sin. There are many thorny issues in applying the category *sin* to children, especially young children—most notably the way an idea of children’s sinfulness has at times throughout Christian history led to physical and spiritual abuse in the name of “discipline.”

However, in trying to chart a parent-child relationship “aiming at mutuality,” Miller-McLemore finds it important to reclaim the category of

⁵ For a discussion of some relevant issues, see, for example, Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 120.

sin. She writes, "As agents, children are neither entirely virtuous nor entirely depraved. Rather, they are a complex amalgamation of imperfection and potentiality."⁶ Elsewhere, she reflects that children must experiment with "a range of roles and desires" as they grow into mutual, loving relationships that balance self-fulfillment and self-giving. "Although parents must make difficult, discerning choices about when to indulge and when to override children's desires, for the most part this discrepancy between

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adults and children warrants gracious leniency on the part of adults toward children's neediness."⁷ Because children are learning about, experimenting with, and hopefully growing in their relationships with their parents and with one another, they will inevitably stray from relational perfection. It is appropriate for children

to expect grace from their parents as they grow toward "loving mutuality." Jesus suggests that disciples can expect the same from God and from their siblings who are also learning and growing.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

Sin is not simply a marginal overstepping of role and relationship; it is also systemic and structural. This points to another parallel between children and disciples: though children are agents, able to make real choices about their lives, their ability to affect or resist death-dealing social systems is limited. Children require caring adults to guide them through a world full of potential harm and malformation.⁸ Adult disciples may resist this level of dependence on God, imagining that we can independently resist the world's evils through pure virtue or sheer force of will. Jesus knows this is not true and instructs his disciples to pray for divine parental help.

6 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 144.

7 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 131.

8 For example, Horace Bushnell, who wrote a nineteenth-century theology of childhood, understood that "children prompt reflection not so much on the dangers of a child's sinful nature, but rather on elements in a child's culture or family life that could corrupt him or her." See Marcia J. Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 17. See also Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought, The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021).

Human parents have also failed to see this as their responsibility to children. Miller-McLemore points this out as she discusses children's moral complexity: "the muddling of innocence and depravity reveals that children are all the more vulnerable. By picturing children as innocent, adults failed to take them seriously and often abused adult responsibility for earnest protection of children's physical, moral, and spiritual well-being."⁹ Adults have real responsibility for children's well-being, and children have the right to make this petition to their parents: do not lead us into situations that will harm our development toward mutual, loving relationships, and keep us away from physical, spiritual, and moral injury.

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever

The disciples as children both seek and receive the good gift of the kingdom. Yet in light of God's holiness and power, reaffirmed in the traditional (if extra-biblical) last line of the prayer, it is extraordinary that we could be invited into such a close relationship with God at all. On what grounds

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could we be so bold to pray to God in such a familial way? An insight into the question is offered by Karl Barth: "The distinctive value and importance of the 'our Father' as the Lord's Prayer consist[s] in the fact that in it Jesus ranges Himself alongside His Disciples, or His disciples alongside Himself, taking them up with Him into His own prayer. The

'We' of this prayer is the We to which the Lord attaches Himself with His people."¹⁰ We pray "our father" not just as a community of disciples but also in community with Jesus. It is God's eternal child who invites the disciples into the divine parent-child relationship.

It is not by being father or mother, male or female that we might "achieve" being the image of God. Instead, God offers Jesus, "the image of the invisible God." We are images of God through Jesus, the child in God's image, taking human form and inviting us to become like him. All that is required to be the image of God is to accept Jesus's invitation: to humble ourselves and meet God as beloved children.

⁹ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 21.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), IV.ii, 705.

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