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“Hallowed Be Thy Name”

Part II of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Pray Then in This Way.”

Matthew 15:1-11, Matthew 6:9

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Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” ³He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. ⁶So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁹in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.



Hallowed. It's not a word that we use very often. With the exception of the Lord's Prayer, and I guess Halloween or if you're reading *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, when is the last time you used the word "hallowed" in casual conversation?

But when we pray it in the Lord's Prayer, even if we don't use the word very often, I think it's not hard to *feel* what it means. Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. May your name be made holy. May your name be honored. May your name be given the weight and significance it deserves—in my life, in their lives, in the world. God, may your name be glorified, so that everyone can see you for who you are. Hallowed be thy name.

Names in Scripture carry with them a great significance, and the name of God, especially in the Old Testament, is honored above all others (because God is honored above all others). When Jacob wrestles with the angel of the Lord, he begs to know God's name. When Moses meets God in the burning bush, he asks, "What name am I supposed to call you by?" And God says, "I am who I am." And that's God's name. It's a verb. It's being. It's life. And the name is so holy, people wouldn't even say it.

In the Hebrew Bible, the name of God when it's written down is indicated by the consonants, but the vowels are written differently, so that if you're reading it out loud it's like a cue not to speak the name of God, instead you say Adonai, my Lord, because the name is so holy we wouldn't want to say it so we can avoid ever using it in a way that doesn't reflect the glory and honor and weight it deserves. The third commandment urges—don't use the Lord's name in vain, don't apply God's name to anything that isn't completely in line with God's character. Make God's name holy! It's understood that it is a human responsibility to participate in the making holy of God's name.

So when Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray and he tells them to pray that God's name will be hallowed, he is speaking out of a rich tradition—a history—out of years and years of religious and communal tradition centered around the holiness of God's name.

But, as you probably know, for the most part Jesus' relationship with tradition was sort of hot and cold.

Take our passage from Matthew 15 for example.

Jesus and his disciples are in Galilee, just after he fed the five thousand and walked on water, and the Pharisees in Jerusalem are getting nervous about his movement. So, they travel all the way from Jerusalem to ask him a very important question: "Jesus, how come your disciples don't wash their hands before dinner?"

Just to be clear, the Pharisees aren't really asking a question about hygiene here. Nobody should be using this passage to argue that Jesus says you don't need to wash your hands. Be mindful of the health your brothers and sisters and wash your hands. But that's not what the Pharisees are talking about. They're talking about a tradition, about ritual handwashing that the law



specified only for priests, but the religious elite had made into sort of a test for common people, an easy signal to show that “Look, I’m following the rules.”

So really the Pharisees are asking an important question, and probably one that the church today can relate to. They look at this new, young idealistic movement and it makes them feel worried about what they have already and the things that they value. They’re asking, “Jesus, why doesn’t your movement doesn’t fit into our framework of tradition?”

And Jesus is wise, because that’s the question he responds to. He sidesteps the handwashing debate and he says, “Well look, you follow tradition, sure, but in your quest to follow tradition, you’ve left the heart of God’s law behind. How are you claiming to support God’s law when you refuse to provide for your own parents?! Your traditions don’t mean anything if you’re using them as an excuse not to care for the people around you! Isaiah was right; you’re paying lip service. You say the right things but your words are a façade that covers up for a heart that is not centered around the values of God. It’s not your traditions that make you right with God, traditions are meant be a sign of a heart and a life that are aligned with God’s will.”

I think Jesus is saying that if you want to do your part to make God’s name holy, you can’t just say things that sound holy, you can’t even just do things that look holy. If your holy words and your holy actions look good on the surface but don’t at their heart promote peace, justice and the welfare of your neighbors, then what have you done really for God’s name? How have you helped the world see God?

A friend of mine, a pastor who I’m studying with at Columbia Theological Seminary, told us the story of a renovation project that had taken place at their church not long before he started working there. The congregation had a lot of fairly handy people so they did as much of the work as they could themselves—including the ramp that they built up to the sanctuary to make the building handicap accessible. The funny thing about this ramp, though, is that although it led smoothly up from the sidewalk, it led right up to a step that you had to climb over to make it into the sanctuary. Which, of course, defeated the whole purpose. From a distance the church looked like it had done the work to make their building accessible to all, but in reality, they’d missed the point of why the ramp was there in the first place.

Our weekly petition, “Hallowed be thy name,” can be hollow. It’s empty if it doesn’t go all the way; if it isn’t accompanied by other words and other actions, a true and deep desire of the heart to live in accordance with God’s will and God’s love in all aspects of our lives.

I’ll be the first one to tell you—I love tradition. I eat the same thing for breakfast every morning. I still make my family sing the same Christmas songs before we open our Christmas presents that we’ve sung since I was a child. I love the rhythms and patterns of a church service I know by heart. And, I don’t think even Jesus would tell the Pharisees that their traditions are bad. Tradition is good and beautiful when it points us towards the heart of God. But tradition alone is not what makes God’s name holy.



What Jesus is talking about in this passage is the alignment of our hearts and our intentions and our words and our actions, the alignment of our will, the alignment of our love with the will and love of God. When we are patient, when we are kind, when we put the needs of our neighbors above our own—that’s how we make God’s name holy.

The thing that I love about the placement of this story in Matthew is that after Jesus has this conversation with the Pharisees and his disciples, after he explains that glorifying God isn’t just about traditions and rules, Jesus’ own love for tradition—for the rules—gets tested, too. Right after this conversation, he’s going to travel to Tyre and Sidon, he’ll have a run-in with a Canaanite woman, so we’re immediately cued in that is someone who definitely doesn’t fit into a traditional understanding of a person who belongs to God.

Even still, she’s begging that Jesus heal her daughter because she believes that Jesus is about healing. He pushes back at first, but she keeps after him. She begs, and in one of the only instances in Scripture, Jesus changes his mind. He heals the woman’s daughter because he recognizes the depth of her faith, and he recognizes that some things are more important than following the rules. After this, great crowds follow after him, and you know what they do? They start praising God. Hallowed be thy name.

There’s a verse of the hymn “Child of Blessing, Child of Promise,” that we just sang a verse of before we baptized baby Hank. It says, “Child of joy, our dearest treasure, God's you are, from God you came. Back to God we humbly give you: live as one who bears Christ's name.” I love that. In your baptism, you are called to live as one who bears Christ’s name. One who makes God’s name holy.

So, we can say it in our prayers: “Hallowed be thy name.”

We can say it with our worship—our church building, our music, our traditions that draw us together and to God: “Hallowed be thy name.”

But we also have to say it with our lives.

In the way we listen deeply and are willing to be moved by people who disagree with us. Hallowed by thy name.

In the way we stick with each other when things get tough. Hallowed by thy name.

In the way we respond with faith and patience in the face of widespread fear and panic. Hallowed be thy name.

In the way we give generously, sacrificially of our hearts and our money and our time. Hallowed be thy name.

In the way we prioritize the needs of the vulnerable over our own personal gain. Hallowed be thy name.



Showing the world what God is like—that is the highest tradition of the church. So we pray—in our hearts and lives and minds and will and love—God, hallowed be thy name. Amen.

