

# WHO IS GOD?

## WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Matthew 5:43-48; Ephesians 4:1-6

June 16, 2002

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Following one of my first funerals, a family member wandered into the church kitchen where Diane and other churchwomen were working. Unfamiliar with protestant churches, the woman was unsure how to address me. “What do you call him,” she asked, “Father, Priest, Reverend?” Diane smiled and said, “I call him honey!” After some laughter, she gave advice that helped the woman become comfortable with me.

How we address people is the beginning point of a relationship. When there is ambivalence, there is little headway. The relationship is awkward, and it remains that way until some form of address becomes comfortable.

Today, as the church honors the degree I recently received, some might wonder what title is appropriate. My formal title is listed with the church staff and worship leadership in the bulletin. If a person wants to relate to me as teacher, *doctor* is appropriate. If someone wants to focus on my religious role, *reverend* or *pastor* works. However, when it comes to creation and redemption, I’m your peer. I’m your brother. God builds his kingdom through friendships, and I want to be friends as much as possible. I count it a privilege to be your friend, so I placed my nickname next to the sermon title. I’m fine with Wes.

I took time to explain this today for two reasons. First, I want to defuse discomfort. I don’t want ambiguity hindering our relationship. Second, I want to address a key issue in your

life. Who is God? If we are to have a healthy relationship with God, we must have clarity about him. The way we address God should draw us into a healthy relationship. Who is God and how should we address him? How should we relate to God?

That was the focus of Jesus' ministry. He came to reconcile us to God. He taught people how to relate. He bulldozed the ambiguity away so that you and I can have clarity and closeness with God. Jesus taught us how to relate in his prayers, in his teaching on prayer and in his general teaching on God.

When Jesus prayed, he did not say, "O God!" He did not say, "O Lord!" He said, "Father." He said, "Abba" or "Papa." He said, "My Father," "Holy Father," "Righteous Father." I found only one prayer where he did not address God as father. Hanging on the cross, Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Only in that moment of agony did Jesus not address God as father. In other moments of agony, he did. For example, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cried out, "Abba, Father, take the cup from me." On the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). Before he died he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Jesus always appealed to God as God's child.

Jesus taught his disciples to do the same. In contrast to the Psalmists who addressed God as "Lord," "Most High God" and other titles, Jesus did not teach his followers that. "Pray to your ***Father***," he told them (Matthew 6:6). He said, "When you pray, say: '***Father***'" (Luke 11:2). In the gospel of Matthew (6:9), Jesus says, "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our ***Father***.'"

Jesus talked continually about God as father when he spoke to his followers about prayer. He also talked about the father in most every teaching about God. He said:

***Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*** (Matthew 5:16)

***Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.*** (Matthew 5:44-45)

***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*** (Matthew 5:48)

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

Jesus even said:

***Do not call anyone on earth "Father," for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.*** (Matthew 23:9)

By saying that, Jesus was not enacting another rule. He was not teaching his followers to call their dads something other than "father." Instead, he told us that there is one Rabbi, one Master, one Teacher (one Doctor, if you will) and one Father. Our actions as believers must humbly point to that truth and help people embrace that relationship with God.

Do you know how many times Jesus calls God "father" in the four gospels and in the first chapter of Acts (before he ascends into heaven)? One hundred sixty-eight times. No other designation for God by Jesus, other than the word "God," amounts to even a handful of references. That ought to tell us a lot about who God is. Jesus taught that God is your father.

The Apostle Paul understood that. He wrote the Ephesians:

***There is... one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***  
(Ephesians 4:4, 6)

He wrote to the Roman believers:

***You received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."***  
(Romans 8:15)

He wrote the Galatians:

***Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."*** (Galatians 4:6)

God sends the Spirit of Christ into our hearts so that we cry, “Papa, Papa,” which is the closest English expression to Abba that there is. God sends the Spirit of Jesus into your heart so that you know God is your father and so that you relate to God as your father. God expects you to say “Papa” or “Father.” That title draws you into a healthy relationship.

Unfortunately, enormous ambiguity has arisen, and it makes our relationship with God awkward and distant. First, the church has uncritically used the rich worship of the Psalms in relating to God. The Psalms unveil a gracious and great God. They model an honest relationship. They coach us in celebration. However, they do not approach the intimacy of Jesus’ relationship with God. There is a difference between calling God “Lord” and calling God “Father.” God is Lord. God is Master; however, that Master is our “Papa.” Children of a king respect their father as king and learn about that kingship. They honor their father as king. They obey their father as king, but they relate to him as father. How are you relating to God? The one who made this entire world is your father. Are you enjoying that?

Second, some believe that it is inappropriate to call God “father” because it leads people to think of God as a man, a male human being. They note that the image of God is not revealed in masculinity. God made his image male and female. Some divine traits in Scripture are seen more in women, and feminine imagery is used of God. For example, God said through the prophet Isaiah, “*As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you*” (Isaiah 66:13). In other words, God comforts us like a mother. Finally, they argue that the Bible identifies God as father for cultural reasons. Since men ruled in Bible times, it would have been inappropriate to call God “mother.” They believe the reasons for calling God “father” over “mother” have disappeared as our culture changed. Even more, they insist that calling God “father” hinders the work of justice and equal rights for women.

It is true that God is not a man and that he can be more fully understood when both the grace of men and women are observed. It is also true that some female traits, such as the comfort of a mother, better describe some of God's actions. It is also true that Scriptures were written in male dominated cultures. However, the Bible and history show us that God is not known through human reason or research but by divine revelation. We know God because He revealed himself to Abraham and his children. We know God because he revealed himself to Moses and the Israelites. We know God because he came to us in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the revelation of God, God acting and teaching in flesh. Though God may comfort us like a mother, Jesus said God is our father. When you pray he said, "Say, 'father!'" Ambiguity distances us. Clarity draws us in. Jesus was unambiguous. Jesus was clear. God is your father.

Third, some object to calling God "father" because it may prevent those who've been hurt by a father from experiencing God's love. Jesus understood that. He knew that our vision and trust is affected by what we experience with family, friends and others. That is why he said,

***If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*** (Matthew 7:11)

Jesus challenged us to stretch our vision of our heavenly father beyond the pain we experience in the frailty and sinfulness of our parents. Read the gospels and you'll learn what a compassionate and patient father you have. That father stood with you when others abandoned you. That father protected you when others attacked. That father preserved you when others died. That father sacrificed his sinless son to save you his sinful child. That father is your real father.

Embrace your true father. Maybe you struggle with trust because your earthly father made destructive choices. Your true father loves you and can heal you. He sent me to you. Talk with him. He is your Papa. Enjoy the intimacy for which you were created.

Men, you have a special calling. Many don't trust God because their fathers hurt them through abandonment or abuse. You can serve as God's emissaries bringing healing and new vision. Surrogate fathers have altered destinies. Will you partner with your heavenly father in serving those who hurt? Especially the little ones? Will you join your father in caring for his hurting children, whatever the age? This Father's day, all of you men have a pivotal call.