

“Mother-In-Law” Meets God  
Creed Series Week 1  
May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015

**“I Believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth”**

Welcome/intro

Happy Mother’s Day! Mom’s, we’re grateful for all the work you do to serve and raise kids  
whether your kids are grown or still at home, thank you for your great work

I hope that you are celebrated and recognized today and thanked often throughout today for your faithful work

Let me also say to those of you for whom this day is hard, I’m praying for you today: some of you want or wanted to be moms but couldn’t and that makes today hard  
Others of you have lost a mom recently, and that makes today hard

Others of you have really awful relationships with your moms and that can make this day hard, too

So on this day, we celebrate and thank the moms among us for all their incredible work to love and serve and invest in your kids—THANK YOU!

And I pray for those of you for whom this day is hard. May you know the comfort of the Lord

Now one of the things that most of us appreciate about our mama’s is that they taught us things, passed along their wisdom

The first time Kelly met my mom when we were dating my mom was very eager for Kelly to know all about all the things she had taught me along the way  
that might make me more acceptable dating and marriage material

She started rattling off all the things that she’d drilled into me: “I taught him how to do laundry and dishes and he can cook and he can make his bed...”

She went on and on reciting and recounting all the things she had taught me that might be a mark in my favor  
because she knew that I’d need all the help I could get to get someone so beautiful to actually fall for me

This is our kick-off week to our new series called Creed, we’re going to spend the next handful of weeks drilling down into the core of what Christians have believed for centuries

One of the value of creeds is just like our mama's passed down wisdom, we're receiving the wisdom of those who have gone before us in the faith

And to do this we're going to walk through what is likely the oldest Christian creed, called the Apostle's creed

which we recited earlier in the service and which we'll continue to recite throughout this series

It likely wasn't actually written by any of the original 12 followers of Jesus, but it emerged very shortly after they all died, so by about 150 some version of this thing is floating around out there

Now there are a whole bunch of creeds that the Christians throughout the centuries have written: Nicene Creed, Chalcedon Creed, Athanasian Creed

And the original purpose of these creeds was most often to address or deal with specific issues that the church was facing

in terms of defining what genuine Christianity was and what it wasn't

In those first few hundred years there's all kinds of people who are taking the teachings of Jesus and going in all kinds of different directions with it.

And so at various points the churches would all get together and have these councils where they would evaluate different teachings and develop creeds to address these issues

These creeds were important in the life of the church to keep things within the rails of what Jesus and his first followers originally taught and meant

So , there are specific issues that each creed is trying to address and false teachings that each creed is trying to address.

So what that means is that every creed spills a little more ink on one part of the nature or character of God than it does on the others

So for example, the Apostle's creed we just recited has:

One line for the Father

Ten lines for the Son

One line for the Holy Spirit

Five lines for us.

So what's the main issue that this creed is probably trying to address? Who is Jesus, right?

This creed was likely written to combat teachings that Jesus didn't really put on human flesh, that he was just sort of an angel or divine figure who looked human but wasn't really human

What that means is that creeds are very, very useful for Christians throughout the centuries to join in with the flow of church history

But at the same time, no creed gathers up all that Christians believe, or even covers all of the essentials in a balanced way.

But they're helpful for us as we try wrestle with the question of "who or what is God?"

Now, this whole idea that we can or even should define who God is and give him a specific name or title is very controversial in our world, right?

In my line of work when I meet people at random places and I'm talking with folks about being a church guy  
people are always hoping that I'm really open-minded about who God is and are sometimes very eager to tell me who God is to them

And I love people and I love God, and so yes, of course, I'm always interested in hearing about people's spiritual experiences or how they think about who God is

But what many of us have been told to do when it comes to the whole idea of God  
is that we can't get too specific about who God is because everyone has their own experience and their own opinion about who God is and everyone's answer needs to be okay

Now, in many ways this is a helpful and important way for us to live together in a culture where there ARE a lot of different ideas and different faiths living side-by-side

And as Christians we have got to take the lead in being respectful of all people and loving our neighbors, whatever anyone believes

But the way that our culture encourages us to talk about God is that God is a *category*, not a personal being.

Because to get too specific is to start to ruffle feathers, right?

It's safer in public to talk about the idea of God as a category  
because that means that each of us can fill in that category with whatever ideas about God or experiences of God that we think we have

But the problem with that is that you can't have a real relationship with a category. You can only have a relationship with a real being

Before I got married, “mother-in-law” was just a category.

And I could think about what a mother-in-law might be like, I could make up all kinds of stuff about what a mother-in-law might be like

But then I got married! And then I actually GOT a REAL mother-in-law, not just a figment of my imagination

And we then had the opportunity to build a real relationship and work out whatever issues we might have

and fortunately I’ve had a great relationship with my mother-in-law and the move from category to real person has mostly been a great experience

For some of you that experience of moving from the category of mother-in-law to the real thing has NOT been a particularly pleasant experience

And perhaps you preferred it when it was all just imaginary!

But the point is this: as long as mother-in-law is a category and not a real person, you don’t actually have the opportunity and challenge of working out a real relationship with her

it’s just a figment of your imagination.

And as long as God is a category and not a personal being, we can’t have a real relationship with God

We can infuse that category with all kinds of figments of our imagination and random experiences that we attribute to him

and stuff we read on the internet or random books we read

But until we actually meet God, and get his name, know what he’s like, we’re just making stuff up, not actually relating

And what we see all throughout the Scriptures is that God is relentlessly relational

So what the Scriptures claim is that God has revealed himself most supremely and perfectly through Jesus.

And from Jesus, we get the names that this creed is built around: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

All of this is not in the interest of being narrow or closed-minded—all of this is in the interest of actually knowing who God is!

Getting the names of the real God is a real gift!

It’s about moving from God as a vague category to a God who’s character we can actually really know

and know for sure that we know because he's made himself known in Jesus

There's lots of you here who don't know if that's true or are wrestling with that claim, that's great, we're so glad you're here

And together over these next few weeks we're going to look at who this God is that Jesus has shown us

And together all of us hopefully are going to move our understanding of God from OUTSIDE of the category of category and into the category of personal relationship, deep and genuine connection with the God of the universe

And the first place the creed starts is this: **"I Believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth"**

And where did they get the name Father from? From Jesus, of course. Here's just one snapshot of his teaching in Matthew chapter 6

There's going to be a quiz after the reading here—I want you to count up how many times Jesus refers to God as Father

*And I want you to keep an eye out and tell me what Jesus is telling us about his character and what this God is like, okay?*

**Matthew 6:**

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

... when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

... when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**7** And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. **8** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

**9** "This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,

**10**

your kingdom come,  
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

**11**

Give us today our daily bread.

**12**

And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

**13**

And lead us not into temptation,[a]  
but deliver us from the evil one.[b]'

**14** For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Okay, so how many times does Jesus give us the name Father to call God?

And what are some of the key words that describe who this God is and what he's like? Rewards! One of the most repeated words here!

Of course that's not all—he judges, he sees in secret, all kinds of great information about WHO God is! And this is critical!

Jesus is giving us full insider information about who God is so that we don't end up living our lives on partial information about who God is

If you've got kids in your house I'm sure that your kids are diligent and fastidious about picking up after themselves

My children don't always have that gift, I'm sure it's due to my poor parenting

And every so often we'll have a clean-up session around the house and after it's all done I'll see something still lying out and I'll recognize the owner of that thing  
and I'll jump to all sorts of conclusions about their character issues and their lack of willingness to be a team player in the house

And so I'll go and find them and before I've like even crossed into the room where they're playing innocently and sweetly  
I've already started my little rant about this thing that they've left out when I've asked them already to pick up around the house!

And every so often, mid-rant, they'll stop and me and say, "Uh, dad, that's SUPPOSED to be left out. We left it out for some really good reason."

And then I have to apologize and ask forgiveness because I jumped to conclusions and acted on HALF-INFORMATION and MIS-information

I find that very often when I act on half-information or mis-information my actions are simply and flat-out WRONG!

Let me ask you a question—have you ever acted on half-information or MIS-information?

How'd that turn out for you?

When our information about God is half-information or MIS-INFORMATION, we live mis-led lives.

Jesus knows that when our picture of God is half-baked or figments of our imaginations or wishful thinking that we will then ACT wrongly

We will behave as if we're alone, fearful, anxious in the world. He knows that wrong belief drives wrong-living

And so he GENEROUSLY goes to great pains to paint beautiful and specific pictures to help us to understand WHO GOD ACTUALLY IS in order that we might live fully alive lives!

If God is a good Father who REWARDS his children and who is eager to and delights to reward his children, that's pretty good news, isn't it?

Some of us grew up in church traditions where the only thing God really wanted to do was make you feel guilty

if that's what you believe about God, it's going to drive your behavior in a certain direction, isn't it?

Others of us have grown up and adopted a picture of God where he's basically just a nice drowsy grandfather who in the sky

who just wants us all to be nice to each other, have healthy self-esteem, eat our vegetables, and have deep inner peace and a nice retirement plan

And if we've got a god in our minds that never judges, never corrects, never challenges you and basically has zero opinions that contradict yours whatsoever

It might be worth asking ourselves if we're just living a total illusion and pipe-dream

But if it's true that there's a God who rewards, who forgives, and who judges and corrects

then there's a much greater power in the universe who we can go to and who invites us to go to him

because he loves to reward his children with forgiveness and reconciliation first of all and most of all

Later on in the New Testament it talks about what happens when we become Christians:

***God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts ...who calls out, "Abba Father."***  
***-Galatians 4:6***

Some of us go to God to find inner peace and happiness, but when the Spirit of God comes on us, it doesn't cry out "inner peace!"

Some of us get upset at God because the world is such a mess, but when the Spirit of God comes on us, it doesn't cry out "world peace"

Some of us get upset because we don't like what the politicians are doing or the people or situations around us are driving us crazy

But when the Spirit of God comes on us it doesn't cry out, "Fix this mess!"

Those things matter! But they're secondary things—our relationship with God is first!

As C.S. Lewis once said:

***if we put first things first, we get second things thrown in, if we put second things first, we lose both first and second things.***

And so we get this first thing that organizes and orients all those other things, but we start here:

The name from Jesus and that the Spirit of God cries out: Father

Father names a relationship—when we come to faith in Christ, we relate to God in a newly intimate way we're his children, his kids

Now, there's all kinds of push-back and great questions and objections about the name Jesus gives us to call God: Father

Some of you have ZERO problems with the name Father, some of you really struggle with God being called Father

So I want us together to dig into these objections a bit because if you don't have these objections, someone around you probably does

So I want to help all of us to be able to answer the very good questions that either we're asking or someone around you is likely asking

First, calling God "Father" doesn't mean that God is a man.

Both male and female are created in God's image, and so both masculinity and femininity are fully found in God

Some very conservative Christians over-react to feminists objections to this name of Father by almost making it sound like God has zero feminine characteristics at all.

As if men are made in God's image but somehow women are something completely alien and foreign to God

God doesn't look at women or motherhood and go "AH! What are you and where did you come from!?"

On mother's day, I want to be sure we recognize that both perfect fatherhood and perfect motherhood are found in the character and essence of God

Fatherhood and Motherhood were both his idea to begin with, they are both characteristics that are hard-wired into God

that he has passed along and gifted to his sons and his daughters

So no, God's not a man but he does introduce himself as Father.

But because that name sounds too much like God's a man, some people reject it.

Others just want to call God by whatever they find more comfortable or convenient

But here's the problem with that:

in my life when mother-in-law went from category to real person, that real person came with a real name

and I was not free to recreationally change her name just because I didn't like it!

Imagine she introduces herself as Kathy Williamson and I look at her and I say,

"No, I don't like the name Kathy. I think you look more like a Sandra. Is that okay if I call you Sandra?" How's that going to go over?

What kind of a relationship am I going to have with my mother-in-law if I refuse to call her by the name that actually hers and that she has introduced herself to me by?

Not a very good one!

God has given us his name, introduced himself to us by the name Father.

If Father is the name the God almighty of the universe wants to be called, if that's how he's introduced himself to us, then we might want to call him that.

Father is not just a great name but it's also a great gift because it is intrinsically relational, right?

In Jesus' time there were all kinds of gods in the middle east and in the Greco Roman world

And they all had all these different names like Baal, Zeuss, Aphrodite and even the ancient Hebrew name of Yahweh from the Old Testament

But this name Jesus gives us to call God is not just a name and it's not just a category or title, it is a RELATIONSHIP:

abba, daddy, Father, it's a relationship, an invitation into a deep, open, honest, trusting, beautiful relationship with the Father who loves us

I remember once a speaker I heard talking about getting dinner in a Jewish family's home, and they had little kids and one little kid bumped his foot or something

And he came running to his dad shouting "Abba! Abba! Abba!" And Abba is, of course, the name that Jesus used

And he said that this was one of the most profound pictures of the gospel he'd ever heard

God as the good father caring for and receiving his children who are in need of care, protection, over us

There's another issue that people bump up against with God as father and it's more personal and less theoretical

And that's simply what if you had a horrific father? Or a non-existent father? What if the name "father" brings up all kinds of baggage for you?

Steve Tamayo and I had the same theology professor and he's going to talk more about this tonight in the Theology Class he's teaching tonight

but I'm going to give you just a little peak of what he'll be talking about

When we hear some description of God, like father or just or loving or kind or that he rewards or that he's good

Where we start is with ourselves and our own experience. And we say, "oh, well I know what father is like, I had one of those, he was terrible!"

I know what father means!"

And then we project that on around to God and say, "If God is father, then he must be something like my terrible father"

And then we come back around the circle to ourselves and we say "if God is like that, then I don't want anything to do with him!"

And our professor called that going around the circle the wrong way—because who is the final arbiter of what is true right or good in this scenario?

WE are! WE're deciding what real love or real fatherhood REALLY is and then deciding whether or not we like God or

And we don't just do it with father, like I said we do it with all the descriptions of God—God is LOVE? Oh, I know what love, I have some idea of what love looks like, some experience of love

I take that and project that onto God and decide that's what he must be like

When we do that, we're saying "well, I know that I'm real and my experience is the most real thing on the earth"

And God must be kind of like my experiences

But what we're doing here is starting with ourselves and our experiences and then projecting them onto God, maybe in bigger letters, and then deciding if we like him or not based on that

But what if that's going around the circle the wrong way? What if instead we started with God?

What if God says to us: "I'm true Father" and then we watch and learn from him "what does true Fatherhood look like"

And then instead of God being the one that we're accepting or rejecting the name Father about

We then evaluate our experiences of earthly fathers based on God's true and perfect Fatherhood?

If we're going to take fatherhood away from someone, don't take it away from God, take it away from your awful earthly father!

You need a perfect Father and you have one!

To reject God as father because your earthly father was a disaster is to only give more power to your pain to define your life!

God is perfect Father. God is perfect love. God is perfect justice. God is perfect peace. God is perfect goodness.

If we start with him, and let HIM decide what those words mean we get their true meaning, THEN we get real understanding!

Because are ANY of our own experiences PERFECT in this world? Is our earthly of fatherhood, love, justice, peace and goodness here in this world ever absolutely perfect?

So who should get to define what Fatherhood really looks like? Who should have the power in your world to decide what love or justice REALLY is?

I'd strongly recommend the only one who never messes anything up ever.

Let me come at this another way for those of us who have really negative associations with the word Father:

I once knew a Mark when I was a kid who was a total jerk, obnoxious, self-absorbed, thought he was awesome, kind of a bully to people around him

So I've got someone named Mark who I have negative associations with. And then I meet Mark Stith here in our church

And I've got two choices: I can either say "I know what Marks are like—I hate you Marks! I met a Mark once and he was a total jerk!"

I can either IMPORT all my Mark baggage with me to my relationship with Mark

OR I can check my old Mark impressions at the door and let THIS Mark be Mark, let THIS Mark define for me what kind of Mark HE is

The Scriptures declare that Jesus is God's living, breathing, walking, talking autobiography.

He's the one who is God, come from God, to show us who God really is.

And the name he's invited us into comes with this huge, whole package of redeemed family, perfect security, perfect love, perfect relationship

And that name is Father.

And so a couple thousand years ago as our forefathers in the faith were trying to articulate who this God was that Jesus had showed to us

They start with God as Father the almighty, creator of heaven and earth

I remember once hearing a woman share her story of coming to faith in Christ.

And she said that she grew up in a Unitarian church as a kid where God was basically talked about as a category that you could infuse with whatever you wanted

And she remembered as a little kid in elementary school, going to her Sunday school class at her church

And she was handed a ball of Play-Dough and the teacher told her: "make God."

And she knew, even as a little girl that that was totally and completely wrong.

That if there was a God, he was bigger than something she could make out of Play-Dough

And she talked about that as her starting point of her journey to eventually coming to faith in Christ

as the one who showed her who the real God was who had actually come make a way for a relationship with himself

Most of us aren't making our gods out of play-dough, but all of us have room to grow in really engaging with the reality of who God is

And all of us have stuff about God as Father that needs to be scraped off so that we might get to the greater reality of who God is

Not just an imaginary friend or something we make up

Not just taking your dad, whether or good or bad, and moving from that experience onto your understanding of God

And not just some composite picture of a bunch of caricatures or scraps from random sources in our culture

a few random conversations, and stuff you WISH was true about God

Not just a few books you've read or even just scraps from the Bible

But getting our information right from the source—the only one who has come from God and who has been sent in order to make God's character known

This week, I want you to step into this with me.

Two things to try this week, one for everyone and one just if you're feeling like an over-achiever

1. Pray just to God as "Father" for the next 7 days and see what kinds of images come up that are good, bad, or you just recognize as baggage from your own experience

Even if you're not a praying person or a particularly spiritual person, try this with me for this week

I did this exercise a number of years ago and I have a GREAT dad. I mean GREAT.

My dad listens to these messages on-line, so let me make sure he heard that—dad, you were and ARE a GREAT dad!

But when I did this in a focused way, I began to see or realize that I was projecting some of my dad's flat-sides onto God.

That part of my understanding of God was cluttered or undermined because my dad wasn't perfect, just like I'm not a perfect dad to my kids

And I needed to let God's fatherhood continue to re-write my understanding of what true fatherhood was really all about

Whether you had a great dad or a miserable dad, God is the Perfect Father who wants to re-write and fill out what REAL fatherhood is all about

So pray to God just as Father for the next 7 days and start to notice "where am I projecting my own dad's shortcomings onto God"

And ask God to help you to re-define what true fatherhood really is

Second exercise is for the over-achievers, this is the A.P. Chatham Church homework for this week:

2. Pick one of the biographies of Jesus and just look for how he describes God as Father.

Pick Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, read for about 5-10 minutes a day, you'll get most or all of the way through it by the end of a week

And just look for how Jesus is defining Fatherhood

maybe get a journal or notebook or piece of paper out

And just note the images, stories, illustrations or adjectives Jesus uses to describe and help us to understand who this good Father is

My friends, when we act on partial information in any area of our lives, we end up acting foolishly or just wrongly

And so this morning as we kick off the creed series, we celebrate the good news that Jesus has been sent by God to tell us who God is

And this morning, we embrace the good Fatherhood of God as a great name and a great gift, an invitation to know the true good fatherhood of a good and perfect God

PRAY