

“I believe in. . .God, the Father”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Text: The Apostles Creed Series

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Dorothy Sayers says the average churchgoer has a quite uninformed theology.

If given a brief exam about the three persons of the Trinity, the answers would generally come like this.

What does the church think about God the Father?

Answer: He's omnipotent and holy. He created the world and imposed on humanity conditions that are impossible to fulfill. God is very angry if these conditions are not carried out and is always ready to pounce on anybody who trips up or is having a bit of fun.

What does the Church think about God the Son?

Answer: He's in some way to be identified with Jesus of Nazareth. It's not his fault that the world is like this and, unlike God the Father, Jesus is friendly to people. He has a good deal of influence with God, and if you want anything done, it is best to apply to him.

What does the church think about God the Holy Spirit?

Answer: I don't know exactly. The spirit was never seen or heard of till Pentecost. There's a sin against the spirit which damns you forever, but nobody knows what it is.

What's the doctrine of the Trinity?

Answer: The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible. It's something put in by theologians to make following Jesus more difficult. And these doctrines have got nothing to do with daily life.

Sayers wrote that over 50 years ago when attention spans were longer and people in the pews had greater Biblical literacy. So I've got my work cut out for me in this attempt to clarify the **core beliefs** of Christianity.

I would argue that **understanding what we should believe** and **why** does have a lot to do with everyday life.

When one **glances** at the Apostles' Creed you will notice that like the Bible, it does not specifically mention the Trinity. The first mention of God in three persons is found in Matthew 28:19 when Jesus gives the great commission to hundreds of his followers,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Paul ends each of his letters with Trinitarian greeting, *“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*

The Apostles' Creed **follows** this “Trinitarian formula,” using **carefully chosen words** to describe the God whom Christians worship as Father, Son and Spirit.

Several years ago a feminist theologian, troubled by the seeming “**boys’ club**” character of the Trinity, pointed out that in the Bible references to the Spirit are usually feminine. Others, agreeing that using **human and male language to describe God is limiting**, have moved to a **gender-neutral wording**, such as baptizing “in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.”

This Trinitarian formula shows up in songs, doxologies and in our prayer life. It is interesting to analyze the words used in our worship and see all the ways the doctrine of the Trinity informs our worship.

In the next several weeks I will be preaching on the phrases in this historic Creed. Today we begin with “**God, the Father.**”

There is **No Old Testament prayer** that begins with “Our Father.” Calling God, “Father,” **started with Jesus**. Jesus often referenced his relationship to God as His Father. The model prayer he taught his disciples begins with, “OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN.”

The Apostle Paul interpreted this to mean that through a relationship with Jesus that all Christians have been **adopted as God's sons and daughters** and are then encouraged to address God in an **intimate manner**. God was understood to be not just as the Father of all humanity but as the one who has selected and redeemed those who believe and follow God . . . To call God, “Father,” is to enter into a relationship of intimacy---**similar--** to one between a loving father and his children..

Besides praying to God as Father, Jesus told many parables demonstrating the deep love the Father has for his followers. God was not just the Father to those that obediently follow his every word and way, but also to those who strayed and were lost. The best known of his parables is found in Luke 15, the parable of the Prodigal Son.

In the Prodigal Son we see the features of God's love most clearly. This is a God who sets us free to choose. We're free to fly away in a fit of anger, or to run off in a quest for happiness; and, we are free to come home when we've come to our senses and know that our true joy and health is in a close relationship with God our Father.

Jesus presents God as a **waiting parent** longing to love. The father in the parable longs to love his absent son. Jesus tells us that the father sees the son while the son is still far off because each day the Father is looking for his wayward son to return.

If you have ever been estranged from a child—you have experienced the real drama of the story. You jump up expectantly on every ring of the phone, hoping against hope with each knock on the door, praying as you open each day's mail that your lost son or daughter has returned home. . . It is a parent's deep love that draws the child home.

To call God Father is to see the face of God as one who waits for us—who seeks us---who welcomes us home by cleaning the slate—being more concerned with the quality of our life in the future than the failures in our chequered pasts.

Of course, because **earthly fathers always fail us—and some in deplorable ways**---many have resented the Father image of God. Jeff Imbach in his book, “*The River Within*,” relates a too familiar, yet powerful story: Mary Louise was raised in a strict religious home and was sexually abused in her family. She naturally shrank from any intimate union with God. It took her years to believe that God

wasn't like her earthly father and that she could safely come and trust God. Once she shared her fears with a trusted friend and said while crying, "sometimes when I pray I tell God he can come in the door but he has to sit in the chair and keep quiet. I know this sounds stupid, but I don't want any of the omnipresent, omnipotent stuff. That's too scary for me. I tell God I would like to learn to be open and intimate with him, but I don't want God violating me."

Unfortunately our earthly fathers fail us. Thankfully we can overcome this hurt by learning to trust our "heavenly Father." In a somewhat dated yet not uncommon story of this was told by Fred Craddock.

Fred was on a short vacation visit with his wife one summer to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. One night they found a quiet little restaurant where they looked forward to a private meal—just the two of them.

While they were waiting for their meal they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting guests. Craddock whispered to his wife, "**I hope he doesn't come over here.**"

He didn't want the man to intrude on their privacy. But the man did come by his table.

"Where you folks from?" he asked amicably.

"Oklahoma."

"Splendid state, I hear, although I've never been there. What do you do for a living?"

"I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University."

"Oh, so you teach preachers, do you. Well, I've got a story I want to tell you." And with that he pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife.

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Ben Hooper. I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born so I had a hard time. When I started to school my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunch-time because the taunts of my playmates cut so deeply.

"What was worse was going downtown on Saturday afternoon and feeling every eye burning a hole through you. They were all wondering just who my real father was."

"When I was about **12 years old a new preacher came** to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I could feel every eye in church on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up and the preacher was looking right at me.

“Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?”

I felt the old weight come on me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down.

But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. “Wait a minute,” he said, “**I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a son of God.**”

With that he slapped me across the rump and said, “**Boy you’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.**”

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, “That was the most important single sentence ever said to me.” With that he smiled, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife, and moved on to another table to greet old friends.

Suddenly, Fred Craddock remembered. On two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected an illegitimate to be their governor. One of them was **Ben Hooper**.

John Calvin wrote a Catechism in Strasbourg in order to teach young adults the basis of their faith and their salvation.

Are you, my child, a Christian in fact as well as in name?

Yes, my Father.

How do you know yourself to be?

Because I am baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What knowledge do you have of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

I have knowledge, which the principal articles of our religion teach, which we make our profession through individual confession.

What is that confession?

And here, the new Christians would confess his or her faith, using the words of the Apostles' Creed.

Let us now stand and do likewise.