

White
Horse Inn

The Gift of Prayer

ROBERT M. HILLER

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By Robert M. Hiller

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The Gift of Prayer

NOT TO LET YOU DOWN FROM THE START, but I cannot teach you to pray. As much as I teach about prayer, lead prayer in the Divine Service, and have a time of daily prayer, I am far from an expert. I am in awe of those saints who speak of spending hours in prayer. I'm frustrated by them, too. I have a hard time focusing for minutes at a time. I am discouraged by so-called "prayer warriors" who boast of seeing their prayers "avail much" when it seems to me that God's answers are too often hidden from my sight. Prayer as a discipline is something I strive to achieve, but like so many disciplines in my life, it is full of stops and starts. No, I do not presume to teach anyone how to pray. I am no master of prayer.

But Jesus is. In fact, he is *the* master of prayer. He alone can teach us to pray. This master of prayer is not your typical "spiritual guru" who is going to merely guide you through secret disciplines which guarantee more "powerful" or "transformative" prayers. Though Jesus is the greatest teacher we have, he is so much more than a teacher. He is our Lord and Redeemer! He is the giver of gifts! Before we can ever talk about the discipline or the practice of prayer, we first need to hear the good news: Jesus has given you the gift of prayer. God the Father hears your prayers on account of Jesus Christ, who has given you the Holy Spirit, who drives you to pray. Prayer is a gift from the triune God, given to all who believe.

He gave this gift to the disciples during his earthly ministry. Luke gives us this wonderful account where the disciples actually get one right. It was a rare occurrence, so it stands out. In Luke 11:1–13, we find Jesus in prayer. When he had finished, one of his disciples came with a request, "Lord, teach us to pray

as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). This disciple gets something right—he acknowledges that he is lacking something. He cannot pray. He needs to know how. So, in his lack and inability, he turns to his gift-giving Rabbi. His request is actually the model prayer! A beggar coming with empty hands to the one who can help. And Jesus is only too happy to answer! Jesus, like his Father, always stands ready to give!

In response to this faithful prayer request, Jesus gives two gifts. And, not just to this disciple, but to all of us who come to him desiring prayer. He gives the petitions we are to pray, and he gives the promise that God will answer. In this way, we learn that prayer has two parts: our petitions and God’s promise. He gives us his words and the Father’s ear.

GIFT #1: THE WORDS TO PRAY

Jesus does not rebuke his disciples for not knowing how to pray. Too much of our conversation about prayer induces guilt or shame for not knowing how or what to say.¹ Jesus, on the other hand, smiles upon this question and is gracious towards those who inquire. He begins by giving us, disciples, the words we are to pray. He gives us what we have called “The Lord’s Prayer.” When giving this gift in Luke’s Gospel (11:2–4), he gives us a shortened version of the full prayer he gave in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel (6:9–13). Here, Jesus leaves us without excuse. If you do not know what to say when you approach the Father, Jesus places this gift in your hands, or better said, these words on your lips. You go before the world’s Sovereign with seven requests, or petitions, asking him to accomplish for you what you cannot do on your own. Jesus invites you to approach God, as Martin Luther says, “with all boldness and confidence [so that] we may ask him as dear children ask their dear

¹ For a deep and delightful understanding of how to view prayer and other spiritual disciplines from the perspective of the gospel as opposed to a sort of suffocating legalism, check out Gretchen Ronnevik’s *Ragged: Spiritual Disciplines for the Spiritually Exhausted* (Irvine, 1517 Publishing, 2021).

father.”² Jesus gives you the prayer for God’s holy name, his coming kingdom, and his inevitable will to be given to you in your life. He opens your eyes to your daily, earthly needs as he guides you to pray for daily bread, a life saturated and formed by forgiveness, guidance away from temptation, and deliverance from Satan’s relentless assaults. This prayer encapsulates all that we need for life and salvation. And Jesus gives it to us as a gift!

However, this raises another question: How do I know the prayer will do any good? On what basis can I pray with all boldness and confidence, as the Small Catechism says? This leads us to the second gift Jesus gives us: the gift of a promise.

GIFT #2: THE PROMISE OF A LISTENING GOD

A number of years back I remember seeing a series of books with titles like, *The Power of the Praying Wife* or *The Power of the Praying Parent*.³ Now, I don’t doubt the sincerity of the author in trying to encourage people to pray in their various vocations. In fact, all of us are incapable of faithfully fulfilling our responsibilities without a complete dependance upon God. However, I fear the titles of these and other such books are misleading. The power of prayer (whatever that phrase may mean) does not reside in the parent or spouse who prays the prayer. The power of prayer is with the God who listens. “For *thine* is the kingdom *and the power* and the glory” (cf. 1 Chron. 29:11). Better said, when we pray, we are relying on the power of the listening God!

Jesus gives us the promise that God our Father is listening to our prayers and will answer them for our good: “And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). Jesus

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2017 ed.), 19–20.

³ Stormie Omartian, *The Power of the Praying Wife* (Eugene, Harvest Publishing House, 2014). Stormie Omartian, *The Power of a Praying Parent* (Eugene, Harvest Publishing House, 2014).

is saying, “I am giving you the prayer to pray and the promise that when you put this in the Father’s ear, he is listening and delighted to answer!” When you pray the Lord’s prayer, you can imagine the Father bending all the way down from heaven to earth, hearing your cry and getting up to act. It’s like a dad bending down to hear his two-year old daughter whisper a secret into his ear. It fills that father with delight. I must imagine it is infinitely more wonderful when the Father hears our cries. As Jesus says, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Luke 11:13).

Jesus not only teaches us to pray, he gives us the gift of prayer and the promise that God is listening. Having received these gracious gifts, we are ready to explore prayer more deeply. In this little booklet, I hope to help you hear what Jesus teaches us about prayer and what it looks like to pray in light of the gospel. I will offer resources I have found useful in an effort to help you pray. But, as I said, I cannot teach you to pray. So, let us join the disciples and turn to the One who gave us the gift!

PRAYER

Almighty Father, in bidding us to pray, your dear Son and our Redeemer has given us the gift of prayer and promised that you would answer us according to your will and for our good. Forgive us for doubting this promise and rejecting these gifts. We thank you that Jesus is our great high priest who daily intercedes for us and that, for the sake of his shed blood, we are forgiven and welcomed into your presence. Open our ears to hear your Holy Spirit’s teaching on prayer and guide us to pray as Jesus has taught us. Amen.

Who Should Pray?

BEFORE WE GET INTO WHY ANYONE SHOULD PRAY or what prayer should look like, it behooves us to contemplate the question: Who prays? Or, to put it more personally, should I pray? After all, what gives us the right? If you think about it, prayer is quite presumptuous. We are talking about approaching the almighty God of creation! He is perfect in holiness and righteousness and cannot abide sinners in his perfect presence. So, on what basis do you presume to go before him with your needs, wants, and cares? Who do you think you are, going before God in prayer?

It seems to me that there are two equal dangers that arise when it comes to this sort of questioning. The first is that we take such questions too lightly. We are presumptuous in thinking we have the right to go before God. To use William Placher's damning phrase, too many are guilty of the domestication of transcendence.⁴ We treat God as being too familiar, our buddy who wants to do us a favor, or worse, a genie who must grant our wishes.

Eugene Peterson corrects such flippancy with his delightful anecdote, "One of the indignities to which pastors are routinely subjected is to be approached, as a group of people are gathering for a meeting or a meal, with the request, "Reverend, get things started for us with a little prayer, will ya?" It would be wonderful if we would counter by bellowing William McNamara's fantasized response, "I will not! There are not little prayers! Prayer enters the lion's den, brings us before the holy where it is uncertain whether we will come back alive

⁴ William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

or sane, for it is a fearful thing to fall in the hands of a living God.”⁵

Prayer enters the lion’s den, indeed! No sinner can presume to come before God on their own. But, this gets us to the second danger which I encounter as a pastor a great deal. It comes when people say, “I’m too sinful to pray. God wouldn’t listen to someone like me.” This is a lie that Satan pours into a guilty conscience in an effort to keep a smoldering wick from the invigorating flames of mercy.

To be sure, sinners cannot approach the Holy One on their own. But—and here is precisely the joy and power of prayer—we don’t! Prayer is not a conversation God is open to having with us based on our worthiness. It is a gift from Jesus, who himself, along with the Holy Spirit, prays for you, and now invites you to join him with your prayers and supplications before the throne of your listening, gracious Father. You can pray because Jesus prays for you.

GOD IN PRAYER

I still cannot get over the fact that Jesus prays. It seems odd to say it. After all, prayers are directed towards God. Jesus is God. So, how in the world would it be that God prays?

We get a beautiful peek into the way the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another, and the way they deal with us, when the Holy Spirit pulls back the curtain and shows us that, right now, God the Son prays to God the Father. In John 17, just before Christ is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners, he prays. He prays for his apostles and the ministry they will carry forth. Then, he prays for his church: “I do not ask for these [the apostles] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20). Here we’ll find our

5 Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987). 46.

Lord praying to our Father for our unity so that, through us, the world might know that the Father sent the Son in love. Later, we'll find Jesus praying for those who are responsible for his death when he cries, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" (Luke 23:34).

Now, I don't know if I can make the exegetical case that this prayer from the cross applies directly to you or to me. However, we can see throughout the rest of the New Testament that this is the very sort of prayer Jesus prays for us. Paul promises, "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34). The author of Hebrews also points out, "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Jesus is before the Father making intercession for you. Jesus prays for you!

This is part of Jesus's great priestly work for the people of God. In the Old Testament, the priests had the job to offer up sacrifices to God and to pray on behalf of the people. Because Christ has given his life as the perfect sacrifice, he enters the throne room of heaven. And, since his sacrifice was made on our behalf, he goes before the Father to intercede for us. It is as if Christ points toward us with his nail-pierced hands and says, "Father, forgive her, forgive him. I have paid for their sins." Christ prays to his Father for you.

But, he won't stop there. He who prays for you invites you to join him!

WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS

Jesus is your great High Priest. He is also your King who rules over you. Such a title can be awfully intimidating. On first blush, upon hearing that we have Jesus as our monarch, we might begin to identify ourselves as his subjects or even servants. Though there are places in Scripture that will use such language,

the Lord Jesus informs us that there is a deeper level to this relationship. He calls us friends! “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:13–15). Jesus calls us royal friends and then connects this title to our prayers: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give it to you” (John 15:16). John Kleinig says, “In the ancient world, the person who was closest to the king, his personal confidant and advisor, was called the friend of the king.”⁶

In baptism, Christ, your great High Priest, has cleansed you with his blood, giving you access to the Father. By calling you his friend, the Lord brings you in as a confidant and advisor, telling you God’s will and inviting you to present your prayers and petitions before the Father in his name.

There’s more. On our own, we are sinners who have no business entering into God’s holy presence. But, being baptized into Christ, we are made priests through His blood and friends through his promise. Even with all this, our faith can waver, and we find ourselves utterly weak. So, Christ Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to help us in prayer, and—get this—to even pray for us!

Paul writes to the Romans, “Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). The Holy Spirit is at work interceding for us in our needs and in our weaknesses, even driving us to pray! “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15). Through Christ, you have been adopted into the family of God

6 John Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2008). 154.

and have been given the Holy Spirit, who both prays for you and teaches you to pray to the Father!

CONCLUSION

So, who should pray? Dear saint, you should! You can! Though we never presume upon prayer as a right that we have as sinners, we should not be prevented from praying. After all, Christ Jesus shed His blood in order to give you access to God. He is your High Priest who prays for you and makes you a priest. You are a baptized, royal friend of the Lord who is brought into the Father's confidence. And, you are an adopted child of God who has been given the Holy Spirit who leads you to pray and even prays on your behalf! All of this, God has done so that you will pray!

Why Pray?

If God is sovereign, how is it that my prayers are going to make any difference? And, if they don't make a difference, what's the point? Why pray if God is just going to do what he wants regardless of my prayers? As a pastor, I find that I am confronted with a form of this question on a regular basis. The questions arise for a variety of reasons, and many of those reasons are very personal, so I hesitate to try and give a "one size fits all" response. As with all theological inquiries, it is necessary to understand why the question is asked in the first place. But, generally speaking, the questions arise either from a place of theological confusion (How can God be both sovereign and responsive?) or as a result of some personal crisis or frustration (Why are my prayers not being answered?). So, when the question arises, "Why pray if God is sovereign?" The first response is always, "Why do you want to know?"⁷

To help us understand why we pray, we'll turn to that unfailingly pastoral theologian, Martin Luther, for guidance. Luther once said that all of his books should be ignored save for *The Bondage of the Will* and his catechisms. Though I vociferously disagree with Luther on this point, I would suggest that his Small and Large Catechisms are among his greatest contributions to Christendom. His teaching on the Lord's Prayer is second to none. His introduction to the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism offers four reasons which deftly address the "why" of prayer. It is to those reasons we turn now.

7 As with much of my theological thinking, I am indebted to Robert Kolb for this piece of pastoral wisdom. To any question of pastoral significance, the wise answer is always "Why do you want to know?"

REASON #1: GOD SAID SO

Simply put, we are to pray because God says so. “The first thing to know is this: It is our duty to pray because of God’s command. For we heard in the Second Commandment, ‘You are not to take God’s name in vain.’ Thereby we are required to praise the holy name and to pray or call upon it in every need.”⁸ Luther finds such a command to be a sufficient answer to those ever-wise theologians who think they can outsmart God and pit his sovereignty against his willingness to answer our prayers. “Prayer, therefore, is as strictly and solemnly commanded as all other commandments lest anyone think it makes no difference whether I pray or not, as vulgar people do who say in their delusion: ‘Why should I pray? Who knows whether God pays attention to my prayer or wants to hear it?’”⁹

It must be remembered that this is a command that comes from a kind Father who knows that his children rely upon him for everything in life and salvation. Apart from him, we can do nothing. To ignore this command and say, “Well, God will do what he wants regardless of my prayers,” is to tempt God, demanding that He act on your terms. Further, to despise prayer because of the sovereignty of God is to misunderstand the term. It is to look upon God as a stoic, immovable force whose work is fatalistic. This imposes a definition of sovereignty upon God and the Scriptures rather than allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the way our sovereign God works. As we think about prayer, it is better for us to begin with the commands and promises of the sovereign God, rather than with a presupposed definition of sovereignty. He doesn’t say, “I’ll do what I want, so your prayers are superfluous,” but rather, “Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you” (Ps. 50:15). And Jesus promises, “Ask, and it shall be given to you.” (Matt. 7:7).

8 Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000). 441.

9 Ibid.

“This God requires of us; it is not a matter of our choice. It is our duty and obligation to pray if we want to be Christians,” says Luther.¹⁰ To be sure, God is almighty and sovereign, but he is the almighty, sovereign God who demands your prayers. What is more, he promises to answer!

REASON #2: THE PROMISED ANSWER

In characteristic “law/gospel” fashion, Luther begins with the command to pray, but then follows with the promise of prayer. Without God’s promise to hear and answer, prayer ceases to be a gift and becomes an attempt to bargain with God, an attempt to manipulate him into doing our will. But, the promise frees us to ask with confidence. “In the second place, what ought to impel and arouse us to pray all the more is the fact that God has made and affirmed a promise: that what we pray is a certain and sure thing.”¹¹

Consider again Psalm 50:15. There we hear the clear command to pray, “Call upon me in the day of trouble.” But, to such a command, God adds this promise, “and I will deliver you.” “Such promises certainly ought to awaken and kindle in our hearts a longing and a love for prayer.”¹²

Luther goes on to point out that God delights in such prayers. He commands you to pray because he loves hearing from you! You never seem too needy or weak to God. You are weak and you do need him, and he delights in caring for you, hearing your cries, and giving you his good gifts.

As wonderful as this promise is, at times it is hard to believe. After all, we’ve all experienced the problem of unanswered prayers. I’ve always hated Garth Brooks song, “Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.” It seems

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid, 443.

¹² Ibid.

so pious. Anyone who has gone through the pains of cancer or broken relationships or job loss knows how false such sentiments are. So, how can we understand the promise of answered prayer in lives where we experience the opposite?

The hardest part of faith is trusting God's word over and against our eyes and experiences. But God has promised, and part of praying is faithfully putting God's promises back in his ears—to pray continuously and to never give up (Luke 18:1). He will answer according to his will and for your good. Though we will see some of our prayers answered in what we deem a timely manner, the truth is we must view these promises from the perspective of the resurrection. We may not see our loved ones healed until Christ raises them from the grave. But the day will come when all tears are removed and our prayers will turn to praise. It is a promise—a promise that drives us to pray.

REASON #3: JESUS GIVES THE WORDS

God commands us to pray and promises to answer. But, there are still those who do not know what to say. Jesus solves the problem for us by giving us the words to say. As we saw in the introduction, Jesus gives us the gift of the Lord's Prayer. "God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use. In this way we see how deeply concerned he is about our needs, and we should never doubt that such prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard."¹³

It is worth noting that when Jesus promises that the Father will hear and answer our prayers, he does so in the context of giving us the gift of the Lord's Prayer. The promise of answered prayer is not a promise that God will do whatever you demand. Rather, it is the promise that he will always answer in your favor

¹³ Ibid.

when you pray for his kingdom to come to you, his will to be done for you, and so on. By giving you his prayer, it is as though Jesus is saying, “Friend, take these requests to the Father and it will be done!”

REASON #4: OUR NEEDS

Finally, Luther says, “[Prayer] has been prescribed for this reason also, that we should reflect on our need, which ought to drive and compel us to pray without ceasing.”¹⁴ When Jesus gives us the Lord’s Prayer, he opens our eyes to our most pressing needs. Too often, we define our needs by our desires and cravings. But our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask, so, in giving us the Lord’s Prayer, he tells us what we should ask for.

“But where there is to be true prayer, there must be utter earnestness. We must feel our need, the distress that drives and impels us to cry out . . . This need, however, that ought to concern us—ours and everyone else’s—is something you will find richly enough in the Lord’s Prayer.”¹⁵

As we pray for God’s name to be kept holy, his kingdom to come, and his will to be done, we are reminded that, though these things happen of God’s accord without our prayers, we need him to accomplish them in us and for us. We learn that we depend on him for our daily bread and all we need to live in this world. Our sins are not forgiven apart from his mercy. And we cannot overcome temptation and the devil without God leading us and delivering us. The prayer Jesus taught us to pray names our needs and places them on our lips and in the Father’s ear.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 444.

CONCLUSION

Why do we pray if God is sovereign? The question misses the point. We pray, as R.C. Sproul once said, *because* God is sovereign!¹⁶ More to the point, he is gracious and loves to hear and answer our prayers. Why pray if God is going to carry out his will anyhow? Because it is his will to answer our prayers. We pray because he commands us to pray, he promises to graciously answer us, and he gives us the words to say. We also pray because our needs drive us to our Father who loves to hear us pray. Why do we pray? Let's let Luther have the last word, "For whenever a good Christian prays, 'Dear Father, your will be done,' God replies from above, 'Yes, dear child, it shall be done indeed, in spite of the devil and all the world.'"¹⁷

¹⁶ I am indebted to Justin Holcomb for this anecdote.

¹⁷ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 444.

What to Say?

I have always been intimidated by my teachers and professors. As an introvert, I find myself overthinking what I should say, fearing that I will look foolish in the presence of people I admire so highly. I will never forget the time, after I was ordained, when I was engaged in a conversation with one of my former seminary professors. I had emailed him a question, and he reached out to discuss it further. Whatever insecurity I had was quickly removed when, after saying, “Hello, Dr. Lessing,” he responded by saying, “Bob! Please, call me Reed!”

Too many people operate with a greater level of this sort of insecurity when it comes to speaking with God in prayer. I’ve talked with so many people who don’t pray because they fear they won’t say the right thing, as though prayer is a magic incantation that only works if you use the right phrase. Or, more to the point, they are worried that, because they are not worthy to be in God’s holy presence, God is not interested in their prayers. But, much like Dr. Lessing (or, should I say, Reed?), Jesus kindly removes our insecurities and establishes confidence by saying, “Dear friend, pray then like this: ‘Our Father . . .’” (Matt. 6:9, cf. John 15:15)

Martin Luther puts it this way in the Small Catechism: “With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask him as dear children ask their dear father.”¹⁸ By giving us the familiar name by which to call upon him, God is showing us that he not only hears our prayers, but desires them! He tells us how to address him and then, as we saw in the previous

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2017). ¹⁹

chapter, gives us the words to say.

The Holy Spirit says to us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6–7). God is so adamant about us making our requests known to him “in everything” that he gives us prayers to pray in every circumstance. We do not need to fear that we don’t know what to pray because God gives us the prayers in the Scriptures! Though these prayers are scattered all throughout God’s word, it is specifically in the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms where we are given prayers to pray.

THE LORD’S PRAYER

I come from a tradition where prewritten prayers are used in our worship services. I am quite thankful for this as I tend to ramble when asked to pray on the spot. However, there are some Christians who believe that our prayers should be spontaneous and from the heart if they are to be sincere and faithful.

I would suggest this is a false dichotomy. The Lord hears our prayers based on his promise, not based on how well written they are, nor on how sincere they are. What is more, both types of prayers are necessary and complementary. In giving us the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus gives us a “prewritten” prayer that we are to pray. But he doesn’t give it so that we thoughtlessly parrot these words back to God. Rather, the Lord’s Prayer is our school of prayer. It is the grammar school that teaches us the language of prayer. It is the launching pad for the rest of our other prayers. It teaches us our need—what we are to pray for. As we learn to speak the language of the Lord’s Prayer, we begin to make it our own. We begin to see our needs in light of the petitions Christ has given us. Our prayers, and our lives for that matter, are viewed in light of this wonderful prayer.

Jesus gives us seven petitions to pray and separates them into two categories which we will designate the “Thy Petitions” and the “Us Petitions.”

“Thy” Petitions

The first three petitions have to do with God’s work in and amongst us:

Hallowed by *thy* name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the Small Catechism, Luther explains each of these petitions by reminding us that God will accomplish all that we ask for here according to his will, whether we pray or not. However, in each petition, we are asking that God would allow that work to be done among us as well.¹⁹

Further, each of these petitions is directed towards God, but also against our persistent enemies who seek to undermine faith and the work of Christ. It is the devil who seeks to sully God’s name, prevent his reign from being proclaimed, and stop his gracious, saving will from being accomplished in our midst. Praying the “Thy” petitions is, to use Martin Marty’s phrase, “a declaration of war.”²⁰ Here we find ourselves aligned with Jesus over and against the assaults of sin, death, and the devil. We pray these petitions with the sure and certain hope that God has answered these prayers for us already in the dying and rising of Jesus and is glad to confer Christ’s benefits upon us.

“Us” Petitions

If the “Thy” petitions focus us on God’s will, the “Us” petitions cry for God to focus on our needs. Here, we who are on the earth pray for God’s will to be

¹⁹ Ibid. 20.

²⁰ Martin Marty, *The Hidden Discipline* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1962). 73.

done for us on earth:

Give *us* this day our daily bread;

Forgive *us* our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;

Lead *us* not into temptation;

Deliver *us* from evil (or, better translated, the evil one).

For those who think God is not concerned with the ins and outs of our everyday life, the Lord's Prayer is a beautiful reminder that all our life is lived under the shelter of his wing. The eyes of all creation look to our Father for their food, and he gives it in due season (Ps. 145:15), so we ask him for our daily bread. It is our Father who so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son for the forgiveness of sins (John 3:16), so we pray that our trespasses would be forgiven and that we would forgive others in kind. He is the God who always gives a way out to those in temptation (1 Cor. 10:13), and so we cry out to him when the devil is drawing us away from his will, trusting with a certain hope that he is our Father who will deliver us from the evil one.

Our Father is the God of creation and redemption who cares for both our eternal and temporal needs. Jesus teaches us how to pray to the Father of heavenly lights who gives all good gifts to meet those needs (James 1:17).

THE PSALMS

If the Lord's Prayer is the school of prayer, then each petition has a list of psalms for its syllabus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "All the prayers of Holy Scripture are summarized in the Lord's Prayer, and are contained in its immeasurable breadth . . . It makes good sense, then, that the Psalter is often bound together in a single volume with the New Testament. It is the prayer of the

Christian church. It belongs to the Lord's Prayer."²¹ Here, the Holy Spirit, by whom we cry "Abba, Father!" (Rom. 8:15), gives voice to every need we have.²²

To parrot Ecclesiastes, for everything there is a psalm, and a psalm for every matter under heaven. There are psalms for times of fear, anxiety, joy, celebration, anger, confusion, repentance, and praise. There are psalms for protection in times of danger. There are psalms that teach you to lament and direct your anger towards Him. And, there are psalms that simply allow you to praise and give thanks to God.

The Psalms guide us in prayer through all of life's circumstances. But, more importantly, they guide us through life's circumstances to Christ Jesus. In his flesh, he prayed all of these prayers for you. He prays them now with you as he intercedes for you. The book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible that both gives you Jesus and takes you to Jesus in your prayers.

CONCLUSION

The Lord's Prayer and the Psalms are the very prayers Jesus has given you as a gift. You need not be worried about whether or not God wants you to pray. After all, you are the one he has given this gift to! With his shed blood, Jesus has reconciled you to your Father, who welcomes you into his presence with open arms to embrace you and open ears to hear your prayers. So, like a child with a new present on Christmas morning, take the gifts he has given you and use them in his presence. After all, your Father delights in your prayers!

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1970). 16.

²² For a helpful chart that organizes the Psalms according to the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, see John T Pless, *Praying Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2016). 161–163.

Using the Gift

Of everything I have written so far, this section makes me the most nervous. I am about to give you advice on how to pray. But I want to make sure you approach what I am about to say in a spirit of freedom. It is, after all, for freedom that Christ has set you free (Gal. 5:1). Yet, so much literature on prayer seems to place a yoke on your back, turning the gift into a burden, or worse, a scheduled appointment. I fear what I am about to write may strike you as legalistic or ritualistic in such a way that you will miss the joy we have in our freedom to pray.

With that caveat aside, I also know that many people want to pray, but really struggle with how to do it. Do I sit or kneel? Do I pray silently or aloud to myself? Must my prayers be spontaneous or written? Can I pray for what I want, or must I only pray the text? What if I get distracted? Is that a sin? (It is not!) Such questions also demonstrate a lack of freedom. They come from people who want to enjoy the gift of prayer but cannot conceive of it apart from a mere demand.

A few years ago, my church body asked the pastors what were some of the most pressing questions their congregants asked. A large number of people said they wanted to have a faithful prayer life, but didn't know how.²³ So, in this section, I want to try and offer some helpful advice. I do not claim that this advice is from the Holy Spirit (well, except for the first section on going to church, that is most certainly God's will and expectation). I do, however, believe there is some sanctified wisdom here and pray that it would prove helpful for you.

²³ As a result of this survey, I was invited to write a little book on the subject. Robert Hiller, *5 Things You Can Do to Have a Faithful Prayer Life (You Can Do It!)* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2013).

GO TO CHURCH

Prayer is not something you engage in alone. As we've seen already, Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit pray for us and with us. But there's more. It is a gift Jesus has given you, but you are not the only one to receive this gift. This is a gift Jesus gives to his church. It is a gift to be used by the church as we gather together with each other. The majority of psalms were used in the worship service. The Lord's Prayer is not addressed to "my" Father, but to "our" Father. Jesus gives us no "me" petitions. To be sure, there is a time and place for the individual to be in prayer (as we'll see in a moment). But we would do well to recognize that prayer begins within the communion of saints.

When we attend the Divine Service, our entire engagement with God is saturated in prayer. He comes to us in Word and sacrament, and we respond with prayer and praise. The Lutheran church designates this pattern of worship as "sacrament" (what God gives to us) and sacrifice (how we respond to God). Do not be misled by the language of sacrifice. We do not believe we are offering a sacrifice of atonement for our sins, but rather, we respond to God's giving of gifts with "sacrifices" of praise and thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15). Thus, we do not pray in the service to earn God's favor, but because he's already given it so freely. Having received the promises of his grace and favor, we present our petitions to God, trusting his promises to answer in our favor. Our communal prayers are just as important as our individual prayers. God delights in them just as much.

The prayers of the church also inform us of the needs of God's people. We not only pray them together in the Divine Service, but we can take them home with us and pray for all God's people according to their needs in our individual prayer time. In this way, we continue to pray with the church throughout the week.

TIME AND PLACE

Jesus teaches us to go to our room, shut the door, and get to the point in our prayers. God is not impressed by long, wordy speeches, incoherent babbling, or even elaborate prayer liturgies(!). Long prayers, which look so impressive to us, may actually lack faith as they seek to persuade God, as though He hasn't already promised to hear and answer: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:8).

Just as you have time set aside in your week to attend worship, it is a useful practice to set up a specific time of day to attend to your daily prayers. There is no law in the Scriptures that commands you to do it at any given time. The key is consistency.

"O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch" (Ps. 5:3). As I've gotten older, I have found waking up an hour earlier for a time of prayer and meditation on God's word is much more beneficial. Though it is purely anecdotal evidence, I have found that beginning my day with Scripture and prayer has helped me remain more consistent in my prayers than when I saved my most focused prayer time for the evening.

"Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" (Ps. 141:2). When I was younger, I was more of a night owl and said my prayers before bed. This is a practice I still do in my home as our family prayer time is before we put the kids to bed. In the evening, we are all at home with the business of the day behind us. It is the ideal time for my family to process through the day together with the Lord. We then go to sleep trusting that our Father will "through the night watch over our beds."²⁴

²⁴ "Now Rest Beneath Night's Shadow" by Paul Gerhardt in *The Lutheran Service Book: Pew Edition* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2006). 880.

“Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice” (Ps. 55:17). It may be that morning and evening prove difficult for you. You could take your lunch break at work to spend time in prayer. But, as this psalm points out, our time of prayer need not be limited to one fixed point in the day. The Lord always stands ready to hear our prayers. Though your most focused time of prayer may be in the morning, it is still a great blessing to pray before each meal and at the close of the day to read a psalm and sing a hymn of peace as you close your eyes for a blessed sleep. Again, it is consistency that is key. With set times of prayer, you will find that spontaneous prayers begin to come more naturally.

Let me also suggest you find a location that is quiet and where you will be able to focus. A number of people tell me that they have their prayer time while they drive to work. Perhaps you are able to focus on God while at the same time focusing on the road. I, however, cannot. So, for the sake of my prayers and my neighbor in the car in front of me, I separate my time so I can keep my eyes fixed on Jesus in my prayers and fixed on the road while I drive. A place free of distraction where you can focus on the Scriptures and prayer is ideal.

ORDER YOUR TIME

To help prevent distraction, it will prove helpful to have what I call a personal prayer liturgy. That is, a set routine to help guide you through your prayers. I have attached one to this chapter that you can use if you’d prefer (see Appendix 1). *The Lutheran Service Book*, the denominational hymnal of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, offers a few brief services of prayer to use individually or with your family. It also offers suggested themes for your prayers throughout the week.²⁵

²⁵ *The Lutheran Service Book: Pew Edition* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2006). 294–298. This hymnal is a virtual treasure trove of devotional material.

You might also order your prayers for each day of the week according to seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer. So, on Sunday, when you pray for God's name to be hallowed, your prayers could focus on that theme. Pray for your pastor, your congregation, the mission of the church, that God would send faithful laborers into the harvest, and the like. I have attached a weekly guide to this chapter to help you in this effort (see Appendix 2).

PRAY THE SCRIPTURES

Martin Luther was once asked by his barber Peter Beskendorf for advice on how to pray. As a result, Luther produced a delightful little book, *A Simple Way to Pray*, where he showed Peter how to prayerfully approach the catechism and allow it to guide his prayers. He said he took up a “garland of four strands” when he would, for example, approach the Ten Commandments. He considered what they commanded, gave thanks for what was spoken and given in the commandment, confessed his sin in light of it, and finally, prayed for divine help in obeying it.²⁶

Luther's advice sounds much like the ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) format of prayer. Both models prove helpful for praying, not just the Ten Commandments, but all of Scripture. Thus, your time in the word should never be separated from prayer, and your prayers should be informed by God's word. This simple format from Luther will help you meditate on the Bible more deeply and prayerfully.

There's no need to be overwhelmed with having to order your time. In his Small Catechism, Luther offers another way to pray. When you wake up in the morning, you make the sign of the cross in order to remember your baptism, then, kneeling or standing, say the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, say

²⁶ Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, tr. Matthew Harrison (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2012).

another prayer (Luther offers his morning prayer as a suggestion), and then go about your day singing a hymn. He also suggests you repeat something similar before bed.²⁷

If you are struggling to find time to pray, start with this short order from the Small Catechism. Then, as you get more comfortable, add a psalm or a Scripture reading. Recognize that by just following this simple format, you'll do more damage to the devil's kingdom in just over a minute than the devil can do to you all day.

CONCLUSION

As you consider these suggestions, remember that you are free. Your prayers may falter, but Jesus's will not. It is the Holy Spirit who groans for you when you don't know what to say. So, if none of this works for you and you only find yourself frustrated, take heart. God yet hears your prayers and frustrations on account of his Son and promise. When such frustration arises, I am encouraged by Gretchen Ronnevik's wonderful reminder, "There are many methods of prayer, but what astonishes me more than any of them is that the Holy Spirit interprets my groans. I can groan, and God not only hears me, but understands me. When we talk about the level of intimacy God is offering us through prayer, I think that's a good place to start. Please don't ask me the correct way to groan."²⁸

²⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 30–31.

²⁸ Gretchen Ronnevik, *Ragged Spirituality: Spiritual Disciplines for the Spiritually Exhausted* (Irvine, 1517 Publications, 2021). 119.

Simply Personal Prayer Liturgy

Invocation

Making the sign of the cross, say:

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN

Psalm Reading

Pray: Father, grant me your Spirit so that this reading would renew my thoughts, focus me on Jesus, and help me see the world according to your will. May the words of the psalmist be the prayer of my heart. AMEN

The Lord's Prayer

The Apostle's Creed

Other Petitions

Note: Here it may prove helpful to set up different themes for each day of the week. This will prevent you from trying to cover everything in one session. Also, allow for the Holy Spirit to distract you into praying for things you may not have planned.

Scripture Reading

Note: Consider using Sunday's texts as your scriptural focus for the week.

Devotional Meditation

Note: Take time to prayerfully focus on the text you just read. Consider using a devotional book as a way of focusing your thoughts. Again, using Sunday's texts and themes will prove helpful.

Closing Prayer

Note: Here you may just say "AMEN" or you could use Luther's Morning/Evening Prayer, depending on what time you pray.

APPENDIX TWO

The Lord's Prayer as a Daily Guide

Use the ACTS model to help guide your petitions. (A–Adoration, C–Confession, T–Thanksgiving, S–Supplication)

SUNDAY: HALLOWED BE THY NAME

A: Praise God that his name is holy and has been made known to us through his Son.

C: Confess that you have not kept God's name holy and have sought your own glory over and against his.

T: Give thanks that his name was hallowed in your life when he baptized you and rejoice that His name continues to be hallowed as he daily forgives your sins.

S: Pray for the church here and around the world. Pray for your pastor as he preaches this day and for all church workers and missionaries. Pray that the devil's plans to silence the name of God would be foiled.

MONDAY: THY KINGDOM COME

A: Sing God's praises as you leave the day of worship and go back to your

callings in his good creation. Give thanks that you do so as one rescued into the glorious kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

C: Confess that you are too easily tempted to live as one still in the dominion of darkness. Ask the Lord to reveal areas of your life for which you should repent.

T: Give thanks that Jesus only welcomes sinners into his Kingdom. Sit in awe of the fact that your struggles are never stronger than his promise to keep you.

S: Pray for your family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Ask for God to show them his love through you and for them to be a blessing in their callings. Pray for the government and all in authority.

TUESDAY: THY WILL BE DONE

A: Praise our gracious Father for the cross of Jesus which defeats the devil, the world, and your own flesh.

C: Confess your inability to do God's will on your own. Confess your desire to be in control. Confess your frustration with God's plans.

T: Give thanks that God's good and gracious will is done in this world and in your own life. Give thanks that it is his will to baptize you, absolve you, and nourish you with his sacrament. Rejoice that it is his good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32).

S: Pray God would keep you firm in his word in the face of all number of trials, temptations, and difficulties. Pray for those who suffer persecution and hatred for Christ's name.

WEDNESDAY: GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

A: Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Give thanks that the God who has redeemed you is also the God who has created you and provides for all your daily needs. Perhaps make a list of your earthly blessings.

C: Confess your greed and covetous heart. Confess that you are not always content with that which God has provided. Confess your constant lust for more.

T: Rejoice that God causes his rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). Give thanks that your Father knows what you need, even before you ask (Matt. 6:8).

S: Pray for your job and a steady income. Pray that the Lord would teach you to trust him with your money and your livelihood so you are free to serve and love your neighbor generously and without fear. Pray for the poor, thirsty, and naked, and ask God to provide you opportunities to serve them.

THURSDAY: FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS

A: Praise God whose Son is a friend of sinners! Rejoice over Jesus who, even as he hung dying on the cross, could speak nothing but words of mercy! (Luke 23:34)

C: Confess whatever sins are truly weighing heavy on you. Confess your inability to forgive your enemies (or even friends!). Take the Ten Commandments and use them for a guide of repentance.

T: Rejoice in the overwhelming message that “while you were yet sinners,

Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Give thanks that he has already forgiven your enemies.

S: Now pray for strength to forgive those who have harmed you as well. Pray that God would give you the Holy Spirit and the guts to pronounce absolution in their ears! Pray for God always to grant you a church where you constantly hear of his forgiveness for you.

FRIDAY: LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

A: Rejoice and praise God that Christ has conquered the devil (Matthew 4:1–11) and is now the gracious Lord of the earth, and of you!

C: Confess your weakness in the face of temptation. Confess your sinful desires.

T: Give thanks for the times that you have been led away from temptation. Praise Jesus, that he will never let you be tempted beyond your ability and will always provide a way out (I Cor. 10:13).

S: Pray for the Holy Spirit to protect you from temptations. Pray that the way out would be made clear in all circumstances. Pray that Christ, who has been tempted in EVERY way you have (Heb. 4:15), would help you with the specific sins you wage war with the most.

SATURDAY: DELIVER US FROM EVIL

A: Rejoice over the week God has given you! Honor him for overcoming all the crafts and the assaults of the devil!

C: Confess your sinful failures in the past week. Confess that your sinful

decisions have caused harm to yourself and others.

T: But, give thanks, that Jesus will make right all that has gone wrong this past week. Thank him for beginning that work in the resurrection. Thank him that whatever wrongs you have suffered will be set right on the last day!

S: Pray for continual rescue from all evils of both body and soul. Focus today on the sick and the suffering in your family, church, neighborhood, etc. Pray for a heart that is ready to receive God's gifts in worship and hands that are ready to serve your brothers and sisters in Christ. Pray for faithfulness unto death.

Recommended Resources

DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE/HELPS

- » Bird, Chad. *Unveiling Mercy: 365 Daily Devotions Based on Insights from Old Testament Hebrew*. 1517 Publishing, 2020.
- » Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Meditating on the Word*. Cowley Publications, 2000.
- » Gerhard, Paul. *Meditations on Divine Mercy*. Concordia Publishing House, 2003.
- » Giertz, Bo. *A Year of Grace, Volume 1: Collected Sermons of Advent through Pentecost*. 1517 Publishing, 2019.
- » Giertz, Bo. *A Year of Grace, Volume 2: Collected Sermons Covering the Season of Pentecost/Trinity*. 1517 Publishing, 2021.
- » Giertz, Bo. *Romans: A Devotional Commentary*. 1517 Publishing, 2018.
- » Giertz, Bo. *The New Testament Devotional Commentary, Volume 1: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. 1517 Publishing, 2021.
- » Giertz, Bo. *To Live with Christ*. Concordia Publishing House, 2009.
- » Giertz, Bo. *With My Own Eyes*. New Reformation Publishing, 2017.
- » Holcomb, Justin. *God with Us: 365 Devotions on the Person and Work of Christ*. Bethany House Publishers, 2021.
- » Lewis, C.S. *The Joyful Christian*. Touchstone, 1996.
- » Luther, Martin. *Faith Alone*. Concordia Publishing House, 1999.
- » Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works, vol. 42: Devotional Writings 1*. Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1963.
- » Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works, vol. 43: Devotional Writings 2*. Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1968.

- » PrayNow app
- » The Lutheran Service Book. Concordia Publishing House, 2006.
- » The Treasury of Daily Prayer. Concordia Publishing House, 2008.

ON PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

- » Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Psalms: the Prayer Book of the Bible*. Augsburg Fortress Press, 1974.
- » Hallesby, Ole. *Prayer*. Augsburg Publishing House, 1959.
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- » Kleinig, John. *Grace upon Grace*. Concordia Publishing House, 2008.
- » www.johnkleinig.com
- » Luther, Martin. *A Simple Way to Pray*. Concordia Publishing House, 2012.
- » Luther, Martin. *The Small and Large Catechism in Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*. Concordia Publishing House 2005, 2006.
- » Pless, John T. *Praying Luther's Small Catechism*. Concordia Publishing House, 2016.
- » Ronnevik, Gretchen. *Ragged Spirituality: Spiritual Disciplines for the Spiritually Exhausted*. 1517 Publishing, 2021.

I am no master of prayer. But Jesus is.

Before we can ever talk about the discipline or the practice of prayer, we first need to hear the good news: Jesus has given you the gift of prayer. God the Father hears your prayers on account of Jesus Christ, who has given you the Holy Spirit, who drives you to pray. Prayer is a gift from the triune God, given to all who believe.



Jesus not only teaches us to pray, he gives us the gift of prayer and the promise that God is listening. Having received these gracious gifts, we are ready to explore prayer more deeply.

In this little booklet, seasoned pastor and White Horse Inn podcast host Bob Hiller helps you hear what Jesus teaches about prayer and what it looks like to pray in light of the gospel. He also includes helpful resources as you seek to deepen your prayer life.

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