

### **“The Door’s Open”**

In the name of him who taught his disciples to pray, dear friends in Christ: Martin Luther, the great reformer of the Church, once said that prayer is like the beating pulse of a Christian’s heart. To be a bit more accurate, he said, “You cannot find a Christian without prayer any more than you can find a living man without a pulse.” I wonder, if we were to take his statement literally, how many of us would be in full cardiac arrest? Or if not completely flat-lined, how many of us would have a heart rate so slow, so weak, and so irregular as to be considered as good as dead? Somehow, I doubt that any of us could claim to have a pulse that is as strong and healthy as it should be – and that’s a pity. It’s been correctly said of Lutherans that they really do *believe* in prayer; but they’d sooner die than be asked to stand up and say one out loud. Why is that? Why is it that we who claim to share the faith of Luther don’t also share his passion for prayer?

At least with respect to praying out loud in public, maybe it’s because of that stoic German heritage so many of us have. We naturally shy away from standing out in the crowd for fear of being considered “showy”. Or maybe it’s our concern for doctrinal purity: we’re afraid that if we just start talking off the cuff we might say something theologically incorrect (or just plain stupid) in front of everyone else. Or maybe we figure it’s the pastor’s job—that’s what we pay him for, isn’t it? But whatever reasons we use for being reluctant to pray aloud in public, what have they got to do with our private prayers? You know, our Lord Jesus was a man of prayer. He would often go off to be alone and pour out his heart to his Father in heaven—and *he’s God*. How much more should we whose faith is so much weaker, whose needs are so much greater, and whose resistance against temptation is so utterly pitiful make use of the gift of prayer? Why don’t we pray as much as we should?

Perhaps it’s that we think of it as too much of a burden. From childhood we have been told to “Say your prayers”. And because of it, prayer has become something of a tedious chore to avoid at all costs. Or maybe it’s because we think it doesn’t do any good. After all, we’ve all prayed for things in the past and didn’t get what we wanted. So, we’re determined it’s usually just a waste of time. Or maybe it’s because of the guilt factor. We know that we aren’t quite living up to the Christian standard in certain areas of our lives, and we feel that it would be rather two-faced to make requests of the Lord after having spent so much time and effort offending him. In the end, it doesn’t matter much: whatever reasons we use, when we avoid prayer we play right into the Devil’s hand. He hates it when Christians pray. And he hates it when we receive its benefits. So he’s more than happy when we come up with excuses to neglect the gift of prayer.

Now, I don’t think anyone of us wakes up every morning thinking, “Hmmm ... I wonder what I can do to please Satan today?” And I further believe that if we had a better understanding of God’s perspective on prayer and the reasons he gave it to us, we’d all have a better attitude about it and make use of it more frequently.

So, with that let’s ask the question, “What is prayer?” It’s important that we start here because there is presently so much confusion and bad information being tossed around out there in Christian circles about the topic. First, we should probably say what prayer is not. Prayer is not a means of empowering yourself. It is not a way to obligate the Lord to do certain things and give you what you want; nor, as many seem to believe, are prayers like votes by which if we can only get enough people to pray about something for long enough a time we can override the will of God. Prayer is not a way to earn favor or extra credits in the eyes of the Lord. And, strictly speaking, prayer is not what we call a “means of grace”, that is, a way by which the Lord gives us more faith in him.

On the contrary, *prayer is an expression of the faith we already have*. If you’ll allow me to use an analogy, prayer is for a Christian what crying is for an infant. An infant cries because it has needs and it cannot take care of itself. It’s completely helpless: it needs someone else to feed it, clothe it, wash it, change its soiled diapers, comfort it, put it someplace warm and safe to sleep, and to protect it. Constantly. And the only way it has to express the fact that something’s not quite right is to cry. It does it naturally. But it soon

learns that when it cries, there's somebody out there it trusts to take care of its needs. And so very soon in a child's life its cries become directed to someone – target specific, so to speak. It's not just "crying out loud", it's crying out *to* someone that it trusts to take care of it. That's what prayer is. It's when we recognize that we are dependent on the Lord to take care of us in every way, and since we trust him to take care of us, we direct our "cries", that is our *prayers*, to him.

But here's the difference: as a child gets older it learns to take care of its own needs. Before long people are telling the child to "stop crying and take care of it yourself." And by degrees a child learns how. It becomes more mature and dependent on itself and so it stops crying so often (at least if you're the parent, you hope it does). But the more a Christian matures in the faith, the more he or she comes to understand how completely *dependent* upon the Lord they are for everything. Our problem is *we think* we can stand on our own. We think we can take care of ourselves. Growing in faith is marked by understanding just how untrue that is. The fact is that every beat of your heart and every breath you take depend on God grace, for if he were to withdraw his steady help and support even for a moment you couldn't last a second. So, whereas a child learns to cry less as it matures, with maturity a Christian learns to pray more – especially for the needs that are the greatest.

And that's why when Jesus taught his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer, we see that his main focus is on *spiritual* needs. Luke's version of the prayer that we have in today's Gospel lesson has only five of the seven petitions that appear in Matthew's Gospel. That's the version with which we are more familiar and that we all studied in Luther's Small Catechism. But even though Luke's rendition is missing "Thy will be done" and "Deliver us from evil", the petitions that deal primarily with spiritual concerns still outnumber the one that treats a material concern (daily bread) by four to one. I'd say Jesus is telling us something here about where our priorities should lie. It's as he said elsewhere, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (that is, the things that you need for your soul), and all these (material) things (like food, shelter, clothing, and so on) will be added to you." We usually turn that around – but again, that's a mark of an immature faith. With more faith in Christ comes more concern for spiritual needs and consequently more prayer for the Lord's help in that capacity.

I hasten to add that "more prayer" doesn't necessarily mean *more time* spent in prayer. It's a question of motivation: how much you see the need for prayer, not how long a duration you spend praying. What's most remarkable about the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples is how brief it is. There's not a lot of flowery prose or long explanations as to why we want this or that. It's simply, "Father, let it be that I regard your name as holy; that your kingdom comes to me; that I have what need for the survival and care of my body; that you forgive me my sins, and give me the grace to forgive others in the same way; and finally let it be that I not succumb to temptation. Amen." They're almost like "bullet comments". The point is that in relatively few words they cover all the essential bases – and they help us to see that it is the Lord who takes care of all of them for us. Some people think that prayers become more powerful the longer they spend at them or the more they screw up their faces and furrow their brows while praying to show how earnest they are. That's nonsense. A far more Christian approach is to understand the need, ask the Lord to take care of it, and go on with your business with the certainty that the Lord has heard your prayer and will take care of it in his own way.

Because, as Jesus continues, the Lord is very much interested in hearing and answering our prayers offered in faith. This is demonstrated by the example Jesus gives. He begins by asking a rhetorical question. Suppose, he says, a visitor from out of town, a friend of yours, has arrived unexpectedly and late, and now you find yourself without bread to set before your guest to refresh him after his long journey. "Which of you", he asks, "after knocking on the door and making your request to borrow a few loaves of pita bread, would have a neighbor so rude and so inconsiderate as to answer, 'No, leave me alone. It's late, we're all in bed, and I can't be bothered to get you what you want right now?'" To properly understand the question, you have to know that in first century Judea the virtue of hospitality was something everyone strived to be known for. Jesus' point is that no one would be as un-neighborly as that. That may not be altogether clear because in the translation we heard earlier it said that the neighbor would give the guy what he wanted on account of his "impudence". It makes it sound as if the neighbor in the house will respond because he's being nagged, and he knows he won't be able to get back to sleep until he gives the guy what he wants; but that isn't the idea at all. A better and more literal translation of the phrase is that he will respond to the guy's request on account of his "shamed-face-ness". And the word refers not to the guy who's knocking, but to the guy in the

house. The idea is he wouldn't want to be known in the community as a guy so grouchy and inhospitable that he would decline such a request from a friend in need. Jesus says that even though he might not want to get out of bed for friendship's sake, he will do it to protect his own reputation.

What Jesus is driving at is that the Lord himself has a reputation to protect. He wants to open the doors of heaven to you and give you what you want—especially the things that are for the spiritual benefit of you and others. If your neighbor would do it to protect his reputation, even though it might inconvenience him a bit, how much more does God your Father who loves you, and who knows how to give you good gifts, and who has the reputation and name that is above every name, eagerly desire to respond to your requests?

Still, we don't knock as often as we should, do we? Maybe this illustration will help: while I was in the Army, for a couple years I served as a company commander. It's not a particularly high position in the Army overall; but from the perspective of the rank and file soldier it is. For the typical private, the company C.O. is six levels up the chain of command from where he is. If you were such a soldier, in between you and your commander would be your team leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant, platoon leader, and first sergeant. So, from your point of view, while the company commander wouldn't exactly be "god" – he'd be pretty darn close. He'd also be the guy who held real legal authority over you. Only he could reward you by granting leaves and passes. Only he could promote you or reassign you. Or, on the negative side, he could demote you, dock your pay, assign you extra duty as punishment, or even put you in jail.

Anyway, while serving in this capacity, it was my custom to have certain times set aside for what was called the "Commander's open door". The idea was that during these designated hours anyone could come in to my office and speak with me one-on-one about whatever was on their minds. You name it: suggestions, requests, complaints ... okay, yes, mostly complaints – this is the *Army* we're talking about; but that was the deal. It was supposed to be a truly open door: no topics off limits, and no recriminations for speaking your mind. Well, anyway, when I first took command no one took advantage of the opportunity; not a single soldier. And I thought, "Either they all must be pretty happy with the way things are, or they're waiting to see what kind of guy the new C.O. is before anyone takes a chance on taking me up on the offer." Soldiers have, after all, a certain inherent distrust of their officers. No one is going to talk to the C.O. if they think in the end they'll get in trouble for it.

So, I gave it some time, several months in fact; during which time I had plenty of opportunities to prove to them that I wasn't such a bad sort and could be generally trusted. But still no one took advantage of the open door. After a while I realized that a big part of the problem was way the office was arranged. In order to come into my office, a soldier had to go through the first sergeant's office. Don't get me wrong, I had a great first sergeant. But one of his chief duties was to enforce discipline – and he was a big, scary man. The soldiers respected him. And they were terrified of him. No one wanted to go past him to get to me. If nothing else, they'd be afraid that the first sergeant would think of them as a complainer, a malingerer, or someone who was trying to jump the chain of command to get some advantage for themselves. So no one came in. I decided that if I wanted to have a truly open door, I'd have to do it during hours when the first sergeant wasn't there.

So that's what I did. And then, slowly at first because the soldiers still weren't quite sure (maybe it was the frightful "aura" of the first sergeant that lingered in the office even when he was gone) they started to take advantage of the open door. And through the process we managed to clear up a lot of misunderstandings, right some legitimate wrongs, improve the living conditions in the barracks, boost morale, and make the company a better outfit over all. Now, the point is not that I was some great and wise leader (most of the time I wasn't); but rather this: If I, being evil, knew how to respond positively to the needs of my soldiers, how much more does God our Father want to give his Holy Spirit and the gifts that flow from the Spirit to those who ask of him? Whatever was "scary" about our Father in heaven was completely removed in Christ. When we come to the Father with our requests trusting in the Lord Jesus who suffered and died for our sins, he sees as his own dear, innocent children whom he wants to bless richly in every helpful way.

St. James writes in his Epistle, "You do not have because you do not ask." So, let's fix that. Let's ask. The door's open. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***