

## Luke 11:1-10 – Lent 3 Wednesday – A Simple Way to Pray – March 15, 2023

+In Nomine Iesu+

You are walking through the hospital after a routine doctor’s visit—with a clean bill of health, of course. But as you exit, you bump into someone from church. And quickly you find out that his visit is much more serious. And at that moment, he asks you to pray. And you say, “Of course, I will pray for you.” And you begin your goodbyes.

But he is looking for more than some good wishes or good vibes. And he says, “No, I mean will you pray for me right now, right here.” And now, the panic sets in. You don’t have your Portals of Prayer. You don’t have your Lutheran Prayer Book. You don’t have your pastor. So, what will you do? What do you say?

Of course, the answer is to pray. This is what we Christians do for one another. James 5 instructs us, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” Grammatically, this is a command in this passage. It’s not optional. We are to pray for one another.

And there is something particularly important about others hearing us when we pray. And let me build this idea from Scripture. There is a conflict about the use of other languages—tongues as Paul calls them—in worship in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Now this is about supernatural sign gifts that God gave to His church in the first century—signs that pointed to the validity of the ministry of the Apostles. And we won’t get into what all of this means today. But there is a thought here worth noting about prayer.

In this passage, Paul says, “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful...I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also...Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.”

Paul is saying that if I pray for you in Hebrew, you won’t know what I am saying. And you won’t be encouraged by my petitions. I may be praying—God knows Hebrew pretty well—but the value is diminished for the hearer.

The same is true with a silent prayer. God still hears, of course, but your neighbor doesn’t. If I pray for you aloud—in language you can understand—you can add your *amen*. *Amen* means *truly*—or as Luther says in the Catechism, “yes, yes, it shall be so.”

It brings encouragement and hope when we know that others take our concerns to our heavenly Father who hears and answers the prayers of His people. In a few weeks we are going to talk about the public prayers of the church. And one of our purposes in praying at church is for encouragement among those who gather for worship.

Getting back to our scenario, then. What do you say to your fellow church member who asks you to pray in the hallway of the hospital. And what words do you use? Maybe it has been a long time since you prayed out loud. Or maybe you only pray before meals. Maybe you only use memorized prayer. Maybe you only pray the Lord’s Prayer. Are you ready for this kind of moment?

In this sermon series, I have resisted the idea that “prayer is just talking to God.” And we have gone looking for a deeper definition—one we draw from the Scriptures. And

with the disciples, we recognize that prayer is something that we learn. In Luke, after they witness Jesus praying, we hear the disciples ask, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” And it is in this context in Luke that we get several of the pieces of the Lord’s Prayer. Of course, we hear it more fully in Matthew 6.

And so, we find that prayer is something that we learn from the Bible. And the Psalms are the perfect example as words that are petitions to God and God’s Word at the same time. Prayer is speaking God’s Word back to Him. And so the words that God would have us use in prayer should sound a lot like what we find in Scripture.

But let’s get even more specific. One of my favorite little books on prayer is called *A Simple Way to Pray*. It’s by Martin Luther. And the Concordia version has a forward by our Synod President Matthew Harrison. I bought a copy of this book for World Day of Prayer a decade ago and gave it out to all in attendance. I probably should have done that again. But you can do it. It is \$4 on Amazon. And they have plenty of copies. I checked.

Here, Luther responds to his barber—his name is Peter—Peter the Barber—who asks him about prayer. He asks Luther about *how* to pray. And this is the question I would like to explore today.

But this is not some academic question for him. In fact, the question comes after this man had made quite a mess out of his life. Although the details are a little sketchy, we know that this man had accidentally killed his son-in-law. And now—although the court was lenient with him because of the accidental nature—he was sentenced to exile.

I can’t imagine living with that kind of guilt. He is alone, forlorn, but also repentant. And in letters that he wrote we discover he was looking for grace from God. And he sought out Luther as his pastor to give him a way to pray about his own desperate situation.

Luther was a busy man. But he spends time responding to this request. In fact, the man got a 30-page response. And it sounds a lot like the Catechism. In fact, He uses the Lord’s Prayer, the 10 Commandments, and the Apostle’s Creed as the basis for his prayer. Each petition of the Lord’s Prayer, each commandment, and each article remind us how we are to pray.

But first, he begins with an introduction—how our prayers should start. And it sounds like this, “O heavenly Father, Dear God, I am an unworthy, wretched sinner. I do not deserve to lift my eyes and hands to heaven and pray. But because You have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear such prayer, and because You have taught us through Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, both in word and in deed, I now come on the basis of Your command in obedience to You. I take my stand on Your gracious promise, and in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, I pray with all You holy Christians on earth, as He has taught us.”

He then suggests that we pray the Lord’s Prayer completely. But then this is where he launches out. The Lord’s Prayer is intended to offer us topics for our prayers. Each petition is what Christ would have us pray about. So, Luther encourages us to recite a single petition and then pray accordingly.

For example, if we were to pray the second petition, “Thy Kingdom come,” prayer would sound like this.

“O dear Lord God, You see how the ‘understanding’ and ‘wisdom’ of this world disgraces Your name. They even give the honor due Your name to lies and to the devil. You have given people the authority, power, riches, and honor to serve You by governing on earth, and yet they set themselves against Your kingdom and struggle against it. There are such a great many of these big, fat, and full people who plague, hinder, and interfere with Your kingdom’s humble flock, which is weak, despised and small. They won’t allow a place for this flock on earth, and think that by this they are somehow offering You some great act of worship.

“Dear Lord God, Father, convert and protect! Convert those who have not yet become like little children and members of Your kingdom, so that together we may serve You in Your kingdom with a right faith and genuine love, and then come out of this assaulted kingdom into the eternal kingdom. Hinder those who refuse to turn away from using their power and strength to destroy Your kingdom. Hurl them down from their thrones and humiliate them so they are forced to cease and desist. Amen.”

So this gives us a hint of what Luther means by prayer. Topics for prayer arise from God’s Word, specifically from the catechism. The Lord’s Prayer is intended to be an outline for us of prayer. The petitions teach us what we are to pray about.

But as to the content of each prayer, he summarizes this with four letters: I.T.C.P. Instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer.

*Instruction* means—as I have suggested—that after addressing God Himself, we focus on something that He has said. This might be to acknowledge His character or goodness. This might be a command that He has given. Think about what God is teaching us in His Word. With open Bibles, here, You speak His Word back to Him.

*Thanksgiving* means that you offer gratitude to God for something He has said, something that He has done, something that He has promised. Thanksgiving is not just a feeling, but is a verbal expression of heartfelt gratitude for His involvement in our lives and our world.

*Confession* admits our weaknesses, sins, failures, insecurities, and even our need for Him. We do this every Sunday, of course. But notice that it holds a prominent place in the Lord’s Prayer. The fifth petition is “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Our confession admits our needs—our limits—not just our sins. Our prayers should humbly reflect that reality.

And finally, *prayer* or maybe more rightly, *petition*. This is often what we think prayer is—although notice it is only one quarter of what Luther would have us pray in prayer. These are our requests. We ask God to provide what we need—especially in eternal matters. But even when it comes to everyday issues, we have needs that only God can meet. He sustains us and our petitions acknowledge His goodness.

So, how should we pray for that church friend in the hallway at the hospital? This requires more than a hug and a wish for “good luck!” Instead, we should stop and pray out loud for our fellow believer. And we should pray to our Father in heaven who has chosen to hear our prayers.

Prayer should include instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer. And perhaps it might sound a little like this. This is from the Lutheran Book of Prayer. And it utilizes these categories for prayer. Listen and see if you can find each one. Let us pray.

“Almighty God, with whom all things are possible, hear our prayer as we come to You in trouble and distress. You are our hiding place. You are our very present help in trouble. We have no other refuge in an hour like this. Gracious Lord, You can heal. Your grace can restore to health and give us strength to carry on. We know that You are compassionate, for You have sent Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer the death of the cross in order to redeem us and make us Your own. As You did not forsake Him, surely You will not abandon us in this time of great need. As You raised Him from the dead on the third day, so we ask that You would also raise us up with Him from this present danger. O Lord, we humble ourselves before You and confess our many sins. We pray, merciful Father, for Your grace hour by hour. Forgive us and restore us, for You have made us Your own children in Christ. Remove the worries and anxious fears that would crush us. Give us grace to trust in You, whose will is wiser than our own, for we have been baptized into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.”

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*