

# Prayer: the Voice of Faith

Rev. John T. Pless

Prayer does not begin in the human heart but in the hearing of God's gracious words of life and salvation spoken to us in the Gospel of His Son. Thus Luther explains the introductory words of the Our Father saying "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." Just as faith comes by the hearing of Christ's words so prayer is created and sustained by the Word of the Lord..

The confidence is not in the praying heart but in the promises of God. In his classic little study of prayer, Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes "The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart" (p.15). The human heart, that cesspool of sin and unbelief, is hardly the fountain from which the aroma of sweet-smelling prayer arises. Indeed the Prophet Jeremiah says "The heart is deceitful above all things, and is desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Christian prayer is not based on the instincts of the heart, instincts that by their very nature rob us of the fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Instead, our Lord invites us to pray in His name, that is, on the basis of good and gracious will and His sure promises.

Oftentimes prayer is described as a conversation with God. This is a helpful image if we keep in mind that God always has the first word. We can speak to God in prayer only because God has first spoken to us in His Son. We are reminded of this blessed reality in the prayer offices of Matins and Vespers as the versicle from Psalm 51:15, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise," is chanted. It is only as God opens lips locked by sin that mouths are free for the full-throated prayer that delights the ears of our Heavenly Father. When we sinners try to open our own lips in prayer, we know what happens. Instead of praise and thanksgiving, intercession and supplication, out come petitions of self-justification and attempts to bargain with God. Prayer then becomes a tool of unbelief that is used in a vain and self-serving attempt to pry from the hands of God the answer that we want rather than the gifts that our Father would give us. When prayer becomes unglued from the Word of God, it is transformed into a weapon that sinners would use against God in a foolish attempt to have their own will done on earth.

Prayer is not an instrument which we use to get something from God. To use the language of Lutheran theology, prayer is not a means of grace. God richly and lavishly bestows the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation on sinners for the sake of the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Our Lord wills to give us these gifts in the concrete and earthly instruments that He has designed and established for His church. In Baptism, God washes away our sin and gives us the gift of His name and Spirit. The words of Absolution unchain us from the fetters of our sin by the power of Jesus' death. In the Lord's Supper we feast on the fruits of the new testament given in body and blood of the Lamb of God. This means that when we are troubled and tortured by our sin and the hellish attacks of Satan we do not take comfort in the strength or sincerity of our praying but in rock-solid gifts won for us on Jesus' cross and delivered to us in the means of grace.

C.F.W. Walther noted the spiritual damage that is done when sinners are directed to their own prayers rather than the Gospel: "...the Word of God is not rightly divided when sinners who have

been struck down and terrified by the Law are directed, not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace; in other words, when they are told to keep on praying and struggling until they feel that God has received them into grace" (The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, p.2). Our confidence is not to be found in our prayers but in God's work in Word and Sacrament. Pietism, both in its classical and contemporary forms, directs troubled consciences to prayer and thus burdens them with the law. The fruit of faith rather than faith's source becomes the focus and struggling sinners are set up either for despair or pride.

When law and Gospel are properly divided, prayer will be seen as anchored in and fueled by the Gospel. To use the words of Eugene Peterson, "prayer is responding speech." That is, the Christian speaks to God in prayer because he or she has first listened to the Holy Trinity in His Word. The Sacred Scriptures, the Catechism, and the liturgy tutor us in such praying.

Adolph Koeberle writes that " Prayer escapes the danger of disorder and confusion only when it is enkindled by the words of Scripture. From the Word proceeds its inner justification, as well as its life-giving power and the clearness of its petitions. A prayer that does not stick to Scripture will soon become poor in ideas, poor in faith, poor in love, and will finally die" (The Quest for Holiness, p.176-177). Martin Luther recognized how prayer is "responding speech" in the advice on prayer that he gave to his barber, Peter. Luther encouraged Peter to tie his prayers to the text of Scripture, taking a text like one of the commandments and turning the text into a prayer (See "A Simple Way to Pray" in Luther's Works, Vol.43, pp.193-211). In this way prayer is anchored in the Word of God and not allowed to become the play pen of human emotion and imagination.

Thus the Catechism became the prayer book for Luther and the Lutheran Church. Not only did the Catechism provide splendid instruction in prayer shaped by the Gospel as we can see from Luther's treatment of the Our Father, the Catechism also provided some very basic forms for prayer set within the rhythm of daily life (morning and evening prayer, prayer at meals). Moreover, the Catechism itself could be prayed!

The liturgy also becomes a tutor in Christian prayer as the liturgy not only gives us the words and gifts of the Triune God, but also gives us God's own words so that we might faithfully confess His gifts, extol His saving name, and call upon Him in prayer and intercession. Prayer shaped by the liturgy draws us out of our inborn selfishness, freeing us to use prayer in faith toward Christ and in love for the neighbor. As the liturgy is first and foremost, *Gottesdienst* (divine service) or God's service to us, liturgical prayer reminds us that prayer is always a response to what God says and does. Hearing God's words, we use His words to speak to Him.

God has given His children a wonderful privilege in prayer. Prayer is abused if it is reduced to a spiritual technique for acquiring blessings from a stingy deity. The God who has given us His Son tenderly invites us to trust His Word and call upon His name with boldness and confidence.

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