



Lesson 6

Prayer

Worship

Selected verses of Psalm 118 (spoken responsively by half-verse)

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Let those who fear the LORD say:

“His love endures forever.”

The LORD is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.

Shouts of joy and victory

resound in the tents of the righteous:

“The LORD’s right hand is lifted high;

the LORD’s right hand has done mighty things!”

I will not die but live,

and will proclaim what the LORD has done.

I will give you thanks, for you answered me;

you have become my salvation.

The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

The LORD has done it this very day;

let us rejoice today and be glad.

You are my God, and I will praise you;

you are my God, and I will exalt you.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;

his love endures forever.

Prayer: Lord God, thanks and praise are yours alone because you have become our salvation. We confess that our prayer life has not always been consistent and clear. Enlighten us by your Word to pray with confidence, knowing that you promise to hear and answer. Strengthen us to pray regularly. Increase our perspective so that we pray for others as earnestly as we pray for ourselves. Amen.



Introduction

Luther supplied lots of advice to people about prayer. As a vital part of the life of faith, Luther knew that people wanted deeper insight into the expression of praise, confession, and supplication that framed a healthy prayer life. The desire for instruction was in no small part due to Roman Catholic practices of praying the rosary and making intercession to the saints. Regarding this Luther admitted: “It was exceedingly bitter for me to tear myself away from the worship of the saints, for I was completely steeped and drowned in it.” That was “Luther the monk” revealing how difficult it was to break with practices that had been inculcated by the works-centered system of the monastery. But common practice among laypeople also emphasized the meritorious work of prayer. So Luther’s reform touched even this most basic element of religious practice.

Luther preached, taught, and wrote often about the truths of the Lord’s Prayer—the ultimate model prayer since Jesus himself taught it. The Bible study today will briefly review this prayer in its context. The excerpts that follow will offer a variety of comments made by Luther about the exercise of prayer itself.

The Power of the Word in the Early Church

Matthew 6:5-15

⁵ “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

1. We always want to understand Scripture by being aware of the context of the passages. This lesson is recorded by Matthew in the middle of the so-called Sermon on the Mount. How do the surrounding verses (the setting or context) amplify our understanding of the Lord's Prayer?

2. Jesus addressed misuses of prayer in his instruction prior to teaching his model prayer. In groups of three to five people (or on your own if you prefer), list common misconceptions about the practice of prayer that may occur today. You will have two minutes. We'll hear a sampling from the groups.

3. Note that the first three petitions direct attention to things that are God's; the final four relate to us. Why is this order important?

4. Faith and an unforgiving heart cannot coexist—this is the lesson of the instruction given following the prayer itself. Why did Jesus add this thought? Name at least two Bible accounts (one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament) that reinforce this truth.

The Power of the Word in the Reformation

With a person next to you, choose one of the following excerpts from Luther's writings—they are taken from the book *What Luther Says* by Ewald Plass. Decide on one main thought from the paragraph you choose that you wish to share with the others in this study. You will have two minutes.

(Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006].)

- A. Praying is the work of Christians alone; for before we are Christians and believe, we know neither for what nor how we are to pray. And even though a man prays most devoutly, the spirit of grace is not there; for the attitude of the heart is simply this: Dear Lord, take into consideration how well I live and how much I suffer; or the merit of this or that saint, the intercession and good works of pious people, etc. There is no faith in the divine grace and mercy through Christ, and the heart always remains uncertain, unable to conclude that it is heard without fail. It wants to deal with God only on the basis of its own or other people's holiness, without Christ, as though God should humble Himself before us and let us actually oblige Him to grant us grace and help and thus become our debtor and servant. This does not merit grace but wrath; it is not praying; it is mocking God. (*What Luther Says*, 3436)
- B. But elsewhere I have often taken up and discussed the component parts of the characteristics which every real prayer has to possess; therefore I shall only summarize them briefly there. They are as follows: first, the urging of God's commandment, who has strictly required us to pray; second, his promise, in which he declares that he will hear us; third, an examination of our own need and misery, which burden lies so heavily on our shoulders that we have to carry it to God immediately and pour it out before him, in accordance with his order and commandment; fourth, true faith, based on this Word and promise of God, praying with the certainty and confidence that he will hear and help us—and all these things in the name of Christ, through whom our prayer is acceptable to the Father and for whose sake he gives us every grace and every good. (*What Luther Says*, 3430)
- C. Here you ask: Do you mean to say that this promise is always true even though God often does not give what we have asked for? Did he not let David pray for the life of his son in vain (2 Sam. 12:16 ff.)? Answer: I have often said how a prayer must be ordered and arranged. In our petitions we should not prescribe to God measure, limit, place, or person; but we should commit all this to him who knows how to give and what is good for us. This is why he himself has set up this order and in the Lord's Prayer has put before us three objectives which must always have precedence: the hallowing of his name, his kingdom, and his will. Then follow our daily bread and deliverance from temptation and all troubles. The best part of the prayer must be: thy name, thy kingdom, etc. If this precedes, then that which is ours will certainly follow. Accordingly, St. John says (1 John 5:14): "This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." (*What Luther Says*, 3502)

- D. Praying is not easy work, as those judge who are inexperienced. People who are experienced in spiritual matters have said that no labor is comparable to the labor of praying. For to pray is not to recite a number of psalms or to roar in the churches, as monks usually do, but to have serious thoughts by which the soul establishes a fellowship between him who prays and Him who hears the prayer and determines with certainty that although we are miserable sinners, God will be gracious, mitigate the punishments, and answer our petitions. (*What Luther Says*, 3479)
- E. I cannot pray without cursing at the same time. If I say: "Hallowed be Thy name," I must thereby say: May the names of the papists and all who blaspheme Thy name be accursed, condemned, and dishonored. If I say: "Thy kingdom come," I must thereby say: May the papacy, together with all kingdoms on earth that are opposed to Thy kingdom, be accursed, condemned, and destroyed. If I say: "Thy will be done," I must thereby say: May the plans and plots of the papists and of all who strive against Thy will and counsel be accursed, condemned, dishonored, and brought to naught. Truly, thus my lips and heart pray day in, day out; and all who believe in Christ are praying in this way with me. (*What Luther Says*, 3519)
- F. We enjoy the benefit that our prayer is always heard; for if it is not heard according to our will, yet it is heard according to the will of God, which is better than ours. The devil pray in my stead if I do not know that my prayer is heard! It is not necessary that God always hear according to my will, for then He would be my prisoner. (*What Luther Says*, 3503)
- G. For about thirteen years Joseph cried and continued to pray God to help him. But the longer, the worse; the more he prayed, the worse he fared. To this day this is what happens to Christians. When they have called and cried for a long time to God, they feel no improvement, but things grow worse, as they did with Joseph. If God had liberated Joseph, Jacob, his father, would no doubt have been glad; but Joseph would have remained a shepherd. However, since the help was delayed so long he became a lord over all Egypt, so that certainly no greater man can be found in Holy Scripture, no one who rose higher as world ruler than did Joseph.
- Thus God still intends to deal with us. After He has denied us our petition for a long while and always said no, but we firmly cling to the yes, it shall finally be yes, and not no, for His Word will not lie (John 15:16). But our reason is highly offended at this delay and would gladly have God answer us promptly. So it is necessary not to be offended. Let our Lord God say no and suspend the answer of our petition for a year, two years, three years, or longer still, and let us only watch that hope and faith in His promise are not torn from our heart. Something will come of our prayer in the end, and God will give far more than we asked Him to give. (*What Luther Says*, 3483)

5. From the excerpts, which of you had an excerpt in which Luther emphasized the truth that God hears and answers the prayers of believers? If you did, share with us that portion of the excerpt.

6. Luther admits (in excerpt D): “Praying is not easy work.” Think about what makes prayer not easy work for you. You will have one minute to complete this sentence in as many ways as you can: Praying is not easy work because . . .

7. “I cannot pray without cursing at the same time” (excerpt E). Evaluate this shocking statement made by Luther. In what context is this statement understandable?

The Power of the Word Today

The statement “you’re in our thoughts and prayers” is so common today that we may wonder if it’s true and what exactly it means. The assertion means, nonetheless, that people have a sense that they should be praying.

About his own prayer life Luther once wrote: “At times I, who teach this and prescribe it to others, have learned from my own example that praying comes close to being the most difficult of all works. Therefore I do not claim to be a master in this task.” Instruction about what prayer is and does is both timely and timeless. Prayer is an element of faith life that needs constant instruction and encouragement.

8. With a person next to you (or on your own if you prefer), choose one of the following statements and decide together if you agree or disagree with it. Make a list of reasons why you said what you did. You will have 90 seconds. We'll then hear from the groups.

A. God hears all prayers.

B. Prayer and Bible study go together.

C. Prayer breeds patience.

9. What is one lesson from Luther you will want to remember from today's study?

NOTES

Summary

"Pray continually," St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This was Paul's way of emphasizing that Christian faith "breathes" prayer. In grace, God grants us both the privilege and responsibility of communicating with him. Our loving Lord wants to hear about all of our anxieties, cares, needs, joys, and sorrows. Jesus lives and promises to supply believers with life "to the full" (John 10:10).

At Home

Have each member of the family compose a prayer for family use during the week.

Pray the Lord's Prayer, Luther's Morning Prayer, and Luther's Evening Prayer together as a family sometime during the week.

Additional Reading

Read Luther's pamphlet titled, "A Simple Way to Pray" (1535) – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 43, pp. 187-211.

Closing Prayer

Hymn: "Our Father, Who from Heaven Above" (CW 410:1,9)

1. Our Father, who from heav'n above
Bids all of us to live in love
As members of one family
And pray to you in unity,
Teach us no thoughtless words to say,
But from our inmost hearts to pray.
9. Amen, that is, it shall be so.
Make strong our faith that we may know
That we may doubt not but believe
What here we ask we shall receive.
Thus in your name and at your Word
We say, "Amen. Oh, hear us, Lord!"