

PRAYER

Prayer is a part of all religions. With its aid, people strive to make connection with their gods. Scripture informs us that during the time of Elijah the priests of Baal cried for assistance from their god on Mount Carmel. People, who have visited Islamic countries or Israel, have heard for themselves how the Muslims hold specified hours of prayer and have seen the Jews praying at the Western Wall. Prayer also belongs to the Christian faith, and Scripture encourages people to pray. Jesus gave an example for this and also taught His disciples to pray.

According to Christian Doctrine, “Prayer is the heart’s humble and sincere conversation with God” (CD 78). Luther wanted to free prayer from all the formal rituals that had been attached to it in the Catholic Church. He taught that the essence and nature of prayer is to raise the mind and heart to God. From this it follows that everything else that does not elevate the heart, is not prayer. “For that reason, singing, speaking, or blowing a horn are prayer just as little as scarecrows in the garden are people” (Explanation of the Lord’s Prayer). The effect of prayer does not depend on its outward form nor on our feelings or fervency. It is the simple uplifting of the heart to God. Prayer cannot be our achievement, by which we would gain merit before God.

Prayer is conversation between God and man. Man does not speak alone; God answers also. When we converse with other people, we may notice that sometimes they may not hear or may pretend not to hear what we say. Our message does not reach its destination. When we converse with God, sometimes it may seem the same. The lack of an answer, nevertheless, is not caused by God’s poor hearing or our quiet or unclear speech. God truly hears and understands, and difficulties of language are not an obstacle. He is interested in us and our matters. He also answers, although it may be in a different way than we expected. Sometimes, we only later understand God’s answer to our prayer.

In prayer, we can speak to God of our needs and our hopes. Scripture guides us also to intercede or to pray in behalf of others. We may enclose within our prayers our close ones, our friends, our people, and our homeland. Paul described in his epistles how he prayed in behalf of the congregations in the various communities. He also asked that the children of God would pray for wisdom and courage for him to proclaim the gospel (Eph. 6:18–20). We, too, can pray to the Heavenly Father that He would bless the work of His kingdom.

Prayer also inseparably includes thanksgiving. When we, in silence and with open minds are before God’s face, we understand with thankfulness how much we have received from Him.

PRAYER AND JUSTIFICATION

From time to time, believers are criticized that they do not give prayer its due respect. The criticism is partially correct, for often we pray too little. This gift that God has given to His children remains in little use. We feel ourselves to be poor at praying. The basis for the criticism, however, is usually this that prayer is not a path to justification for us, as it is for many others.

Many people believe that they can confess their sins privately to God through prayer and that God, himself, will forgive their sins. One hears this understanding often, when we exhort someone to repent. “I do not need an intercessor. I will resolve matters privately with God.” But God does not justify sinners privately, rather He sends the owners of the office of remission to preach the gospel of forgiveness to the penitent sinner.

I remember how once at the conclusion of some services, I asked a service guest if he had need to believe and receive the forgiveness of his sins. He answered, “I say the Lord’s prayer every night and confess my sins to God in it. I do not need to repent in the manner that you mean.” I answered him,

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“I notice that you believe that God hears your prayers. Every night, you have petitioned, “Thy kingdom come.” God has heard your prayer and now His kingdom of grace has come to you. God wants to answer your other prayer and forgive your sin of unbelief along with all of your other sins.”

On the other hand, it is sometimes thought that in no wise does God hear the prayer of an unbelieving person. Someone may even support this with Scripture. For example, Isaiah says, “And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood” (Isa. 1:15). However, the matter is not so clear-cut. There are many places in the Bible, that indicate that God has heard the prayer of an unbeliever and has answered it. The decisive factor appears to be what, and with what mind, they pray. I will take three familiar examples from Scripture. They also support what has been said previously about prayer and justification.

THE EUNUCH, A SERVANT OF THE QUEEN OF ETHIOPIA (Acts 8:26–40), had made a long and difficult journey to pray in the temple in Jerusalem. He thought that it was an acceptable place to pray. There, he hoped to find help and an answer to the distress in his heart, but he did not find help. On his way back, he studied the Scriptures. Again in vain, for he did not understand what he read. However, God had heard his prayers. He sent Philip to the place to explain the writings of Isaiah and to preach the gospel. The eunuch heard Philip’s sermon and believed it.

SAUL OF TARSUS (Acts 9:1–8), on his way to Damascus, met the resurrected Christ. Heavenly light blinded him. He, who thought that he knew the will of God and that he was righteous having fulfilled the Law, found that he was blind and without understanding. In his distress, he prayed. God heard the prayer even of a persecutor of the congregation and sent Ananias to help. Saul received his sight and living faith in his heart. He became Apostle Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

THE CENTURION CORNELIUS (Acts 10) prayed to God. God heard his prayers and answered him first through an angel. This angel did not preach the forgiveness of sins, but told him to send men to get Peter from the city of Joppa. Cornelius followed the angel’s instructions. When Peter came and preached the gospel, Cornelius, along with his family, believed and they received the Holy Spirit. We can conclude from these three examples that God hears the prayers of even the unbeliever, when they are in earnest.

JESUS’ TEACHINGS ABOUT PRAYER

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His disciples how to pray (Matt. 6:5–13). He warned them against vain wordiness and praying for their own merit. At least one matter was clarified to the disciples as they listened to His speech: they do not know how to pray by their own means. Many a sincere person has probably experienced this while praying. To His own, Jesus gave the Lord’s Prayer, the “Our Father” prayer.

Luther has explained the Lord’s Prayer in the Small and Large Catechisms, in his sermons as well as his book, “Explanation of the Lord’s Prayer.” In the latter he says that the Lord’s Prayer is, without a doubt, the highest, noblest, and best, since it originated from our Lord. Had our righteous and faithful Master known a better prayer, He would have taught it to us also. This must not be understood to mean that all other prayers in which these same words do not appear are wrong. Many saints prayed before the birth of Christ and had not heard these words. Instead, all such prayers are questionable that do not have this prayer’s content or meaning.

The beginning of the Lord’s Prayer can easily slip by without our paying attention to it. For a contemporary of Jesus, it was strange and perhaps offensive to refer to the holy and righteous God as Father. Luther leads us to think of the beginning of the prayer, “The best beginning and preface is that we know clearly how to name, respect, and relate to Him, to Whom we are praying, and how we should

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behave toward Him, so that He would be merciful and willing to hear us. There is no name among all the names, that would make us more acceptable before God than 'Father.' It is a friendly, pleasant, deep and heartfelt address. It would not be equally loving and comforting to say 'Lord,' 'God,' or 'Judge.' For that reason, the name 'Father' is naturally innate in a person and naturally pleasing. Therefore, it also pleases God the best and moves Him most to hear us. At the same time, we confess ourselves to be children of God by that name. In this manner, we move God the most, inwardly, for there is not a more pleasant sound to the Father than a child's voice....For the person, who begins to pray, 'Our Father, who art in heaven' and does it from the bottom of his heart, confesses that he has a Father and that this Father is in Heaven."

Almost half a century ago, I sat in church one winter evening. The congregation evening's topic was prayer, on which three clergymen spoke. In two speeches, prayer became a means of justification. The words, "Our Father who art in heaven," were the text for the second speech. The third speaker rose to the pulpit and read a text that was even shorter than the preceding one, "Our Father, Amen." Beginning with these words, he led the listeners to see what had had to happen so that we are able to pray, "Our Father." How great was the love of the Father, that He gave His only Son for the remission of sin. In place of prayer, another way to justification opened. Prayer was revealed as a great gift, the secure and trusting discussion of a child with a Father who loves him.

THY WILL BE DONE

Our prayers are often about distress, oppression, difficulties, and the obvious hopes and desires that arise from them. There is nothing wrong in this, for a child has permission to speak freely to his Father. However, in the Lord's Prayer Jesus sets the needs in priority and brings a new dimension to prayer. He instructs us to ask, "Thy will be done." This is not always easy.

Jesus did not only teach in this manner, but also set an example in Gethsemane. The most important and critical events of His life were before Him. The cross, suffering, and death awaited him. More frightening, before Him rose the fact that the Father would cast upon Him the sins of the entire world and, for a moment, would turn His back upon Him. In this situation, one more difficult than we can possibly imagine, Jesus prayed, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). Jesus' example leads us to the correct humility and childlike trust. The Father knows what is best for us, even when it is difficult for us to be therein content.

"Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your cares upon him: for he careth for you" (1 Pet. 5:6,7).