

Midweek Lenten Worship
March 22, 2017
Matthew 6:5-15

Luther's Small Catechism: The Lord's Prayer

Tonight we focus on another of those chief articles of faith found in Luther's *Small Catechism*, the Lord's Prayer. This prayer of all prayers, given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension to it. This is similar to the Ten Commandments with those two tables of the Law which speak of our relationship with God and with our neighbor. With Spirit-given wisdom, Luther breaks down the Lord's Prayer into seven different petitions, together with an introduction and a conclusion. These are all so familiar to us that we run the risk of rattling off these amazing words without even thinking about them. We know the words so well that at times we may not even be aware of what we are praying. These are not magic words like some kind of incantation, but words rooted in a relationship of faith and trust. Hence the necessity of this message this evening.

Matthew's account of Jesus' giving the disciples the Lord's Prayer comes in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Tonight's Scripture lesson was heard on Ash Wednesday, but also included verses before (Matthew 6:1-4) as well as after (Matthew 6:16-21) this lesson. Taken as a whole, Jesus here teaches his disciples on the true nature of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These are spiritual disciplines used by many Christians, especially during the Lenten season. Note what the Lord Jesus teaches us here about prayer; what it is, and what it is not. It is not for show so that we might be seen by others who will be impressed with how good and pious we are. That's not the point. The point of prayer is not about the number or eloquence of our words. The point of prayer is for us to commune with our Father in heaven, and that requires concentration and focus. Many of us prefer to pray alone so that we might do this very thing. There is certainly an individual aspect to prayer, but there is also a corporate aspect as well when the Body of Christ comes together and offers prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. It is not either/or, but both/and. It is not about getting the words right, but coming to the Lord in all our need and poverty, inviting the Lord to come into our need and poverty with his grace and blessing. We trust that even in times when our thoughts and words are just a jumbled up mess, when we cannot seem to articulate what is on our heart, when we are experiencing the dark night of the soul, it is then that **"the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words"** (Romans 8:26).

The introduction to the Lord's Prayer is both personal and cosmic at the same time: we call God "our Father," and at the same time affirm God's cosmic being: "who art in heaven." Note that Jesus taught us to pray "our Father," and not "my Father." Our faith always puts us into relationship with fellow believers. Just like the Second Commandment ("You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain"), the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer ("Hallowed be Thy Name") asks that in our own lives we may live in such a way that God's Name is honored and glorified through our words and actions. God's reign is already among us in Jesus Christ, but we pray in the Second Petition ("Thy kingdom come") that God's reign and rule would continue to grow and expand everywhere. The Third Petition ("Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven") may be the most difficult part of the Lord's Prayer as we struggle to submit our will, our plans, our agenda, for what we want with what God would have for us. Our model for this is Jesus himself, who submitted his will to that of the Father as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: **"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will"** (Matthew 26:39). We can only turn over and submit our will to the Father when we know that our heavenly Father wants what is best for his children. The Fourth Petition ("Give us this day our daily bread") asks for God to graciously provide us with the necessities of life – not always our wants, but our needs – so that people everywhere may have enough to sustain life. The Fifth Petition ("Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us") calls to mind Jesus' parable of the

unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35), who was graciously forgiven an astronomical amount of debt by his master, but then could not forgive a paltry sum owed to him by a fellow servant. How can we who have been forgiven by our Father all the debt of our sins and trespasses not do the same with one another? The Sixth Petition (“Lead us not into temptation”) is coupled together with the Seventh Petition (“But deliver us from evil”) in the style of Hebrew poetry. Similar in structure to many of the psalms, which also are poetry, Part A of the poem affirms trust that God will not do this (lead us into temptation), which leads to Part B which confesses confidence that God will do this (deliver us from evil). It is both/and. God does not lead his children into temptation in order to make them stumble and fall, but He does graciously deliver them in time of need by his almighty power. The conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer (“For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever”) echoes David’s words: **“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all”** (1 Chronicles 29:11). And the Lord’s Prayer, like all our prayers, ends with that word, “Amen,” which Luther says means, “yes, yes, it shall be so.”

Each day, let us then pray the Lord’s Prayer with confidence and trust in our heavenly Father, whose gracious will and purpose are made known to us in his blessed Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior, who died for us that we might live for him. Amen.