

A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY

Martin Luther

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PREFACE

FOR A GOOD FRIEND—A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY

1535

“A Simple Way to Pray,” written by Luther to a very good friend of long standing, Peter the Barber, turned out to be more than a letter addressed to a man exiled from his homeland. In his desire to give pastoral advice to one in desperate circumstances, Luther expanded his message into a little book.

God’s ways are often mysterious indeed. Luther may never have written “this noble, precious booklet” had not Peter the Barber, whose family name was Beskendorf, become intoxicated at a family gathering in his son-in-law’s home on the Saturday before Easter, March 27, 1535. On that occasion Peter tried to prove a boast of his son-in-law Dietrich, a mercenary soldier. Dietrich had bragged that he was impervious to sword strokes and thus had survived unscathed the many battles in which he had been engaged. Evidently, to substantiate or test his son-in-law’s boast, Peter, inebriated, stabbed him in the chest. This stabbing cost Dietrich his life and Peter his house and goods, in addition to his citizenship. Because of Luther’s pleas and those of the elector’s Chancellor, Franz Burkhard, and because the public found it regrettable that the old man was found guilty by the court, Peter was banished instead of sentenced to death. He found refuge as an exile in Dessau.

The old man needed comfort and the assurance that he was still God’s child in spite of having slain his son-in-law. It seems he sought help from Luther, who, though very busy at the university and otherwise, did his friend a great pastoral service from which every one of us can benefit. Luther took time to write this extensive essay in which he offers instructions on how to pray. He teaches us to concentrate in our prayers and to make them personal and meaningful so that they can also be instruments of

learning and meditation, while at the same time we are given the assurance that God will hear us.

Luther had already dedicated the booklet to Peter early in 1535, and the Hans-Lufft Press in Wittenberg eventually published it. Later in 1535 there appeared an enlarged edition. Many other editions in German followed. It has experienced no fewer than 17 reprintings and revisions. Several Low-German editions, followed by one in Latin, appeared after the earliest publications.

This English translation by C. J. Trapp was first made available in 1983, in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, and has been reprinted many times since then. As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, we are pleased to reissue this little devotional gem in a slightly updated version.

The translation of *A Simple Way to Pray* is made from the German text found in the Weimar Edition XXXVIII, pp. 351-375, of *Luther's Works*, and entitled "*Eine einfaltige Weis zu beten für einen guten Freund.*"

A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY

FOR MASTER PETER THE BARBER

Dear Master Peter,

I shall do my best to let you know how I go about praying. May our gracious Lord help you and others do it better than I. Amen.

First of all, when I realize that because of other duties or thoughts I have grown cold and neglectful when it comes to praying (for our flesh and the devil resist and hinder prayer), I take my little hymnal and hurry to my room, or, if the occasion gives opportunity, to a church service with others. As time permits, I quietly recite the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have more time, some of the quotations of Christ, of Paul, or of the Psalms, just as children recite them.

It is good practice to begin and end the day with prayer. In this connection it is well not to entertain a deceptive idea such as this: "Wait a while, I'll pray a little later. But first I'll have to do this or that." Such thoughts divert us from praying. Instead, all our attention is given to the thing at hand. And nothing comes of praying.

Some things, no doubt, are often as important as, or even more so than, prayer, especially when they are matters of necessity. Then one can apply the saying of Saint Jerome: "Whatever a believer does is a matter of prayer" and the proverb "A faithful worker prays twice over." This is concluded from the fact that in whatever a believer does, he fears and honors God and thinks of his commandment not to wrong anyone, to steal, to cheat, or to defraud him.

Just as that is true, the counterpart must also be true, namely, that the deeds of unbelievers must be nothing other than a curse. Thus the unbelieving person's deeds are a twofold curse.

His motives for doing what he does can only lie in his despising God and his commandments. Consequently, he can justify robbing, cheating, or defrauding his neighbor. What are such thoughts other than curses against God and man, a twofold curse? Whoever harbors them condemns himself. Such people are beggars and bunglers. Constant prayer is what Christ encourages in Luke chapter 11: to pray without ceasing. For a person should constantly guard against sinning and being unjust, which can happen when one fails to fear God and keep his commandments in mind, as Psalm 1 indicates: “Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.”

We must see to it that we do not lose the habit of prayer and deceive ourselves into thinking that other kinds of things are more important, when they are not. Then we might become careless and lazy, cold and indifferent when it comes to praying. The devil is neither lazy nor lax in our midst. Besides, our flesh is not too eager and desirous but is disinclined to the spirit of prayer.

When through such recitation your heart has been aroused to its need, kneel down or stand with folded hands and with your eyes heavenward. Speak or think as briefly as you can, “Dear God, heavenly Father, I am a poor, unworthy sinner, not entitled to raise my eyes or hands in prayer to you, but I come because you have commanded us all to pray. Because you also taught us when and how to pray through your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, you will hear us.

“Thus I come trusting your gracious promise and, in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, I pray with all your faithful Christians on earth, as he has taught me:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

“Our Father in heaven . . . ” word for word, from beginning to end. After that, repeat one phrase or as many as you want.

THE FIRST PETITION

Pray: “Hallowed be your name.” Then say: “Indeed, Lord God, dear Father, hallowed be your name, both within us and throughout the world. Destroy and wipe out the abomination, idolatry, and heresy of the Turks, the pope, and all false teachers and fanatics, who blaspheme your name, erroneously picturing you in a wretched and outrageous manner, while enthusiastically presenting their own ideas as your Word and the church’s law. Actually, under pretense of your name, they deplorably use the devil’s lies and trickery to mislead very many poor souls everywhere. And on top of that, believing that they are doing you a divine service, they kill, shed innocent blood, and persecute.

“Dear Lord God, convert and restrain such people. Convert those who shall be converted, that they with us and we with them may bless and praise your name, both in holding fast to pure doctrine and living respectable, holy lives. But restrain those who are unwilling to be converted from abusing, dishonoring, and profaning your holy name, and from misleading our poor people. Amen.”

THE SECOND PETITION

Pray: “Your kingdom come.” Then say: “Dear Lord God, Father, you see how the world in its wisdom and knowledge not only slanders your name and dishonors you by honoring the devil but also uses all its power, might, riches, and honor, which you have given her rulers on earth to govern well and to serve you, against your kingdom. They are great, mighty, and many. They are also overly well fed. They torment, thwart, and destroy the small flock

of your kingdom, who are weak, despised, and few. They consider such an act as carrying out your will, and do not tolerate your flock being on earth. Dear Lord God, Father, convert and restrain them. Convert those who will be children and members of your kingdom that they with us and we with them may serve you in true faith and genuine love and that we may move from the present kingdom to your everlasting kingdom. Restrain those, however, who refuse to stop destroying your kingdom with their might and power, that dethroned and humbled, they are forced to stop. Amen.”

THE THIRD PETITION

Pray: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Then say: “Dear Lord God, Father, you know that the world, though it cannot wholly blot out your name nor root out your kingdom, still goes about night and day with spiteful pranks and tricks, employing distortion, inventing plots, and practicing intrigues, all directed with evil intent and purpose against your name, your Word, your kingdom, and your children. For that reason, dear Lord God, Father, convert and restrain them. Convert those who shall know your gracious will, that together with us they may obey you and, beyond that, gladly and patiently bear every evil, cross, and adversity, which we recognize as coming from your perfect and gracious good will. Restrain those, however, who will not refrain from doing harm in their anger, their raving, their hate, and their ill will. Bring to nothing their counsel, evil plots, and underhanded practices, to their own shame, as it says in Psalm 7. Amen.”

THE FOURTH PETITION

Pray: “Give us today our daily bread.” Then say: “Dear Lord God, Father, bless us also in this temporal, physical life. Give us much desired peace and guard us against war and insurrection.

Bestow upon our dear emperor good fortune and success against his enemies. Give him wisdom and understanding to govern over a peaceful and very happy nation. Grant all kings, rulers, and leaders good judgment to govern land and people in peace and justice. Especially keep our present ruler, under whose shelter and protection you preserve us, from all evil rumors and false accusers so that his rule might be a blessed one. Give all his servants and citizens grace to serve him faithfully and obediently. Bestow upon all classes, both city folk and country folk, piety and a mutual love and sincerity. Bless our land with good harvest and good weather. Protect house and home, wife and children. Let me lead them well, bringing them up in the way of the Lord. Ward off and restrain Satan and all evil angels who would harm or distract us in this life. Amen.”

THE FIFTH PETITION

Pray: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Then say: “Dear Lord God, Father, do not call us into judgment, for in your presence no one is righteous. Please do not condemn us for being ungrateful for all of your unspeakable goodness—both spiritual and physical—and for our daily blunders and sins—which are more than we know or mark (Psalm 19:12). Furthermore, do not consider how good or bad we have been, but look upon us with your infinite compassion, bestowed upon us by Christ, your beloved Son. Forgive also all our enemies and all those who have harmed us or done us an injustice, even as we forgive them from the heart. For they do themselves irreparable harm when they vent their anger against us. We gain nothing by their ruin. Rather, we would rather see them blessed with us. Amen.”

If there is anyone who still feels it difficult to forgive, he can pray for grace to be able to forgive. But this really belongs in a sermon.

THE SIXTH PETITION

Pray: “Lead us not into temptation.” Then say: “Dear Lord God, Father, keep us brave and alert, fervent and eager in the use of your Word and service, lest we become complacent, lazy, or sluggish, as if we had need of nothing more, so that the fierce devil suddenly is able to catch us by surprise, deprive us of your precious Word, or create dissension and sects among us, or otherwise lead us into sin and shame both spiritually and physically. Rather, grant us wisdom and power through your Spirit, that as good soldiers we can conquer after resisting him. Amen.”

THE SEVENTH PETITION

Pray: “But deliver us from evil.” Then say: “O dear Lord God, Father, this life of ours is so wretched, so full of sorrow and misfortune, so full of danger and insecurity, so full of evil and faithlessness—as St. Paul says, ‘The days are evil’ (Ephesians 5:15)—that we might justifiably be tired of life and even desirous of death. But you, dear Father, know our weakness. Therefore, help us to survive such great evil and malice. And when our time comes, let it be a blessed hour and a joyful departure out of this place of sorrows, that we may neither fear death nor give way to despair, but in unwavering faith commit our souls into your hands. Amen.”

Finally, mark this: say the Amen in every case emphatically, without doubting that God in his grace is certainly giving ear to and saying yes to your prayer. Never think of yourself as standing or kneeling alone, but as all of Christendom, or all devout Christians, joining with you in a united prayer, which God cannot disregard. And do not close this prayer without having said or thought: “Indeed, God heard this prayer; of this I am sure. For that is what Amen means.”

Also note that I am not recommending all these words become part of your prayer, lest it could end up in vain babbling and

empty chatter, read from a book or recited like the alphabet, just as laypeople use the rosary or the priests and monks say their prayers. But I want the heart to become excited about what kind of thoughts lay in the Lord's Prayer. Such thoughts the heart can, if it's properly aroused and inclined to pray, express in many other ways, either briefly or at length. For I do not bind myself to use the same expressions, but rather, today in one way, tomorrow in another, just as my heart is warmed and inclined to pray. But I do stay as close as possible to the thoughts and content. It happens often that in my meditation I come across such rich thoughts that I disregard the other six petitions. When such a wealth of ideas comes, one should forego other petitions and make room for such thoughts, listen silently, and certainly not hinder them from coming. Under these conditions the Holy Spirit is preaching, and in his sermon one word is better than a thousand in our prayer. I have learned much more from this kind of listening than I could have from much reading and reflection.

It is, therefore, very important that the heart be free and ready for prayer, as Ecclesiasticus (18:23) says: "Prepare your heart for prayer, lest you tempt God." For what is it other than tempting God when one's mouth babbles and his heart rambles? Such can be compared to a certain priest who prays in this way: "Make haste, O Lord, to save me! Lad, have you hitched up the team? Lord, come quickly to help me! Maid, go milk the cow! Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Hurry up, boy, get moving!" etc. I have heard and experienced many such prayers in my day under the papacy and almost all of them trifle with God. It would be better for people to pretend praying if they cannot do any better or are unwilling to do so. I regret that I too have prayed many canonical hours myself before I was aware that the hour was up or the psalm over with and didn't know whether I had just begun or was in the midst of the prayer.

Although people do not always pray as did the aforementioned clergyman who mixed work with worship in prayer, their minds

wander from one thing to another, and when they have finished, they don't know what they have done or what they have prayed about. They start with "Praise . . ." and immediately they are gone, God knows where. It seems to me that a person who understands what must go on as prayer in a heart so cold and irreverent cannot but compare it to a comic-juggling act. I am now convinced—God be praised—that one who forgets what he has prayed for has actually not prayed well. For a true prayer is well thought-out from beginning to end.

He who prays must be like a good, industrious barber who has to keep his mind and eyes precisely upon his razor and hair and know whether to cut or trim, lest by too much gabbing or looking about aimlessly, he slashes someone's mouth or nose, or worse, someone's throat. Thus every job, if it is to be done well, demands the full attention of one's mind and members. As the saying goes: "One who is scatterbrained thinks of nothing and doesn't do anything right." How much more, then, will not the heart demand single-minded concentration to produce serious prayer?

This, in brief, is how I go about praying the Lord's Prayer. Like a child, I still suckle at it, and, like an old person, who cannot be satisfied, drink from it and eat of it. It is the best prayer, even better than the Psalms (which I dearly love). So it is because the Master himself composed and taught it. How shameful it is, then, to say the least, that a prayer from such a Master be treated so carelessly by so many who thoughtlessly rattle it off. Many undoubtedly pray the Lord's Prayer a thousand times a year. And though they might pray it their way a thousand years, they haven't benefited one little bit from it! To conclude: Together with the name and Word of God, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth. For everyone tortures and abuses it; few joyfully use it correctly for comfort.