

The Need for Prayer

Praying is one of the hardest things a person can do, especially having to pray in public. This is evident at a funeral luncheon when I announce that the last person talking says the table blessing. It quiets down very quickly! For whatever reason, people feel that any kind of public praying should be done by the 'professionals.' In Martin Luther's Large Catechism, he writes extensively on the need for praying and praying properly before he gets to his comments on the Lord's Prayer. In the Bible itself, there are many verses and passages which tell of the importance of prayer.

This Lenten season, we will look at each of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer see what is behind these words that we repeat often. But before we do this, we should look at what prayer is and how it is important to our lives.

In its simplest understanding, praying is talking with God. Praying provides a connection with something that is bigger than oneself, a connection with the divine. It is having the courage to say what is on one's mind to God. Many people would say that they do not know how to pray, or what to say. They think that their prayers need to be eloquently stated and include every need under the sun, including world peace. But that is not what praying is. We could think of the conversations that the Biblical characters had with God as their prayers to God. Sometimes those conversations were short and to the point; at other times, such as in the Book of Job for example, the conversations can be long and wide-ranging.

People often think that since God knows everything, then they do not need to pray since they would be telling God what God already knows. That may be true, but if something is bothering you, sometimes when it is stated aloud, it isn't

as big a bother than what you thought it was. We tend to make 'a mountain out of a molehill' when we keep our thoughts of problems to ourselves. We focus on that problem and it becomes all-consuming to us. By verbalizing our thoughts, we release them so that they do not limit what we can do. Also, by offering it up to God, you are letting God take control of it.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus hints at this when He tells us to pray in secret. While there is a literal understanding of this where Jesus tells us to go to a private place and pray, there is also a figurative understanding to this. Our 'secret places' are those places where we do not let anyone in, the deepest parts of our heart and soul. These secret places are where we keep those darkest secrets that we fear that if anyone finds out, then we will be exposed for being a fake. Jesus reminds us that God sees even those places in our hearts. If God sees those places, then we should not be afraid of expressing those thoughts and secrets to God - that is where we can receive forgiveness for those secrets. Martin Luther hints at this when he encourages us to have a sincere heart when we pray. We should not just be spewing out words to make our prayers sound good or to show others that we know what we are talking about. This goes along with those verses in the Old Testament that remind us that God does not want the people to just go through the motions of sacrifices, but that their hearts are right before they make their sacrifices. These verses tell us that God wants a contrite heart rather than empty sacrifices.

While there is much more that could be said in regards to prayer and its frequency, let us turn now to the Lord's Prayer and its opening petition. The Lord's Prayer is probably one of the first prayers that people learn. In liturgical churches, it is recited at nearly every worship service. But because of its familiarity, it can often become 'just words' that are said so that we can get to

the next part of the service. But, as Luther says, we should spend time thinking about those words and the meaning behind them. Believe it or not, this prayer is not unique to Jesus as it has roots in Jewish prayer structure and wording. There is even some evidence to show that is a common structure of prayer for other ancient religions.

This simple prayer begins "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." The beginning of a prayer sets the tone for the rest of the prayer. While the English word 'father' may have some negative connotations to it and thus people may have negative reactions to this term and thus the prayer itself, the word that is used by Jesus, Abba, means more of the loving type of father who would do anything for their child. To capture the essence of Abba, we should probably use 'daddy' which underscores a positive, intimate relationship between us and God.

The next thing we should notice about this simple, succinct prayer is the sense of community. Jesus said "Our Father" which indicates that the one who taught us this prayer has the same Father as we do. By saying 'Our Father' we can imagine Jesus praying alongside of us, just as we say this prayer alongside everyone else who is praying this prayer. This makes it a community prayer and not a selfish prayer focused on the self. This goes along with the thought from John 3:16 that God so loved the world. This prayer opening then includes everyone, no one is excluded from this prayer - God is the Father of all.

A tension is created by acknowledging that God is in heaven, yet can be addressed with such an intimate term as daddy. God is not some royal who sits on the throne where there is controlled access to the royal. Yet, we are reminded in this prayer that God is more than just a friend. At the same time, because of who God is and being the Creator, then God's name is to be revered and kept

sacred. Luther reminds us that in stating that God's name is holy, we should remember the Ten Commandments and to keep God's name holy and not to use it in vain.

We see in this first petition, that we are in relationship with God, with Jesus and with everyone else who recites this prayer. We see that this is a positive relationship where God wants good things for God's children. While there is that intimacy with God, there is also a transcendence that goes way beyond our imaginations. Because of the inclusivity of this prayer to include everyone, we cannot exclude anyone from having access to the grace of God shown to us through Jesus Christ. So, it is fitting and right that we should begin this prayer by acknowledging the relationship that we have with God, the transcendence that God possesses and the intimacy which God seeks with us.

Next week, we will look at the next two petitions, Thy kingdom come and thy will be done.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon:

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