

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday after Easter, May 21, 2017

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 434, 524: 1-2, 459, 457, 46.

Lessons: Genesis 18:20-32, Colossians 2:6-15, Luke 11:1-13.

Text: Luke 11: 5-13.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Your car won't run without fuel. You tell your children to eat good, nourishing meals, because their bodies can't run without fuel. Well, prayer is one of the essential ingredients for fueling a life that will be busy doing the will of God. Jesus recognized this fact and spent much time in prayer.

For many who are professing Christians prayer can easily become part of a mechanical routine, an emergency measure, a sort of fire escape to which they run in the hour of need. But prayer is a vital, essential part of a Christian life: As St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, we are to ***"pray continually"*** (1 Thessalonians 5:17 NIV); ***"Pray without ceasing."*** (KJV). He writes to the Romans: ***"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."*** (Romans 12:12 NIV) The King James Version says ***"Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer."*** The idea is continuing constantly in prayer, just as he wrote in Thessalonians.

Having heard Abraham's persistent prayers to God over the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and having heard Jesus teaching his disciples to pray and telling them why and how they should pray, let's talk about

PERSISTENCE AND PERSEVERANCE IN PRAYER

- 1. God commands us to pray and promises to hear prayer.**
- 2. What are we asking for?**
- 3. *"Thy will be done"*. We ask that God's will, not ours, be the final deciding factor.**

With this introduction today, we begin to address what our Lord teaches us about prayer.

We are commanded to pray by a faithful God who promises that he is able to do more than we can ask or imagine. "Ask, Seek, Knock", Jesus says. God can do more than we ask or imagine: ***"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us"*** Ephesians 3:20. ***"Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us."*** (KJV)

We must emphasize first of all, that prayer does not save us. We are all sinners who have broken God's law and deserve eternal damnation. God's word plainly teaches in Ephesians 2:8-9: ***"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."*** We are saved eternally from damnation because Jesus Christ died on the cross for all our sins after living a perfect, sinless life, the life we could never live. It is God's grace, that is, his undeserved goodness and mercy which saves us from our sins.

Prayer is talking to God. It is asking him for what we need and thanking him for what he has given us. In our Gospel lesson you heard the words we have come to know and use as "the Lord's Prayer". Prayer is not a means of grace. It is not a means through which God gives us his love. It is not a means through which a searching soul receives a supernatural revelation independent of the Word of God and the Sacraments. Nowhere does Holy Scripture make man's salvation dependent upon his feelings.

The repeated command to pray in scripture is found in a setting of promises that amaze us when we take time to study them. Jesus tells us in John 16:23 ***"I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."*** God tells us in Psalm 91:15-16 ***"He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation."*** And we read in Psalm 50:15 ***"call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."*** James tells us: ***"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."*** James 5:16.

These are promises from God! And God tells us in Hebrews 10:23 ***"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."*** And this isn't only a New Testament promise about a faithful God: We read in Isaiah 54:10 ***"Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you."***

To sum up what God wants for us we might quote Romans 8:27-28 ***"And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*** And then a few verses later: ***"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*** Romans 8:31-32.

So God plainly promises to hear and answer the prayers of believers. But what did Jesus tell us we are to pray for in the Lord's Prayer? Let's look for a minute at the petitions as we pray them:

After we address "Our Father who art in heaven", we ask in the first petition: "Hallowed be Thy name." That is a spiritual blessing, that God's name be holy among us. "Thy kingdom come." That's a spiritual blessing. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Another spiritual blessing. "Give us this day our daily bread." Oh, there's something we can easily comprehend: an earthly blessing. We need food and clothing and shelter, and this includes, as Luther teaches us in his explanation "What does this mean? Everything that we need for our bodily welfare...." "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Another spiritual blessing. "And lead us not into temptation." More spiritual blessings. And the last petition: "But deliver us from evil." Spiritual blessings. Jesus himself gives us 6 petitions for spiritual blessings, and only one for earthly blessings! Don't we often think our earthly blessings and possessions deserve much more attention than the spiritual blessings? Our sinful flesh thinks so!

In coming sermons we will talk about these petitions in greater detail.

Of course to the believer it goes without saying that any God-pleasing prayer must be offered to the Triune God in the name of Jesus. Then he tells us plainly, as in Matthew 21:22 ***"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."*** And we read also in John 16:24 ***"Ask and you will receive."***

When we pray, we must go to God with our greatest problem of all, the root of all other problems, sin. We confess our sins, and admit that we are not worthy of the least of the things for which we ask, but we ask that he give them all to us by grace.

Every prayer must be conditioned by bowing to the will of God. We always pray: "If it is God's will, let such and such be done". One writer said "Prayer is not a blank check which the petitioner fills in indiscriminately and then presents at the Throne of Grace. In that event man would rule the world. The result would be conflict, chaos, disaster. Thoughtful parents have a plan for their children, one that is designed for their welfare. Within the scope of this plan the wishes and requests of the children are granted. Our heavenly father has a plan of love and wisdom for us. This embraces invaluable blessings such as freedom from the guilt and the power of sin, membership in His family, a character and a walk 'worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called', partnership in building up His Kingdom of Grace, eternal life in heaven. Within this area, prayer is answered. In 1 John we read ***"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him."*** (1 John 5:13-15) Everything that is essential to this will, such as faith, love, hope, strength to overcome the enemies of our soul, power and wisdom to serve Him, will be granted without

reservations. Everything that is incidental to this plan, such as food, clothing, health, freedom from distressing circumstances, must be left to the discretion of God in such terms as, 'If it be Thy will.'" The best example of this is Jesus himself praying before his sufferings and death: "***Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.***" Luke 22:42. The answer for Jesus was Calvary with all its suffering and shame because it was essential to God's plan for man's salvation.

"Similarly we may [suffer] the very experiences which we hoped to ward off through prayer: sickness, bereavement, financial losses, trying personal and home situations. When that happens, we have God's assurance that the cup does not contain poison, but medicine wisely chosen by the great physician of souls for our eternal welfare." We quote again from Romans 8:28 "***And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.***"

St. Paul himself had some kind of "thorn in his flesh" that he prayed repeatedly for God to remove. But hear what he wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 "***To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.***"

In the life of the individual, prayer must be more than a last resort, more than an emergency measure, more than a way of escape from troubles and difficulties that distress us. It must be a working force that reaches out for the abundant life promised by our Savior. Prayer must be the atmosphere in which we live and work. It must be an essential part of the Christian's life. How often don't we go through our days just taking what comes, not planning, and especially not planning for prayer and with prayer? Through prayer we shift the focus of our thoughts from self to God. As our weakness turns toward the almighty power of God, demoralizing cares vanish, and a quiet strength replaces them.

The point Jesus makes in our sermon text is that persistence in prayer pays off. The entire household is settled in for the night behind locked doors. But persistence proves a greater motive than friendship for finally providing the bread requested. If a human friend is moved to respond by persistent pleading, how much more likely is it that our heavenly Father will respond when we come to him again and again with our needs! Our asking, seeking, and knocking will not be in vain.

What the heavenly Father grants to us in response to our persistent prayer will be good for us. Jesus uses this comparison: an earthly father will not give what is harmful to his son. How much more should we trust our heavenly Father to give us good gifts! St. Paul uses a benediction in writing to the Ephesians (3:20-21) which emphasizes, in the words of the King James Version, that God "***is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think***". With those words we close our sermon, using the New International Version translation: "***Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.***" Ephesians 3:20-21.

(Adapted from the LCCF MINISTRY BY MAIL sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, August 23, 2009)