

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Twenty-first Sunday After Trinity, October 24, 2021

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

Hymns: 44, 245:6, 456, 459:1-5, 459:6-7.

Lessons: Jeremiah 17:5-10, 2 Corinthians 7:6-10, Luke 7:36-50.

Sermon Text: Matthew 6:5-8.

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

There are certain things in life without which we cannot get along. For example, in our physical life we cannot get along without food, water, light and air. If we are deprived of these essentials, we will not live very long. So also in the spiritual realm there are certain indispensable things. One such thing is the Word of God. It is the food that nourishes our soul. Another thing a believer in Christ will not want to be deprived of is prayer. It is as natural for a Christian to pray as it is for him to breathe.

We should think of prayer as a most precious privilege. Lots of people of all kinds of different beliefs talk about praying, but prayer is a privilege only Christians have. Jesus won this privilege for us by his work of atoning for our sins. The Pharisees and teachers of the law went through the motions of praying to God. But Jesus called them hypocrites and applied Isaiah's words to them: *"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me,"* Matt. 15:8.

Since prayer is so vital to the Christian, and since it is such a precious privilege, we welcome some instruction on prayer, especially since Jesus is the one who teaches us. Let us, then, meditate on:

THE TEACHING OF OUR SAVIOR CONCERNING PRAYER

- 1. The manner of praying;**
- 2. The form of our prayers.**

Concerning the manner of praying, Jesus first tells us what the wrong manner is: *"But when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men."* In the Old Testament times the faithful Israelites observed certain hours for prayer. This custom was based on Psalm 55:17: *"Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice."* This was a good custom, but the Pharisees observed it in a hypocritical manner. They loved to pray in some public place where a large crowd of people came together. They wanted to impress others with their piety. They wanted to gain the admiration and praise of men. But in doing this, Jesus says: *"I tell you the truth they have received their reward in full."* The praise of men was their only reward. They did not have the approval of God. Jesus teaches that to pray in this manner is wrong. We may, indeed, fold our hands and bow our heads and thus make a good confession before others, but we should never do this to impress other people.

The Christian manner of praying is very different from the manner of the hypocrite. Jesus says: *"When you pray go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."* In the New Testament God does not give us any commandment to pray at certain fixed hours. We should pray at all times, especially in times of trouble. The Bible teaches us: *"Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* 1 Thess. 5:17. We should always be mindful of the Lord and of the need of his blessings. Whether at work or at leisure, we should always keep the Lord and his Word in our thoughts. For we are dependent upon the Lord's help in all we do and we should be eager to do according to his Word and will. We do, of course, observe certain times for praying because we want to ask for God's blessings. We have the fine custom of praying before and after meals to ask the

Lord Jesus to be our guest as we eat, and to thank him for what we have received. We also like to pray in the morning before we begin our work for the day, and in the evening when we retire. No matter how old we are, we ought not to be ashamed to pray this little prayer before we sleep: “As I now lie down to sleep, I ask you, Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I ask you, Lord, my soul to take. If I should live for other days, I ask you, Lord, to guide my ways. And this I ask for Jesus’ sake.” Especially in times of trouble we should call on the Lord, for he says: **“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me,”** Psalm 50:15.

Jesus also teaches us about private prayer: **“When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”** We should seek some quiet place in the privacy of our homes where we can pray undisturbed. In private we are alone with God. He is omnipresent, present in all places at all times. We can be assured that he will hear and answer our prayer. Other Scripture passages teach that we should also pray in public worship: **“I urge, then first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone...”** 1 Timothy 2:1. Psalm 26 also says: **“...in the great assembly I will praise the LORD,”** V. 12b.

In general, in our homes we should pray with members of our family in family devotions. In public church services we should make the prayers spoken our own. But it is something we must practice and be ever mindful that the Lord wants us to pray from the heart and not just mindlessly repeat words. We should pray to our heavenly Father with childlike confidence. Luther wrote: “Though I be a sinner and unworthy, still I have here God’s command, which commands me to pray, and His promise that He will mercifully hear me, not on account of my worthiness, but for the sake of the Lord Christ.” (Luther, 7, 503) We continue now with Jesus’ instruction teaching **the form of our prayers.**

2.

“When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” Repeating words and phrases in a prayer over and over again is a heathen custom. We have an example from the account of Elijah and the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel. The heathen worshipers **“called on the name of Baal from morning till noon,”** I Kings 18:26. Elijah mocked them and told them that maybe their god was sleeping, and they shouted louder, slashed themselves with knives, and cried out to their god until the time of the evening sacrifice. All was in vain, their prayers were not heard nor answered. What shall we say about the practice of praying the Rosary in the Roman Catholic Church? Words are repeated over and over again while the beads are fingered, and the Virgin Mary is addressed in these prayers. Not only is this contrary to Jesus’ clear teaching when he says: **“Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only,”** Matt. 4:10, but it is also a **“vain repetition”** (KJV), a monotonous repeating of words which Mary cannot hear or answer. Jesus warns against this wrong form of praying. He says: **“Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask them.”** Jesus emphatically says that we Christians should not be like the heathen when we pray. There should be no point of resemblance between their worship and ours. What we all need to remember is this truth: Prayer requires more of the heart than of the tongue. If we do not pray from the heart with our mind centered on the words we are speaking, then our prayer will be just so many words and no prayer at all. The psalmist had this in mind when he wrote: **“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer,”** Ps. 19:14. Our prayers must originate in our hearts, for with our hearts we believe in Jesus as our Savior. He is our only Savior, as Peter told the rulers and elders of the Jews: **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved,”** Acts 4:12. If we do not pray with a believing heart, we cannot pray at all. Jesus says: **“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer,”** Matt. 21:22. James writes: **“But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord,”** James 1:6-7a.

How foolish and absurd it is to think that we must pray with many words before God hears! Jesus says in our text: **“Your father knows what you need before you ask him.”** God is our dear Father through faith in Christ, and he is very much aware of the needs of his dear children. He sometimes fulfills the needs of his children before they even realize that they lack something. Isaiah records these words of the Lord: **“Before they call I will answer;**

while they are still speaking I will hear,” Isa. 65:24. Especially when we are in distress and suffer afflictions, we may be comforted by these words of the psalmist: *“You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more,*” Psalm 10:17-18. The Lord knows the desires of our hearts before we express them in words. What a comfort to know that God our Father is acquainted with all our needs and is ready to supply them according to his will! Luther wrote: “God commands us to pray, not indeed that we with our prayer should teach Him what He should give, but rather that we should realize and confess what kind of goods He gives to us, and will and can give much more; so that by our prayer we instruct ourselves more than Him.” (Luther, 7, 506)

However, we should not think that we need not pray because God already knows our needs and is ready to supply them. In many Bible passages God commands us to pray. Jesus himself in deepest humiliation prayed to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is natural for children to ask their father for what is needed, and so we also ask our dear heavenly Father in prayer. If we look in our Bibles we will find that the words of our text form an introduction to the Lord’s Prayer. Right after our text we find these words: *“This is how you should pray:”* and then follow the words of the Lord’s Prayer. We like to refer to the Lord’s Prayer as the model prayer, for in it Jesus gave us the words which bring all our physical and spiritual needs to our Father in heaven. Let us learn to say with Martin Luther:

“Amen, that is, so shall it be.

Confirm our faith and hope in Thee

That we may doubt not, but believe

What here we ask we shall receive.

Thus in Thy name and at Thy word

We say: Amen. Oh, hear us, Lord!” Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal 458:9) Amen

(Revised from a Ministry By Mail sermon for September 29, 2002)