

## Why we pray

The fourth Sunday after Pentecost

We kid ourselves about the problem of sin because we're caught in it. Last week the practical question was: What is worship? This week we take up the matter of prayer, which is again a practical matter. It seems so religious, but it really is very practical. How is prayer practical?

The main thing we need to realize is that most of what people think and do with prayer is superstition. As you know, while 90% of the people in this country believe in God, 95% pray, which raises all kinds of questions about what prayer is. People are trying to manipulate life and manipulate God. That's what this amounts to: "I do this for you, God, and then you do something for me." We know of this in the religion (or parts of the religion) of Buddhism where they have prayer wheels driven by water or the wind so all those prayers get going.

It is best seen in the contest between the priests of Baal and Elijah (1 Kings 18). Who is really God? They take an altar made of stone and put wood on it and then put on slaughtered oxen. The priests of Baal have the first chance. They pray and go singing and dancing around the altar and shouting to God, and Elijah taunts them: "You better do it louder; God doesn't seem to hear. You better be more sincere." Actually they don't tell us in the translation because it's indiscreet, but Elijah says: "Maybe God has gone off to the bathroom, you better repeat what you've said." He really makes fun of them because all day long they are shouting and they're serious, and nothing happens.

This is also seen in the famous account of Gideon. Gideon says: "Lord, if the fleece is wet in the morning but the ground is dry, then I'll believe you." O.K. The next day do it the opposite way: "If the fleece is dry and the ground is wet, then I'll believe you." It's testing God and manipulating God. We fall into the trap: This is what prayer is about. We're making God do what we want and what we think should happen.

There are basically four problems dealing with prayer:

1. The first one is the problem that prayers aren't answered. People say: "God said, No." In the Small Catechism Luther goes into this: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." You may remember by heart what he says: God's kingdom comes by itself. Thy will is done by itself. Why bother. It happens anyway. What does God need? A nudge? A reminder? What is prayer for if it isn't for us to help God run the universe? Which is unfortunately the way people think prayer works.

In the last five to ten years there have been a series of major studies that have attempted to prove whether prayer works or not, especially with people who are in particular kinds of illness, and they've tried to control these studies. But the results are inconclusive because it cannot be precise about how people pray. That's really the problem. We say: "Well, how does it work?" What often happens is that it is not that

prayer changes things, but it becomes, according to psychology, that prayer changes you. And that's all that it is. God isn't really working. What is prayer then? How does it work? Or does it work? Why would we do it?

2. There are some Bible passages that raise huge questions. The central one is found in Mark 11:23-24, where it says: "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.' Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Parallel passages are found in Matt 17 and 21. In Luke 17 it's the same, except it's not the mountain but the Sycamine (mulberry) tree. What do we say to this? In the 2000 years of church history there is no record of anybody ever moving a mountain or moving a tree like that.

More important is what we find in John 15:7, which is like a commentary on Matthew 11:23-24: "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." That's very different from saying: "Screw up your faith and be sincere and it will happen." But rather: "If you abide in me and my words abide in you . . . ." Most significant is in the great love chapter, in 1 Cor 13:2, where Paul writes: "If I have all faith so as to move mountains, and do not have love, it's nothing." Suddenly the question of prayer is put in a different light.

3. The third problem is the passage in 1 Thessalonians 5:17: "Pray without ceasing." Pray all the time; it's not just praying certain times, or once in a while, but all the time.
4. Finally, the most important passage in the New Testament about prayer is Romans 8:26-27: ". . . for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." The Greek word used for "sighs too deep for words" is "*alaletos*," which means "baby talk." "*Alaletos*" is like "mama" and "dada." Our prayers then are all imperfect. Paul goes on in verse 27 to say the Holy Spirit translates them so that they are before the Most High what they are supposed to be. But our prayers are imperfect in a very significant way.

We go back then to the promises. What is it that the New Testament says about prayer? We think first of all of the place in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 7:7-11, where it says: "Knock and it will be opened. Seek and you will find. Ask and it will be given to you." Then in verses 10-11: "If your child asks you for a loaf of bread, do you give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, do you give him a scorpion?" And then in verse 11: "If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** does your Father in heaven know how to give to you?"

This "**how much more**" becomes the way that the New Testament describes what it is about. It's really the same thing in that much misunderstood parable in Luke 18 about the importunate

widow. You remember she is trying to get justice from this crooked judge. She comes and pounds on his door, and he won't do anything. Finally he says she's such a pest that I'll do it anyway just to get rid of her. People mistakenly think that's the way the Lord is. The Lord doesn't want to help us, but if we pound on the door and are really tough about it . . .

But no, that's not what it says. It's really the same as in Matthew 7. If the unjust judge will act, **how much more** will our Father in heaven do what is good for you.

It's the same way in the **how much more** in Romans 8:32 where it says: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all good things with him?"

To go back to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. He takes care of the lilies of the field. He takes care of every sparrow that falls. Don't you think he takes care of you and cares for you?

Then what is prayer? God is going to take care of us in spite of us. It isn't a matter of saying, if you just remind him, or if you're serious enough, or really sincere. It isn't a matter of screwing up your faith to the highest degree.

Luther, in his commentary on this in the Large Catechism, points out that we pray because the Lord has told us to. It's a command. It's a work. We are called upon to pray. Of course then we end up in the trap of a new law. It's like Islam; they pray five times a day. They pray no matter where they are.

There is going to be a Muslim astronaut flying around the world, and they have had to get a ruling from a famous teacher in Islam as to how you figure out where Mecca is at that point when circling the earth. They have that all worked out, set up. It's a matter of using certain words and keeping certain laws.

Like last week when we talked about worship, the danger is that people turn prayer into a new law. Then we become like the Roman Catholics or Islam. It's not what prayer is about.

Why do we pray? Why do we worship? We worship because everything is changed. Remember from last week the story of the family with the little girl with the brain tumor. This is a true story. Finally they were able to find a surgeon to operate and save her life. It changed everything for them. It changed their lives. And there wasn't anything they could say or do, except praise and thanks. And tell others about what he had done.

Luther talks about this in another way. Luther had a house dog named Topel. And he describes how when there was a piece of meat on the table, Topel watched that piece of meat. Nothing could get his attention away from that piece of meat.

What it's about is that everything has changed because of the cross and resurrection. We have a different focus. That's what it means in 1 Thessalonians 5:17: "To pray without ceasing." To pray without ceasing means that everything is oriented, is focused in a different way.

How about being imperfect in our prayer? Luther points out that if you have any trouble with how to pray, you have the Lord's Prayer, and the Lord's Prayer will take you all your life to figure out enough ways to say it, and what it's about.

It does say in Romans 8:26 that our prayers are imperfect. That's basic to what it's about. What is this like because it is this baby talk? This babbling, really. Those of you who have had little ones know that the little one is babbling and will reach for the handle of the frying pan on the stove and you will pull it away. Or run toward the stairway and you will grab him. But you are rejoicing that your little one is beginning to talk and beginning to move. You understand. You don't require some clear, philosophical, doctrinal statement.

If you read the Book of Psalms, which is the prayer book of the church, not in pieces as we do but read it as a whole block, a hundred and fifty chapters, what do you find? You find them shaking their fists at the Lord, cursing their enemies, asking for all kinds of stupid things. In fact, there is this one place that is normally left out when churches print hymnbooks because it's so terrible – about smashing the little ones heads against the rocks (Psalm 137:9).

It is the Lord who is in charge, and he wants us to bring everything to him in prayer. But not because we do it right, but because that's the One with whom we are involved. Everything has changed. That's what it means when it says we never pray right.

Finally, it is summed up in that second most important verse about prayer after Romans 8:28, the one in 1 Peter 5:7: "Cast all your cares on him, for he cares about you." That's what it's about.

We know he cares for us, except we end up saying: The Lord helps those who help themselves. Well, no, as a matter of fact. We bring all our sorrows and all our cares to him.

Then as Luther says writing about the First Commandment in the Large Catechism: Let God be God. Let him run the universe. And we then are his little ones he cares for, and he wants to hear from. Amen