

The Gift of Prayer

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How are Christians to pray? Must we? Does God even listen?

Some years ago, I was teaching a class that was unusually ready to challenge what I taught. In the previous session on the creed, I had stressed that our salvation was given to us as a free gift that we did nothing to earn. I had barely begun a lesson on the Lord's Prayer before one of the stirrers asked, "Please, sir, do we have to pray?" My answer surprised him and the rest of the class. "No," I said, "you don't have to pray." Then, after pausing for effect, I added, "But you would be stupid if you didn't!"

I went on to challenge the class with a hypothetical scenario. What if I handed out a super-voucher to each confirmand? What if that voucher had a list of 1,000 items? And what if, on presentation at the local shopping center, that person could receive any of the listed items free, either for himself or his friends, not just once but whenever he wished? And what if I agreed to pay for all of them? "What," I concluded, "would you think of anyone who asked whether he had to use that voucher?"

That exchange opened up a discussion on prayer as a gift rather than an obligation, prayer as something that Jesus has given to us for our benefit to receive God's gifts. We pray in order to receive the gifts that God has for us and others. And best of all, prayer itself is a gift!

No need to pray?

More than anything else, the devil tries to stop us praying, for as soon as we pray, his work is undone. So he does everything he can to prevent that from happening. He commonly misuses God's Word in two ways. On the one hand, he argues that since prayer is not a means of grace and our works contribute nothing to our salvation, we have no need to pray. On the other hand, since we seem to fail more often in prayer than in anything else that we do, no matter how hard we try, we should give up and leave it to the experts in faith. He tries to deprive us of the good things that God wants us to receive from Him.

Since prayer comes so hard to us, God has taken great pains to help us to pray. He sent His Son to live a human life in which He accomplished for us what we could not accomplish by ourselves. In the three years from His Baptism to His death, Jesus did not just preach God's

Word to His disciples but also prayed for them. All that He said and did was undergirded by regular prayer. He had no need to do that for Himself; He did it for others, bringing them and their needs to the Father. Yet, His work of prayer did not end with His life on earth. In fact, His death laid the foundation for His ongoing prayer for us and all people. The author of Hebrews claims that this is what He is now doing for us: “Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

Jesus teaches us more about that in Luke 11:1-13. Luke begins the story by noting that Jesus had been praying. When He had finished, one of His disciples, speaking for the others and us, too, who would like to be better at prayer, said: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” That disciple wanted Jesus to give them some tips on prayer. But Jesus does not do that. He answers the request in four surprising ways.

Learning to pray

First, He does not tell us how to pray but gives us His own prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer that He prays for us and the whole world. With this, He gives us His own unique relationship as Son with God the Father and lets us stand in His shoes, joining with Him in His praying. In this prayer, we identify ourselves with Jesus as we pray together with Him for the hallowing of the Father’s name and the coming of the Father’s kingdom. In this prayer, Jesus also identifies Himself with us and our need for food, forgiveness and protection from temptation. In this prayer, we pray together with Jesus who prays for us and the whole world.

Second, He teaches us to pray with the parable of the unexpected visitor. Here Jesus gets us to imagine that we have an unannounced visit at midnight from our best friend. He has come a long way and has had nothing to eat. Worst of all, there is not a scrap of food in the house. Yet, even though we have nothing to set before our visitor, we have a friend next door. So we borrow from him for our guest.

How does this parable answer the request for Jesus to teach us to pray? God gives us unexpected “visitors,” people who cross our paths and make impossible demands that we can’t fulfill. We would like to help them out but have nothing for them. But we do have a friend next door. Unlike the neighbour in the parable, Jesus is eager to provide what is needed. So Jesus teaches us to pray by giving us unexpected visitors, people who need our prayers and help from God through us.

Third, Jesus teaches us to pray by giving us God's Word with its commands and promises. He authorizes us to pray by saying "ask" and "seek" and "knock." To each of these commands He adds a promise. If we ask, God will give us His promised gifts. If we seek help and guidance, we will find what is needed from God. Best of all, if we knock at the door of the Father's house, He will open the door for us and invite us in. We won't just get what we ask for; we will enjoy His warm hospitality.

Jesus helps us to pray by giving us God's words. His words are aids to prayer. The Bible is our prayer book, for as we listen to what God says, we receive help and guidance in praying according to His will. That's why Luther explains in the Small Catechism that we can be sure that God the Father is pleased with our prayers because "He Himself has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us."

Fourth, Jesus helps us to pray by the promise of the Holy Spirit. He challenges us with two questions. Even the worst father would not give his son a snake if he asked for a fish or a scorpion if he asked for an egg. Then comes an unexpected conclusion: God the Father does not just give good things on request to His children, but He also gives the Holy Spirit. That's the best of gifts!

A spirit of prayer

But how does Jesus teach us to pray by giving us the promise of the Holy Spirit? The answer is simple. We are all dunces at prayer, people who find it hard to pray. So God provides us with His Holy Spirit, not just once but again and again, whenever we pray. The Spirit is the Spirit of prayer, for He is not just received by faith in prayer, but also prompts us when we pray. Since we do not know how to pray or what to pray for, the Spirit, says Paul in Rom. 8:26-27, intercedes for us and in us before God. We pray to God the Father together with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we have received the gift of prayer from God to receive gifts from God in prayer. We pray in order to receive the gifts that God has for us and others. And best of all, prayer itself is a gift!

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