

A two-session study on Martin Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray*



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Preface

This study is a practical two-part introduction to the theology and practice of prayer,¹ drawing on Luther's Small and Large Catechisms and especially on *A Simple Way to Pray: For Peter, the Master Barber*. The latter provides our outline: In the first part, we explore the theology and practice of prayer from the command and promise of the Lord's Prayer. Then in the second part, by design somewhat shorter on reading and longer on practice, we delve into the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed (and beyond), as into a treasure chest, to find yet more sound words with which to pray.

Each part may be explored in a single session or expanded as desired. Some discussion questions are brief in nature; others could easily support much discussion or even practice, together or individually, in prayer.

In this study, we will get just a taste of Luther's marvelous *A Simple Way to Pray*, now available in an inexpensive and accessible booklet from Concordia Publishing House, and an even smaller taste of the Small and Large Catechisms as bottomless prayer treasure chests or, perhaps better, war chests for our earthly strife with world, devil and flesh. The study leader and, if possible, participants might want to have these available at the study for reference or to mark thoughts for further perusal in personal reading or devotions. Participants also will want to have a Bible close at hand. Each session opens with a hymn from *Lutheran Service Book*. The author hopes this little study will encourage pastors and laypeople alike to dig deep and find in these "treasure chests" lifelong refreshment in prayer.

¹ Theology and Practice of Prayer: A Lutheran View is the title of a much more studious document, published in 2012 by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

Session I: “Lord, teach us how to pray!”

The Lord’s Prayer and the Prayer of the Christian

Hymn • “Our Father, Who from Heaven Above” (LSB 766)

The Lord’s Prayer as more than a passing blur

The nine stanzas of this hymn on the Lord’s Prayer — one for each of the seven petitions, bookended by one for the introduction, “Our Father,” and one for the “Amen” — reflect Martin Luther’s catechism teaching on the Lord’s Prayer and the theology of prayer that produced it. It is a longer hymn than many; it takes much longer to sing than to pray the Lord’s Prayer. But time spent reflecting on the prayer’s various petitions, instead of just racing through them, is time well spent.

“Many,” Luther laments, “pray the *Pater Noster* (*Our Father*) as many as a thousand times a year; if they were to pray a thousand years they would indeed still not have tasted or prayed even one letter of it [Matthew 5:18].” (How often have you found your mind wandering to the grocery list, or worse, while the words roll, seemingly on autopilot, off your tongue?) “In summary, the *Pater Noster* is the greatest martyr on earth, as much as the name and Word of God. Nearly everyone mistreats it and abuses it. Only a few are comforted by it and find joy in its correct use.”² Well, let us move on, hopefully, to do just that.

After all, for Luther, as with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the right place to begin to answer the questions “What is prayer?” and “How shall we pray?” and the like is with our Lord’s own command and promise. For when His disciples asked Him how they should pray, the Lord said, “When you pray, say”³ And then He gave them what we call the Lord’s Prayer. Here is where Christians, with the disciples, learn to pray, in a school taught by

² Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, tr. Matthew Harrison (St. Louis: CPH, 2012), p. 15.

³ Luke 11:2f.; compare Matt. 6:9f.

the Holy Spirit. How does He teach? By the words of God: the Psalms, Gospels and Epistles, the whole Scripture, but especially “the very best prayer, because the true master of prayer, Jesus, composed it and taught it to us.”⁴

⁴ Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 15. On the vital connection between the working of the Spirit and the Word of God, see Luther’s discussion of confession in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (Smalcald Articles III VIII, p. 279–281).

The unique gift of Christian prayer

Although we might see or hear people praying all sorts of prayers to all kinds of gods, some of whom they at least think they know better than others, Christian prayer is unique. It reflects our unique knowledge of and trust in the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has created all things, redeemed us by His blood and sanctified us in His holy Church.⁵ We pray from a position of confidence, sure that God will hear us and grant us what is good because we pray by Christ's command,⁶ according to His promise⁷ and even according to His explicit instructions.⁸

Yet how we have often rushed through those words, "Our Father . . .," without thinking what a remarkable gift it is that Christ would have us pray this way. To make them think about this, I ask my confirmation students what they think would happen if they went to an unknown man on the street and said, "Dad, give me a sandwich!" I haven't added what I probably could: that they should put him in the right frame of mind first by kicking him in the shins. What would they get?

I promise you, it wouldn't be a sandwich! Who would dare call some ordinary man on the street "dad" and ask him for even a sandwich on that basis — kick in the shins beforehand or no? How, then, should we dare call upon the one and only true God of heaven and earth as Father — whom we have gravely offended through our sins — and then ask Him not only for a sandwich, but (as Luther well explains in his unfolding of "daily bread") for everything? Why should He give it? Why should He not instead be angry that we are just looking to "take, take, take," when that's pretty much what our lives have been about?

⁵ "These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and separate us Christians from all other people on earth . . . [who] still do not know what [God's] mind toward them is and cannot expect any love or blessing from Him." Luther, Large Catechism II 66, in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (similarly, the following), p. 406.

⁶ Luther, Large Catechism III 5–18, p. 408–9.

⁷ Luther, Large Catechism III 19–21, p. 410.

⁸ Luther, Large Catechism III 22–27, p. 410–11.

Yet, this is how Jesus teaches us to pray, without offering Him anything first, without so much as even saying “please!” That’s a bold prayer — one might even say risky! But it is a boldness in Jesus, not in ourselves or in our finding our own right words or sweet deal for the God to whom we pray. “Our Father . . . give us today!”

So there is a false boldness in prayer, and a true one. A false boldness thinks we have a right, *outside of Christ* and His command and promise and instruction, to offer what we please, to ask for what we want and, in many cases, to call upon God as we might wish, by whatever name. That gets us nowhere. Such prayer, because it is outside of faith, is even sin.⁹ But there is at the same time a true boldness in prayer that *knows* that we have the right *in Christ* and in His command, promise and instruction to ask “confidently with all assurance, as dear children ask their dear father.”¹⁰ And to cap it off, our Lord teaches us to conclude with “Amen!” That is, “Yes, yes, it shall be so!”¹¹

In his wonderful devotional guide, *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther thus instructs his barber, Peter, that he might begin his prayers, humble in himself but confident in Christ: “O, Heavenly Father, Dear God, I am an unworthy, wretched sinner. I do not deserve to lift my eyes and hands to heaven and pray. But because You have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear such prayer, and because You have taught us through Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, both in word and in deed, I now come on the basis of Your command in obedience to You. I take my stand on Your gracious promise, and in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, I pray with all Your holy Christians on earth, as He has taught me: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven . . .’ ” Say the Lord’s Prayer completely, word for word.”¹²

⁹ Rom. 14:23.

¹⁰ Luther, *Small Catechism III* (The Lord’s Prayer, Introduction), p. 331.

¹¹ Luther, *Small Catechism III* (The Lord’s Prayer, The Seventh Petition), p. 338.

¹² Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, pp. 7–8.

What is the point on which prayer stands or falls?

Why do we dare to pray this way? Because Christ invites us to pray to His Father as the one who has made us His brothers and sisters, redeeming us to be adopted children of His Father, by the Spirit of adoption,¹³ in Holy Baptism. Thus, when we pray, “Our Father,” we are praying *in the name of Jesus*;¹⁴ that is, *as those baptized into Jesus Himself*.¹⁵ What we pray *in Christ*, by faith, according to His promises, God the Father hears as coming from His own Son. What a remarkable gift, to pray not on the off chance that we might be able to wheel and deal a favor out of God, but in the certainty that He loves His Son, and loves us in Him.¹⁶

Now you may say, “Dear pastor, you take us in circles! All you have done is show us that it is OK for us to pray as we always have!” Fair enough. Yet, perhaps you will now pray thinking about something, clinging firmly to something, that you once assumed and thought little about, which is this: prayer is rooted in justification, in the forgiveness of sins, in our adoption as sons, in Christ. What does this matter?

As I’m out and about as a pastor, people I don’t know see by my dress who I am and ask me to pray for them. I am glad to listen to their concerns, of course, and to pray for them, as is my privilege and duty.¹⁷ But sometimes I also ask, “Have you tried praying for yourself?” Often the response is something along these lines: “Oh, pastor, God will hear *you*. He’s not going to listen to *me*.” And there we’ve moved from a question about the doctrine of prayer — “Will God hear *me*?” — to the central question of the doctrine of justification: “How can God count me righteous, holy, good, acceptable, worthy in His sight?” And that is the question to which Jesus is the most definite *yes* — and not just for “men in black.”

¹³ Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:15; Eph. 1:5.

¹⁴ John 14:13–14; 15:16.

¹⁵ Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3–11.

¹⁶ John 16:23–27; Rom. 6:3–5, 11; 8:15–17, 31–39; 13:14.

¹⁷ 1 Tim. 2:1–6.

So prayer — or to back up a step, some crisis of a world subjected to futility, but in hope¹⁸ — led to a question of prayer, which led to a question of faith, a question of the article, in fact, on which faith and the church stand or fall — the article of justification. Does God love me? Will He hear me? Does He care? Will He see me through?

If I'm speaking with a man on the street (or perhaps if you are), this is a chance to share the Gospel, the truth that it is not our relative merits or works that make us acceptable to God or beloved by Him, but it is the death and resurrection of Jesus, for the remission of all our sins. The truth is that we ought not judge our status before God by the conditions of our daily existence, whether we are rich or poor, loved or hated, free or locked up, healthy or sick — but by what Christ has done, and by the fact that it is for us.

But this point, that prayer is rooted in justification, is not just for witnessing to others when they overhear our prayers and find them strangely confident. It is part of a vital cycle of the Christian life for each one of us, to be brought continually back to this fact in which is our trust and to work through its implications for our entire lives. (About this cycle, we'll say a bit more in the next part.)

To truly pray as a Christian, then, you pray not just from the desires of your heart, but in faith, sustained by God's Word, that for Christ's sake God will hear you and grant you all He has promised.¹⁹ So prayer is not just an exercise in prayer, but it demands and exercises faith and drives us into doctrine, into the Word of Christ. *In Him* we are God's own. *In Him* we pray and expect every good thing, even, best of all, the Holy Spirit.²⁰ "The prayer

¹⁸ Rom. 8:20–21.

¹⁹ See Luther's Small and Large Catechisms on the introduction and conclusion to the Lord's Prayer, and also Matt. 20:21–22; Mark 11:20–26; and James 1:5–8; 4:2–10.

²⁰ Note how Jesus Himself holds the Holy Spirit forth as the greatest answer to prayer in our time of need: Luke 11:5–11.

of a righteous person has great power as it is working," James says.²¹ Thanks be to God that by faith in Christ, that means you!

A Simple Way to Pray

LCMS President Matthew Harrison recently released a new translation, in booklet form, of Martin Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray*. In this little book written for his barber, Peter, who had asked him how to pray, Luther begins, as we might expect, with the command and promise of the Lord's Prayer. Even before that, though, he confesses that he, too, could become "cold and apathetic about prayer." Sound familiar? What to do? Luther describes how he warms his heart from God's Word, namely, by saying the Ten Commandments, the Creed, perhaps some words of Christ, or of Paul, or the Psalms — out loud to resist the flesh and devil that want to distract us.²² Our words to God find their source in God's Word to us, as children quite naturally learn to speak from their parents. Hearing God's Word to us, we learn to pray to Him, not only in the babbling overflow of our hearts but crystalizing our needs in terms of His promises and praying confident that He will act. So moved, then, by the Word of God it is time to pray.

We heard earlier how Luther advised Peter to begin his prayer on the basis of the Lord's Prayer, expounding on the words "Our Father" and on the merit of Jesus that opened that Father's ear to him.

Luther then moves through the rest of the petitions, not one upon another without thought, but meditating on what each concerns. "Here there is included in seven successive articles, or petitions," he says in the Large Catechism, "every need that never ceases to apply to us. Each is so great that it ought to drive us to keep praying the Lord's Prayer all our lives."²³ And indeed, this is how he unfolds the prayer in *A Simple Way to Pray*, one

²¹ James 5:16.

²² Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, pp. 6–8.

²³ Luther, Large Catechism III 34, p. 412.

petition at a time. Drawing on his catechism explanations and related words of Scripture, each seed of a petition he causes to bloom into its own prayer.

To take an example, the final petition, the seventh and “sum of all,” “but deliver us from evil,” inspires Luther thus to pray: “O dear Lord God and Father, it is true that this life is full of extreme misery and misfortune, so full of danger and uncertainty, so full of unfaithfulness and wickedness (as St. Paul says: ‘The days are evil’ [Ephesians 5:15–16]), that we should grow weary of this life and should look forward to death. But You, dear Father, know our weakness! Therefore help us travel with certainty through the many evils and all the wicked things, and when the time comes, give us a gracious last moment and a blessed departure from this vale of tears, so that we will not be terrified or lose heart in the face of death, but rather with firm faith, commend our souls into Your hands. Amen.”²⁴

See how Luther milks the Lord’s Prayer for all it’s worth, applying its concise words to life to become a comprehensive comfort! Imagine how rich it is, in the hour of need, to pray “deliver us from evil,” when one has practiced a lifetime of unfolding the words in this way. When he prays, “Hallowed be Thy name,” he imagines those who oppose God’s name and honor, prays for deliverance and pure doctrine. When he prays for his own and his family’s “daily bread,” he remembers prince and farmer and townsman, praying for love and loyalty, weather and harvest. And so on, drawing in all the pressing concerns of his day and being drawn by the prayer’s outline beyond his own daily concerns to his family, congregation, church and world. All these he commends faithfully to his Father’s care, asking with boldness, “Convert! Restrain! Protect! Give! Forgive! Help!”²⁵

Imagine what comfort a person so trained in prayer might be able to expound for a friend or loved one simply from the outline of the prayer, which easily fits in one’s head. Luther does not, of course, intend to prescribe

²⁴ Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 12.

²⁵ Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, pp. 8–12.

a script to be venerated and repeated verbatim as “Martin Luther’s perfect prayer.” It is merely a very worthwhile example of how any Christian, a *theologian*, might pray with the prayer Jesus taught as the basic outline and guide, one encompassed in Jesus’ command and full of His promise.

“I certainly do not,” Luther says, “bind myself to these exact words and syllables. . . . But I do stick as close as I can to these kinds of thoughts and the meanings of each petition in the Lord’s Prayer. It often happens that I get lost in right and good thoughts as they come, so that I do not even say the rest of the Lord’s Prayer. When such rich thoughts come, just let other prayers go and give these thoughts plenty of room; do not in any way hinder them. For in this way the Holy Spirit is preaching to you. His sermon is better than a thousand of our prayers.”²⁶

Discussion Questions

1. The first stanza of Luther’s hymn on the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father, Who from Heaven Above” (*LSB* 766), rounds out the catechism by focusing more on the word “our” than on the word “Father”: “Our Father, who from heav’n above Bids all of us to live in love As members of one family And pray to you in unity” Jesus did not, after all, have us pray, “My Father” Praying *in Christ* gives us access, but it also gives us fellow members in Him. How might this insight shape even your private prayers?
2. What does it mean for your prayers that you are a *Christian* praying? What unique features does a *Christian* prayer have that other prayers to a generic god, or to a God of the Law only and not the Gospel, lack?
3. Sometimes people are puzzled that if God is omniscient (all knowing) and omnipotent (all powerful) and good and loving, we should have to pray at all. Without really answering these philosophical questions, Luther gives two or more reasons for praying when he instructs Peter

²⁶ Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 13.

- how to begin. What are these, and how does the Lord use them to open our lips for prayer?
4. We are sometimes used to praying “Thy will be done” with some disappointment, perhaps as a concession that God knows better even when we really wish we did! How does Luther explain this petition in his Small Catechism, thereby helping us understand our praying (and the struggling that wrenches it from us) in the context of God’s greatest good? How might this impact your praying in a time of trial?
 5. Luther speaks often of praying not simply from the desires of our hearts (which Jesus warns us about, doesn’t He?) but on the sure basis of God’s command and promise. If what comes *out of our mouths* is to be rich in these things, instead of impoverished in our own meanderings, so that we may have well-founded confidence in our praying, what needs to be going *into our ears*?
 6. This session emphasized the connection between prayer and the doctrine of justification, that we are accounted righteous before God (and therefore worthy to pray) “for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake” (Augsburg Confession IV, p. 33). The Augsburg Confession continues: “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted” (AC V). How does our personal devotional life, grounded as it is in faith and justification, connect in theory with what God does for us in the Divine Service? How might we make this connection more concrete in our Monday through Saturday lives?
 7. Often it’s not the grocery list but the catalog of our worries that derails our praying! Sometimes the list of our needs and concerns is so great that we simply rattle them off and become absorbed in them. If we are to cap our prayers with a confident “Amen” — a “So be it!” — ought we let this be the case? Thinking about praying *in Christ Jesus*, who

- taught us to end our prayers that way, in confidence, where can we look to see that God the Father delivers? (Hint: See Heb. 2:6–9.) In what great story can we find plentiful assurance that we can, as Luther says, after our evening prayers offered *in Christ Jesus*, “go to sleep at once and in good cheer” (*Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*)?
8. With all the talk about “quality of life” these days, we might measure even our own worth by what we can do “with our own two hands.” Times come when this no longer works so well for us, and we might be crushed. First, from where does our worth before God really come? Then, if you are frustrated being idled by illness or injury (or know someone who is), what *can you do* that has God’s command as a good and pleasing work and His promise that it will have great power in its working?

Prayer Exercises

- A. Luther offers us an example of how to unfold a prayer from each petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Now it’s your turn! Taking a petition of the prayer (or perhaps assigning them around the room), study up for a moment! Look at the related stanza of *LSB* 766. Remember (or look up) the Small Catechism explanation, or think on the Gospels or a familiar psalm or hymn. What does this petition have to do with Jesus? Then fashion a prayer that addresses *your related daily concerns* in this petition, these words of Jesus, which He teaches us to pray and that the Father promises to hear and, in them, work all things for our good. Remind God of His promises. Pray as a living member of Christ Jesus. Ask Him to act, expecting that He will, and for good! If you’re studying in a group, share with each other.
- B. Now imagine visiting with a friend or family member, real or made up, Christian or not (yes, you can pray *for* those friends, even if you can’t pray *with* them *in Christ* by a common faith), who feels a real need for God’s mercy. Suppose your friend asks you to pray. (Don’t take the

easy out and say, "Pray for yourself, if you want!" That's not what I meant.) Think on how you might explain from the Lord's Prayer how you pray, and what those petitions and the Lord of that prayer also mean for your friend. Fashion a prayer taking into account their needs, as you did for your own. A serious question to think about: are you praying to make your friend feel better, or are you praying on the basis of God's definite promises to listen when we ask Him to act? What difference will this distinction make in your praying? What difference, perhaps, to your friend? Share and discuss!

- C. Now let the Lord's Prayer range even farther. Taking a petition again, now consider "our" needs and concerns, "our" being the whole people of God in Christ Jesus. Consider your brothers and sisters, your pastor or congregation, sister congregations near and far, persecuted Christians and complacent Christians, Christians starved of basic necessities and Christians being choked by the cares and pleasures of this life, Christians you know by name and those whose needs you can only imagine from the news or the Scriptures. Pray, as Psalm 122 implores, for the "peace of Jerusalem," that is, the heavenly one, our mother, the Church. Every congregation has worries! What can worries do to the life of a congregation if the devil gets ahold of them? What does God mean for us to do with them instead? What might the Holy Spirit do for us in these straits through such regular practice in prayer for the Church and our fellow Christians?
- D. As we pray for one another (and even for ourselves and our own families), it is helpful to have a plan of intercession. The *Treasury of Daily Prayer* proposes one (p. 1306f.), as does *Lutheran Service Book* (p. 294). How might you use the petitions of the Lord's Prayer to help you remember to pray for the needs of others (and to acknowledge and pray for your own true needs) throughout the week?

Session II: Ever a Child and Pupil of the Catechism

Hymn • “Lord, Help Us Ever to Retain” (LSB 865)

“Lord, help us ever to retain The Catechism’s doctrine plain As Luther taught the Word of truth In simple style to tender youth” (LSB 865:1). This little hymn-prayer implores God not only to help us remember these foundations of the Christian faith in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, Confession and Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, but also to continually reshape our lives in their terms by His Holy Spirit. This was certainly a lifelong reality for Luther. From his studied acquaintance with these precious texts, he provided explanations for us that are themselves worthy of memorization and use as proven springboards for our own devotions.

Yet even Luther, who was skilled enough in the doctrine to compose such concise, precise and memorable explanations, says this of the catechism, which he never outgrew: “Yet I act as a child who is being taught the catechism. Every morning — and whenever I have time — I read and say, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Psalms, and such. I must still read and study them daily. Yet I cannot master the catechism as I wish. But I must remain a child and pupil of the catechism, and am glad to remain so.”²⁷ In the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Sacraments, there is a profoundly rich summary of the whole Christian doctrine, of Law and Gospel, and of the Means of Grace, which give us the confidence to pray as God’s forgiven children.

Prayer as earthly access to a heavenly treasure

Luther, therefore, does not limit his inspiration for prayer to the Lord’s Prayer only, but he provides in *A Simple Way to Pray* a key to open this

²⁷ Luther, Large Catechism Preface 7, p. 353.

treasure of doctrine, teaching, to enrich our faith and our praying.²⁸ In fact, Luther intended his catechisms to be not simply books for Christian instruction, but devotional, prayer works. Of all Christians, but especially all pastors and preachers, he says, “They should daily exercise themselves in the catechism, which is a short summary and epitome of the entire Holy Scriptures. They should always teach the catechism. . . . These pastors are now released from the useless and burdensome babbling of the seven canonical hours of prayer. I wish that, instead of these, they would read each morning, noon, and evening only a page or two in the catechism, the prayer book, the New Testament, or something else in the Bible. They should pray the Lord’s Prayer for themselves and their parishioners. Then they might respond with honor and thanks to the Gospel.”²⁹ Such an orientation toward study in the Christian doctrine and God’s Word, and then the prayer that flows from it, would be good not only for pastors!

The Ten Commandments and the Fourfold Wreath

In the second part of Luther’s *A Simple Way to Pray*, he moves on from the Lord’s Prayer to consider the other two of the first three parts of the catechism, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed. In each, he demonstrates a simple and flexible but also quite useful model for prayer that President Matthew Harrison has abbreviated with the acronym “I.T.C.P.” So that his prayers may be as “completely free of distractions as possible,”³⁰ focused on the Word of God and hearing it as Law and Gospel, and then responding with prayer in terms of God’s definite commands and promises, just as we did in the Lord’s Prayer, Luther makes “a wreath of four strands out of each commandment:”

²⁸ “Treasure” is a carefully chosen word. When the *Treasury of Daily Prayer* was released in 2008, its name followed in a long tradition of “prayer treasuries.” The word “treasury” or “treasure” comes from the Greek *thesaurus* — a word also borrowed to name books for those seeking just the right words. Thus, “treasury” or “treasure” is a fitting word for a book that helps us find just the right words with which to pray.

²⁹ Luther, *Large Catechism Preface 1 and 3*, p. 351

³⁰ Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 16.

“*First, **I**nstruction:* I read each commandment and consider what it is teaching me, as intended by the commandment, and think about what God is so earnestly demanding of me.

*Second, **T**hanksgiving:* I use the commandment to thank God for something.

*Third, **C**onfession* of sin.

Fourth, I use the commandment to say a **P**rayer using these or similar words.”³¹

Here, as with the Lord’s Prayer, Luther finds a way to slow us down and get us to contemplate familiar words from God’s Word, instead of just rattling them off. *A Simple Way to Pray* provides worthwhile examples, worked out in this way, for each of the Ten Commandments (Luther combines the last two). (For these examples, see the book!) Luther suggests he was in the custom of beginning at the first commandment and moving through the rest, as he had time or inclination, again noting that “If the Holy Spirit should come and begin to preach rich, enlightened thoughts in your heart, give Him the honor and let these kinds of fixed thoughts go. Be still and pay attention to the Holy Spirit’s thoughts, for He can do far better than you . . . as David says in Psalm 119:18: ‘Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.’ ”³² What matters is not so much “getting through a devotion” as Luther has outlined it, but hearing from God in His Word, applying it to our situation and finding sound words, in God’s promises, to pray.

Yet, Luther’s outline is generally quite helpful in getting us started from not our thoughts, but the Spirit’s. With each commandment, Luther moves through the four strands of the “four-fold wreath,” an outline that keeps the meditation focused in a particular aspect of God’s Word or

³¹ Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 16.

³² Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 18.

Christian doctrine drawn from it, while progressing from hearing to application to prayer.

Instruction is the first strand of Luther's wreath. What does this Word of God teach? What does God mean by these words? As these are commandments, what does God expect of me? In order to "consider [our] place in life according to the Ten Commandments," as Luther's Small Catechism advises all Christians to do when preparing for confession, we must be schooled in the Ten Commandments.

Here you might say, "Who doesn't know the Ten Commandments?" Yet, a consistent obstacle to our devotional lives is that we consistently underestimate what God can say in a few words. Luther doesn't, and he teaches us not to. "It must be true," he says, "that whoever knows the Ten Commandments perfectly must know all the Scriptures [Matthew 7:12]."³³ Likewise, "what, indeed, is the entire Book of Psalms but thoughts and exercises upon the First Commandment?"³⁴ Think on that! Have you really understood, then, even the First Commandment, let alone mastered it? Luther teaches us here a healthy modesty before the majesty of God's Law, but he also points us toward understanding. If the Psalms are a bit much to bite off to begin to understand just the First Commandment, Luther's Small Catechism explanations and Large Catechism sermons on the Ten Commandments also are excellent starting points for opening our ears to hear the fullness of what God is saying. As our mothers told us, we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. And we must hear from God before we can speak meaningfully to Him.

In his "instructions" on the Ten Commandments, Luther often clearly relies on his catechism explanations or pulls in a bit of Scripture here or there that unfolds, or at least relates to, the commandment at hand. Perhaps if your devotions are in the setting of a service with a Scripture reading or psalm,

³³ Luther, Large Catechism Preface 17, p. 354.

³⁴ Luther, Large Catechism Preface 18, p. 354.

you can contemplate how the text (or another familiar Scripture) sheds light on or shows the value of the Law. You might even crack open your Small or Large Catechism and learn from Luther to learn from the Word of God. After a sufficient bit of such instruction, having figured out what God is saying, Luther suggests we move to thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving receives the instruction, here the commandment, as good and thanks God for it. (Although “P” for “pray” comes last in the sequence, the praying really starts here!) Thanking God for *commandments* in itself might seem surprising. We more often resent, it seems, that God’s commandments put a crimp on our options, even that they call us to repent when we’d rather do our own thing or think ourselves successes!

But “the law is good, if one uses it lawfully.”³⁵ It is good for us that God “threatens to punish all who sin against these commandments,” because fear of punishment alone can curb evil. By these commandments, God draws a line around our bodies and families, our things and reputations. It is also good that God shows us our sin now, so that we may repent and be driven to the joy of the sure forgiveness of sins, to the blessedness of the certain justification in Jesus’ blood, now, before it is too late. It may not always be fun that the Law makes us repent, but it is unquestionably good that it drives us to our Savior. It makes us sinners, so that He may make us saints. And it is good, moreover, that God does not leave us to imagine and invent good works for ourselves or to determine in our yet-confused state what is good and what is evil, but He continues to guide us by His Law. It is good that He works by the Law and His Holy Spirit to sort out in us what we sometimes cannot, the good from the evil, the new from the old. It is good that through the Law, He brings us to the Gospel, to strengthen the new Adam and drown the old; through the Law, He instructs us as to what good works truly are, which love and serve our neighbors, and what is just blowing pious smoke.

³⁵ 1 Tim. 1:8.

For all this we do right to give thanks! So take the commandment and turn it around in your head. Consider its good uses — for and against you, and then *in* you, in your new life by faith in Christ, as doing what comes naturally to the new Adam, who lives by faith. Thank God for *all* of this. It is a good way to begin our prayers — not for reasons of politeness or courtesy, as if we must thank before we ask — for Jesus did not teach us to say “please,” remember. But because when giving thanks, even when forcing ourselves against our own fleshy inclinations to give thanks, we are put into a mode of receiving good things from God. We confess that He gives only good presents. As with instruction before, don’t be afraid to borrow a thanksgiving here or there. The copyright office has no branch in heaven, and God gives His Word to be used, to teach us a new vocabulary and a new way of speaking. A psalm, a proverb, a passage from the Gospel or a benediction of Paul, maybe even some Luther, all might help you crystalize what is worthy of thanks in a thing you’re not too gushingly enamored of, yet that you believe is good because God gave it.

There are presents you got as a child, I imagine, that you gave a forced thank-you for at first, and then came to value later, realizing that they were truly worthy of thanks. So Luther encourages us to “open our eyes to the Law,” to confess with God that it is good, to give thanks for it — even if its work at first is to kill us — so that we may behold “wondrous things” in the Law — even its end, the Most Wonderful One, who is Christ for us.³⁶ And such thanksgiving is a good preface to prayer.

Confession is the next strand, the confession of our sins and unworthiness. We have given thanks for what God has given. Now it is time to confess how we have bungled it. Confessing sin is an art to be commended but that is rarely well practiced. The fifth chief part of the Small Catechism and the Lutheran Confessions rather assume (I should say, they do not *demand* but do *assume*) that Christians will examine themselves according

³⁶ Rom. 10:4.

to the Ten Commandments and confess the sins that trouble them to a pastor, who will absolve them. What comfort to the conscience, and also what an opportunity for its instruction! For often we feel guilty for things that are not sins (such as doing an unhappy but just duty) or fail to come to grips with what is really *sinful* in our obviously sinful acts, so as to be strengthened consciously to try to put it away. Confession and Absolution is more than feeling generally bad, then feeling generally better. A confessor can be of immense help in such things, besides his chief purpose, which is that you can hear the Absolution, as by Christ Himself, spoken over the very sins that weigh you down. Still, the vast majority of us make do the vast majority of the time with the general confession and absolution, and take comfort that it is perfectly valid.³⁷

Having, though, sought instruction in God's Word and given thanks for the Law for its protecting us from our neighbors and our neighbors from us, for its pointing out our sins of commission and omission, thought, word and deed, we are prepared to make a good confession of our sins. What does that sound like? It is one thing to say, "I am a good person who did a few bad things," and another to say, "I am a poor miserable sinner, but I can't think of anything in particular I did wrong." Well, the latter is vastly better than the former, but neither of these is terribly good or terribly good for you.

The "good person who did a few bad things" is not a Christian, for Christ saves only sinners and justifies only the ungodly. So we should confess like we mean it: we are poor, miserable sinners, and who will rescue us from this body of death but Christ? At the same time, don't be satisfied to be a

³⁷ As we said with expanding the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, this kind of devotion is not to *replace* the thing itself, but it does hopefully help your faith hang on to the fullness of what God is giving. Imagine if you have so examined yourself through the week, how much more the general confession on Sunday morning will mean to you, or receiving the Lord's Supper "for the forgiveness of sins" when you have thought on a list of them in all their ugliness and struggled to be free in Christ, by His forgiving Means of Grace! (Or for that matter, spending some time with your confessor, your pastor, to speak into his ear, as into Christ's tomb, your sins, and to hear your Lord Christ speak, with borrowed mouth, the Absolution to your real guilt.)

sinner on paper only; to say, “Yeah, I’m a sinner; yeah, I’m forgiven; hooray!” and then go on without contemplating or grieving your actual sins (yes, I guarantee you have some you ought to notice), confessing them and praying the Holy Spirit to change you by actually taking them away.

Luther’s examples are rich and instructive here, both to confess the full depth of the problem — that we don’t just have sins, but are thoroughly sinners — and to begin to identify the breadth of the pool of actual sins we slop about in, to pray for the Holy Spirit to amend our sinful lives. Do this with boldness, putting off sins as a glutton picks up food at an all-expenses-paid, no-holds-barred buffet. For here Christ has picked up your tab. Your sins are no good, not to you, not to anyone. And the Law is good, all of it, when used lawfully — that is, when it finds its end in Christ, in the forgiveness of sins. Scour the smorgasbord. Check every tub. Leave no commandment unturned. Take seconds where the need strikes you. Pour out your sins with certainty in the forgiving God; beg for grace, knowing it will be given. Make the most of it, not, as we are in the habit, the least!

Prayer is the final strand of Luther’s braided wreath, and it ties the whole together, placing the bundle squarely in our gracious God’s care. Of course, we have been praying for a while now, giving thanks and confessing sins. But now is the time to pray as we prayed in the Lord’s Prayer for God to act, praying with the boldness of children asking their dear Father, confident that He will hear us and come to our aid, according to His promise.

As we said with the confession of sins, we ought not be absorbed in the trees or so removed from the forest as to recognize only a green blur. Deal with the concerns known and near to your heart, of course, but do not neglect the comprehensiveness of God’s promises and action, either. Couched in Instruction, Thanksgiving and Confession, this Prayer sums up our need (even needs that we perhaps only learned to notice in the course of instruction, thanksgiving and confession, and indeed the needs of our family

and congregation, community and confession, nation and world) and calls upon our Sustainer, our Savior, our Sanctifier to act.

Luther's concluding advice is well stated: "These are the Ten Commandments, treated in fourfold fashion, namely as a little book of instruction, a little book of thanksgiving, a little book of confession, and a little book of prayer. From this a heart will come to its senses and warm to prayer. But watch out that you do not bite off everything, or too much, right away and thus make the spirit weary. Likewise a good prayer should not be long, nor should it be drawn out, but prayed often and fervently. It is sufficient if you work through one point or part of another so that you can kindle a flame in the heart. Now that will, and must, be given by the Spirit, and He will continue to instruct our hearts, if they are cleared out and emptied by God's Word of foreign things and thoughts."³⁸ This may well be the best summary of what is needed in guidance for personal devotions: a routine, a discipline, which will get our "foreign things and thoughts," the choking cares and pleasures of this world,³⁹ out of the way of the Holy Spirit's work by the Word and His cry in us, as response to every need, that for Christ's sake, we are the Father's dear children.⁴⁰

The Apostles' Creed and the Sacraments and beyond

Luther, of course, does not leave off with the Ten Commandments, but proceeds to the Creed, where I.T.C.P. functions just as well, seeking instruction on what God is teaching us about Himself, giving thanks for all His benefits, confessing how we have not lived as those who rely on this God as the good giver of all good things, even our righteousness before Him and temporal and eternal life. Luther's prayers in this final part of *A Simple Way to Pray* are for a strong faith to regard God — the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — as our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sanctifier, and by that faith, so to live toward Him and toward our neighbors. So Luther advises us to work through

³⁸ Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 27.

³⁹ Luke 8:14.

⁴⁰ Rom. 8:15–17.

the Creed, in its various articles, as we have through the Ten Commandments, finding the strength to pray from what the Holy Spirit leads us to confess there, the identity and working of our God Himself.

And there is no good reason to limit I.T.C.P. to these parts of the catechism, although Luther leaves off there, probably figuring he has given us sufficient examples.

What of Baptism, the next chief part, which has many great and glorious promises, which is explained and unfolded in God's Word in working and effect, which both Luther's catechisms expound with marvelous comfort? Luther says, "Therefore, every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to do all his life. For he has always enough to do by believing firmly what Baptism promises and brings: victory over death and the devil [Romans 6:3–6], forgiveness of sin [Acts 2:38], God's grace [Titus 3:5–6], the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts [1 Corinthians 6:11]."⁴¹ There is instruction, for which we can be thankful, against which we have grievously sinned, but in which God's power is ever working and ever accessible to our prayer, if we know for what to ask. I.T.C.P. can open this treasure chest also to you, day by day. Likewise, with Confession and Absolution and the Lord's Supper — indeed, with the Psalms and the whole of the Scriptures. It is a simple key, I.T.C.P. — Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, Prayer — but the treasure chest it can open for you, day by day, is vast.

A few thoughts about the setting of our prayers

In the previous session, we mentioned the danger that our personal prayers can fall apart into times in which we're not so much asking God to address our concrete concerns in terms of His concrete promises, but simply rehearsing all our worries and doubts and fears. Luther's suggestion that our prayers be grounded in and, in a sense, organized around the Lord's Prayer and the other parts of the catechism can be a great aid. If we want the Holy Spirit to stir our prayer and direct it, what better way than to seek Him

⁴¹ Luther, Large Catechism IV 41, p. 427.

where He promises to be found, in God's Word, in the doctrine of Christ — especially as the chief doctrines are bundled neatly up for us and connected together in the catechism?

Also very helpful can be using a form for our personal devotions that sets them off from the routines (or crises!) of our day. A regular time can be helpful, and it ought not be put off for every pressing concern. "It is this kind of thinking that will have you believe something is actually better, or more important, than prayer."⁴² Although it is sometimes true that "he who actually works, prays twice" (read on in Luther), prayer itself is a good work, with both the command and promise of God, and may well be the highest priority thing we have to do!

The *Treasury of Daily Prayer* includes several options for services of daily devotions, as does *Lutheran Service Book* (pp. 294–298). Very simple forms for morning, evening and mealtime prayer are included in the Small Catechism. These set forms, although they certainly do not need to be followed inflexibly, create a context for God's speaking to us and our speaking to Him. Any of them would be a fine setting to handle the divine treasures of God's Word through Luther's I.T.C.P. routine. And the routine of such a setting can be especially helpful in helping sustain, in the midst of busy and often confusing lives, a regular family time of meditation on and instruction in God's Word and of prayer.

Published plans of intercession (as found in the *Treasury of Daily Prayer* or *Lutheran Service Book*) can broaden our perspective when praying, to pray seriously for the needs of others as well as ourselves and to put the needs we sometimes perceive as most urgent in the perspective of the divine will and plan, which is for our greater good. A prayer like the Litany, purified by Martin Luther from medieval forms (*Lutheran Service Book*, p. 288; *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, p. O-53), also is very helpful in this regard. President Harrison has recently encouraged its use in Lent, perhaps leading to

⁴² Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, p. 6.

an increase in its familiarity after (in most places) a significant period of disuse. If you have a chance to read through this magnificent responsive prayer or to incorporate it into your devotions, you will notice how it puts our cares (and those of our neighbors) into twofold perspective: First, in terms of the great needs we perhaps rarely think of, “From all sin, from all error, from all evil; From the crafts and assaults of the devil; from sudden and evil death; From pestilence and famine; from war and bloodshed; from sedition and from rebellion; . . . Good Lord, deliver us.” And then, in terms of Christ’s great work for us, “By the mystery of Your holy incarnation; by Your holy nativity; By Your Baptism, fasting, and temptation; . . . Help us, good Lord.” In this way we are drawn in our praying to comprehend the greatness of our need, and so truly to pray as the “beggars” we all are. At the same time, we are drawn also to rest in the greatness of Christ’s salvation, and thereby truly to rest.

These time-tested forms, drawn from the Scriptures and the prayer habits of generations of believers gone on to glory, function much in the same way as Luther’s I.T.C.P scheme (remember what those stood for?) to deliver our prayers from the domain of our spiritual poverty and to ground them firmly in the richness of God’s Word and the Spirit’s working through it.

Three things make a theologian, and you are a theologian

Luther, commenting on Psalm 119, says that three things make a theologian (and every Christian is to be this sort of theologian): *prayer*, *meditation* (in God’s Word) and *affliction*. Afflicted by trying to live as Christians⁴³ in a fallen world and with our sinful flesh, we are driven to pray for the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴ That prayer propels us into meditation on God’s Word, where the Holy Spirit is with promise.⁴⁵ And what we find there strengthens the new man in us again to face affliction, which drives us again to our knees

⁴³ John 16:33.

⁴⁴ Luke 11:13.

⁴⁵ John 14:23–27.

in prayer . . . and so on, until Christ takes us home, along the way of faith.⁴⁶ This study has aimed to equip you especially to make that crucial transition, in this cycle of the Christian life, from the urge to pray to searching God's Word for His true counsel and sustaining promises, and finding them in richness. And this is, I propose, a healthy part of how the God who has redeemed us by His blood and commanded us to pray and promised to hear us works "all things . . . together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."⁴⁷

Discussion Questions

1. Luther describes himself as "ever a child and pupil of the catechism." And he wrote it! We are surrounded by words that teach *anything but* the pure and saving doctrine of the Six Chief Parts. Taking each part (and perhaps having a catechism handy), think of a few challenges to the faith the catechism expresses. (For example, prime time TV programs suggest [against the Ten Commandments] that happiness is to be found in promiscuity, and the commercials suggest that our identity [against the Creed and Lord's Prayer and Baptism] is to be found in impressing our girlfriends or boyfriends with the things we can afford to buy.)
2. How important is it, given your observations in #1, to give "the Catechism's doctrine plain" a chance to work on us each day, to bring us back around to what God would have us hear about good and evil, about who He is and is for us, and who we are in Him? How do you make the catechism a part of your life — or is it yet?
3. Identify some of the obstacles to your personal devotions or praying. Do you find time, or do these things get displaced by "more important" or "more interesting" things? What did Luther have to say about this? How have you been able to see that you have time, quality

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition*, in *Luther's Works*, 34:285f.

⁴⁷ Rom. 8:28–30.

- time, in meditation on God's Word and in prayer that soundly rests on His promises, instead of floundering in our problems?
4. What are the four parts of Luther's "wreath of four strands," which we can use to direct our prayers according to the Word of God? Where does he suggest effective praying begins? In us or in God's Word? Not that such a process is necessary for prayer to be heard, but how does Luther's suggestion help us have the confidence in praying that we had in praying the Lord's Prayer and putting our "Amen" — or "Yes, yes, it shall be so!" — to that?
 5. The life of the Christian flows from the Word and the Sacraments, and it draws back to the Word and the Sacraments. Personal devotions do not replace gathering together to receive the Lord's gifts from the Lord's ordained representative, rejoicing with and encouraging the whole body of Christ. The study suggested one way that daily devotions can help enhance (rather than replace) our participation in the Divine Service and our reception of these gifts (by helping us to prepare for Confession and Absolution). How else can daily devotions in the catechism and prayer enrich your congregational life, in worship and also otherwise?
 6. What are the three things that Luther says make a theologian? How do they work together in a cycle? What important part does doctrine (the catechism, for example) play in the Christian life and in prayer? How do you keep it functioning, as round and round you go? Or put another way, what does the catechism have to do with the stress and suffering, puzzles and problems of your daily life? If the answer is "not much," how can daily devotions with it be made to change that, so that your confidence is grounded ever more firmly on the "rock" where Christ gives His Church to stand secure, the confession of the true faith?

Prayer Exercises

- A. Now it is time for practice in I.T.C.P.! Take one of the Ten Commandments or divide them around the room, and perhaps set a time limit for the exercise.
- a. Take a piece of paper and write down in a few words what the commandment teaches or demands. Use the Small Catechism if you need help. (And if you only come up with a meaning that condemns other people and not yourself, guess what, you haven't got it all yet!)
 - b. Then write down a brief thanksgiving. Give thanks for what is good, even if it hurts. Give thanks for how the commandment protects you from your neighbors, your neighbors from you and you from yourself. Give thanks for how the commandment protects the means through which God protects order and the means through which He saves. Give thanks, for the Law is good, even though you can't fulfill it; give thanks because it drives you to Christ, who does.
 - c. Now look back over your instruction and thanksgiving and write a confession of sins. Get to the depth of your sinfulness, but also do not neglect to confess your *actual* sins of thought, word and deed, of doing and leaving undone. For you agree with God that the Law is good and that your sins are bad — and you want to be rid of them, right?
 - d. Finally, thinking on instruction, teaching and confession, pray. Pray for the Holy Spirit, for faith, for strength. Pray for protection and deliverance, for mercy and consolation. Pray calling on God to make good on what the commandment has revealed of His nature. Pray calling on God to keep His promises to you for Christ's sake, who has fulfilled the Law on your behalf. Pray as a child, confident that your Father in heaven will

hear and do. And don't forget to affix your "Amen," built on God's command, promise and instruction: "Yes, yes, it shall be so!"

Now share a few of your prayers with the group, if you wish, or share a few things you have learned. Don't expect it to fit perfectly the first time. Give Luther's shoes a while to break in on your feet (no, I don't know what size he wore). At least think about trying to walk a mile or two in them, trying this at home or with your family or friends — or get your pastor to give you some ideas. Even if you don't wind up using it just as Luther gave it — he won't be offended — time in God's Word, seeking instruction, giving thanks, making confession and praying for aid certainly won't hurt you!

- B. Now try it again, but this time with the Apostles' Creed (or Nicene). Take an article, or even a part of one. There's enough in the "was made man" to make a good prayer. What is the *instruction* here? What does it mean that the Son of God became man? Why did He do it? What did it accomplish? What does it mean that a man who knows our sorrows and just how much we can bear sits at the right hand of God, ruling all things, and is still with us, God and Man, our Immanuel? Then, how can this instruction not flow forth in *thanksgiving*? And on the heels of that, what do we have to *confess*? Have we lived as if God didn't know how it was to be a man? Have we neglected our neighbors, whose likeness Christ also shared? Have we despised the body and blood of Christ, given for us at such a price, in the Sacrament? Then, *pray*. Pray for the God-man, Jesus Christ, who was crucified for you and risen and ascended, to keep His promises from God's right hand, to sustain you by Himself, to bring you where He is.

Try it out! Share your prayers, or what you learn.

- C. Now dig even deeper into the treasure chest. Try I.T.C.P. with Baptism or one of the other parts of the catechism, or perhaps with a familiar

Bible passage. You might also choose one of the lessons or psalms from this past Sunday's service or from the one to come. Share what you discover, and think on how such a routine might multiply the good things you receive on Sunday through the week. Think on how it prepares you to receive what your pastor is there to give in even fuller measure — or how it might give your family an opportunity to gather and grow in a simple but helpful way in the Word of God.

For Further Study

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