

## What Do Lutherans Believe About Prayer

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Proper 10C 07 | Luke 11.1-4

### Series Intro

This summer,  
we're exploring your responses  
to the sentence: What Lutherans Believe about . . ."  
It's not too late to make your suggestion  
on a yellow communication card!  
This morning, we're going to tackle  
what Lutherans believe about prayer.

Let me start out by saying this:  
What do Lutherans believe about prayer?  
We're all for it! And more than that,  
we believe that prayer works!

In 1988, researchers at San Francisco General Hospital  
showed that prayer makes a difference.  
Cardiologist Randy Byrd took a group of nearly 400 patients and divided them  
into a "prayed-for" group (192 patients) and  
a "not-prayed-for" group (201 patients).  
All the patients were victims of heart attack, heart failure and other cardiac  
problems in the coronary intensive care unit. Patients, doctors and nurses did not  
know which group  
patients were in.  
Prayer group members were scattered around the nation  
and given only the first names,  
diagnoses and prognoses of patients.

The prayed-for group had significantly fewer complications  
than the unremembered group.  
And fewer members of the prayed-for group died.  
The not-prayed for group was five times more likely  
to develop infections requiring antibiotics,  
and three times more likely to develop a lung condition,  
leading to heart failure.<sup>1</sup>  
A 1999 study by Dr. William Harris at St. Luke's Hospital  
in Kansas City, Missouri, demonstrated a similar trend  
among the 1000 patients it studied.<sup>2</sup>  
What we claim by faith can also be shown empirically:  
prayer makes a difference.

Our prayers, themselves, can take many forms.  
Perhaps you can relate to some of them.

Children often pray the most honestly and directly:

- Debie prays: Dear God: Please send a new baby for Mommy. The new baby you sent last week cries too much.
- This one is from Jimmy, aged 6: Dear God: Who did you make smarter? Boys or girls? My sister and I want to know.
- I appreciate Lois' prayer – she offers one that says it like it is: Dear God: Please help me in school. I need help in spelling, adding, history, geography and writing. I don't need help in anything else.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps you could offer this prayer tomorrow morning:

*Dear God, So far today I've done all right.*

*I haven't gossiped. I haven't lost my temper.*

*I haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish or over-indulgent.*

*I'm very thankful for that.*

*But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed,*

*and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help. Amen*

### **What is Prayer?**

There's something exquisitely luxurious about room service in a hotel.

All you have to do is pick up the phone

and somebody is ready and waiting to bring you breakfast, lunch, dinner, a chocolate milkshake –

whatever your heart desires

and your stomach will tolerate.

Or, dial another number

and someone will come running to clean your shirt

or press your dress.

I often wonder if this isn't

one of our fondest images of what prayer is.

We have created God in the image of a divine bell hop.

Leads to the popular misconception of

prayer as **room service** in a hotel,

and best of all, you don't have to leave a tip.

Everything is charged to that great charge card in the sky.

Let me suggest that prayer is something other than this.

Prayer is simply **a conversation** between two friends.

Have you ever noticed when you're talking

with a close friend or loved one,

sometimes you'll start a sentence

and the person you're talking with will finish it?

Often, wives and husbands will do this;

so will close friends.

Well, that kind of intimate conversation

is what prayer is like, only between us and God.

Our kids don't start out talking like that,

with full sentences and understandable grammar.

It takes some practice and some learning.  
So does our prayer life.

Sometimes, the biggest **stumbling block** to praying  
is simply **doing it!**

If you've been in worship services very much  
you might think that prayers need to be like poetry –  
perfectly crafted sentences that rhyme  
and have no more than a certain number of verses;  
a sort of liturgical iambic pentameter.  
I suppose that's just one sort of prayer,  
but it's certainly not the only kind.

In fact, God's promise is even more incredible.  
Even when we don't know exactly what to say  
or how to say it,  
God **understands** the innermost **cries** of our hearts.  
The apostle Paul reminds us of this  
when he writes to the Romans,

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness;  
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,  
but that very Spirit intercedes  
with sighs too deep for words.*

Romans 8.26

Prayer is a conversation, but it's also **surrender**.  
Surrender to God's will and cooperation with that will.  
Perhaps we might think about it this way:  
if I throw out a boat hook from a boat  
and catch hold of the shore and pull,  
do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore?  
Prayer is not pulling **God** to my will,  
but aligning **my will** to **God's** will.

### **How Shall We Pray?**

As we reflect on our life of prayer, Jesus encourages us  
to be **honest** and **real** with our prayers.  
Jesus reminds us of this  
when he tells his disciples of every age:

*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 others.*

Matt 6.5

We don't need to impress others  
as the Pharisees were trying to do.

The Pharisees were religious leaders who would stand on the street corner, literally and raise their hands and their face to the sky and carry on in this very public way, trying to impress other people. Jesus says don't be like the hypocrites; like the actors in the Roman theater who are just putting on a show for the crowds. Be real, be honest.

When I need something from Karen, I don't go to her and say, "O Thou most honored of women, I need some money for groceries if thou wilt bless it to me." No, I just go, "Honey, I need some money for groceries." I just talk to Karen because we have a love relationship. When you come to God, be honest. Tell God what's really on your heart. Just talk to God as you would a dear friend.

Jesus also gives us a model for our prayers. This is from Matthew 6:9-15 and our Gospel reading for today, Luke 11. It's commonly called the Lord's Prayer. This prayer, Jesus said, *is how you should pray* – not the sum total of what we should pray. He's giving us an illustration of things we can use in our prayers, not just this one specific prayer to pray.

There are **SIX PARTS OF PRAYER** that are revealed in the Lord's Prayer.

### **PRAISE - I BEGIN BY EXPRESSING MY LOVE TO GOD.**

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*

When we come to prayer

we begin by expressing our love to God.

I start by saying: Lord, I want to focus on You.

If I come to prayer focusing on myself and my needs first,

I just leave prayer more depressed and frustrated than when I began.

But if I come to prayer with the attitude

that my focus is on God, what I can see of Him,

what I can learn of Him, what it is that He can show me then I'm going to have the right perspective.

Two kinds of praise we're told to do.

First of all is **adoration**,

which is praising God for who He is, His character.  
The second is **thanksgiving**,  
which is praising God for what He has done.  
We need to do both of those  
when we come before the Lord –  
    thanking Him for who He is and  
    thanking Him for what He's done.

**PURPOSE - I COMMIT MYSELF TO GOD'S PURPOSE AND WILL FOR MY LIFE.**

The next part of the Lord's Prayer says,  
*Your kingdom come, Your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.*  
This part of prayer is our acknowledgement  
that God is God and we are not.  
At this time in prayer  
we pray for God's will to be done in our families  
and in this congregation  
and among our friends and in our city.  
This is where we invite God to do  
whatever God needs to do in our life.  
We claim Romans 12:2

*Offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God,  
dedicated to his service and pleasing to him.  
This is the true worship that you should offer.*

**PROVISION - I ASK GOD TO PROVIDE FOR MY NEEDS.** What needs do I pray about?

Absolutely every one of them.  
There is nothing too great for God's power to take care of,  
and there's nothing too insignificant for His concern.

Paul encourages us this way when he writes,

*Don't worry about anything  
but in everything by prayer and petition  
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Phil 4:6

Why? Doesn't God know what I need?  
Why do I have to go and talk to Him about it?  
I say a little more about this in a minute.  
Of course God knows what we need.  
But prayer is our personal  
declaration of dependence on God.  
When I come to Him I'm saying,  
"I'm totally dependant upon You, God.  
Not because of what I can work for

or what I can earn by my smarts or by my ability,  
but I am totally dependant on You for my needs.”

### **PARDON: I ASK GOD TO FORGIVE MY SINS**

This part of the Lord’s Prayer says,  
*Forgive us our sins.*

When I come to God with an honest heart,  
He will reveal places that there is sin in my life.  
But God does more than just shine the light of divine perfection on us;  
God also mends what is broken in our lives and in our relationships, restoring us  
as God intended.

*If we confess our sins,  
God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins,  
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

1 John 1:9

When we talk about forgiveness  
we need to accept the fact that  
we don’t have to live with guilt.  
We may not always act or think the way God wants us to,  
but God’s nature is to forgive and to make whole  
when we come to God asking for that healing touch in our lives. Everything that  
we confess to God  
can be forgiven and wiped clean.

### **PEOPLE: I PRAY FOR OTHER PEOPLE**

The Lord’s Prayer says,  
*As we forgive those who sinned against us.*  
Timothy tells us this in his letter:

*Pray much for others; plead for God’s mercy upon them,  
give thanks for all he is going to do for them.*

1 Timothy 2:1

An important part of prayer  
is remembering that God is working in the lives of the people we pray for  
even when we can’t see it.  
If there’s someone you’ve been praying for,  
for a long time and you don’t see any evidence of change,  
you want to give up. Forget it.  
Prayer doesn’t really work.  
There’s no point in it.  
I don’t know why I’m wasting my breath.  
Scripture says pray much and plead for God’s mercy.  
Give thanks for all he is going to do for them.  
Be assured that whoever it is you’re praying for,  
God is working,

even though you can't see the evidence of it.  
I am never given permission to stop praying for someone.  
I am to pray until God has either changed me,  
changed the situation, or changed the person.  
Keep praying.

## **PROTECTION: I ASK FOR SPIRITUAL PROTECTION FROM GOD**

*And lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from the evil one.*

Matthew 6.13

We, as believers, face a spiritual battle every day  
and Satan wants to defeat us through temptation and fear.  
If I start every day without praying for God's protection  
I'm walking into battle unprotected.  
Ask God to make you aware of evil in this world.  
If you're unaware of it, you can get caught by it,  
you can get involved in it  
before you even know what's going on.  
But if you ask the Lord to make you aware of evil  
and tempting situations, you can fight it.

Two faith questions related to prayer:

### **If God knows everything, why should we pray?**

If prayer is a matter of bending God's will to ours,  
then it's true – why bother?!  
But I believe prayer is really about  
**aligning** our **will** with **God's** will for us  
rather than convincing **God** of our needs.  
That's how I understand what Luther's writes  
in his explanation of the petition  
"thy will be done" in the Lord's Prayer:

*To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself,  
without our prayer, but we pray in this petition  
that it may also come to us.*

*Small Catechism*

Sometimes our act of praying – whether one time or 20 times – is a way for our hearts to soften and for our agenda to change if it was wrong in the first place.

Frederick Buechner on Prayer:

*According to Jesus, by far the most important thing  
about praying is to keep at it. Be persistent –  
not because you have to beat a path to God's door  
before he'll open it,  
but because until you beat the path*

*maybe there's no way of getting to your door.*<sup>4</sup>

Author George McDonald offers another perspective on this when he writes,

*Why pray, if God loves us and knows all we need before we pray? What if he knows prayer to be the thing we need first and most? What if the main object in God's idea of prayer be the supplying of our great, our endless need—the need of himself? What if the good of all our smaller and lower needs lies in this, that they help drive us to God? Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other needs; prayer is the beginning of that communion.*<sup>5</sup>

We need to have an intimate relationship with God, and God knows that the best way for us to accomplish that is for us to be in regular prayer contact with God.

For God's prevailing power is released into the lives of those who pray.

Someone has said that when we work, we work; but when we pray, *God* works.

Skeptics may argue that answered prayers are only coincidences, but as an English archbishop once observed, *It's amazing how many coincidences occur when one begins to pray.*

Second faith question related to prayer:

### **What About Unanswered Prayers?**

We don't pray very long before we're faced with a dilemma: what about those times when God doesn't answer our prayers? What about the person for whom we pray who isn't healed?

If the request is wrong, God says "**No.**"

Old Testament example: 2 Sam 12.15-16,22-23

New Testament example: Matthew 26.36-39

If the timing is wrong, God says "**Slow.**"

Old Testament example: Gen 15.2-6; 21.2

New Testament example: John 11.3,6,14-15,17,43-44

If the person is wrong, God says "**Grow.**"

Old Testament example: Number 14.26-45

New Testament example: James 4.3

If the request, timing and person are all right, then God says, "**Go!**"

Old Testament example: 1 Kings 18.36-39 (cf. James 5.17-18)

New Testament example: Acts 12.5-7,12-17

Ours is a God who delights in answering prayers.  
It may take longer than we'd like.  
Or the answer may not be what we want to hear.  
But God **always** answers our prayers.

This poem attributed to an unknown Confederate soldier says it beautifully:

*I asked God for strength that I might achieve.  
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked God for health that I might do greater things.  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches that I might be happy.  
I was given poverty that I might be wise.  
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.  
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for —  
but everything I had hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were  
answered. I am among all men most richly blessed.<sup>6</sup>*

As we live with the mystery  
of how God answers our prayers,  
I appreciate Frederick Buechner's perspective:

*Keep on beating the path to God's door,  
because the one thing you can be sure of  
is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting  
prayer,  
the God you call upon will finally come,  
and even if God doesn't bring you the answer you want, God will bring you  
himself.  
And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers  
that is what we are really praying for.<sup>7</sup>*

Amen

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<sup>1</sup>10,000 Sermon Illustrations. (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> 10,000 Sermon Illustrations. (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Downloaded from CNN web site, <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/HEALTH/alternative/01/18/prayer.power.wmd/> (7/23/07).

<sup>4</sup> *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> George MacDonald, *Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome*, K Hughes, (Tyndale,

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1988), 72 as quoted in *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press. 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2000

<sup>7</sup> *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, 72.