

One of the questions our confirmands are asked is, "What is prayer?" The answer is "speaking to God with our words or thoughts." In our Gospel reading a disciple asked Jesus how to pray. How should words or thoughts be addressed to God? Which words or thoughts? What is the attitude we should have? These are things Jesus teaches in our reading today.

He begins by teaching the Lord's Prayer. The reason why the Lord's Prayer is called the Lord's Prayer is because it was the Lord Jesus taught it to his disciples. He is the "Lord" of the Lord's Prayer. Much could be said about this prayer. Each petition is filled with meaning and importance. Like many of the other things we memorize, like the Creed or the liturgy, we do not think about what we are doing. We simply say the words. Thinking about what the words mean is a good exercise.

However, I am not going to do that today. I'll refer you to the Small Catechism for that. The only thing I'd like to point out today is how different this prayer is from what we might otherwise pray for. Certain things seem to come naturally. We pray for more money, better health, to fix this problem or that problem. Jesus teaches us to pray for needs that we probably wouldn't otherwise recognize. We need God's name to be holy to us. We need God's kingdom to come to us. These needs are more important and fundamental than those other things, and yet our attention is more easily directed to those other things. If God's name is holy to us, if God's kingdom is coming to us, then we are sound and fit. The other things are more like window dressing. Wouldn't it be strange to have a house that's falling down around your ears, but to be concerned only about the curtains? The Lord's Prayer teaches first things first.

Then Jesus has an interesting story. There are two friends. One of them has a problem. An unexpected visitor has arrived and he doesn't have anything to eat. So he goes to his friend's house at midnight—a strange time to visit. Nobody goes to another person's house at midnight unless such people are in their late teens or early twenties. Normal people sleep at that time. And he rings the doorbell, waking his friend up, and his friend is not happy. What do you want? He's cranky. Why'd you wake me up?

Jesus then makes this interesting point. Even though he doesn't get up because it was his friend, or because he loved him, he'll still get up and do what was asked because of his friend's impudence. That means he has no shame. He has the gall. The unusualness, the annoyingness of the request, gets the fellow out of bed. You can imagine how he'd grumble as he turns the lights on and rummages in the pantry. "Here: Go away!" But—and here's the point—the guy gets what he asked for.

Apply this to prayer. Be shameless, have the gall, wake up God with your prayers. Even if you make him grumpy, he'll give you what you ask.

This flows nicely into what Jesus says next: **"Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you."** Jesus is urging us to ask, seek, and knock—pray. We might turn these things on their heads. Even in everyday life, if we don't ask, how can we expect to receive? If we don't seek, how can we expect to find anything? If we don't knock, we'll be waiting a long time for the door to open itself.

These words are instructive in another way as well—again, taken from everyday life. Have you found it the case that every time you ask for something it's immediately given to you? Maybe if you were a billionaire or a tyrant you could inspire such greed or fear that nobody would say no to you, but with the rest of us it is not uncommon to fail to get what we ask for. Or sometimes we have to wait. Or ask again.

Or, if you have lost something, do you always immediately find it as soon as you start looking? Looking for lost things can be so frustrating. If you're desperate, you might start looking in the places you've already checked. Maybe you've had the experience that you've taken a break from looking, and after awhile, without trying, your brain remembers something. Then you find it. That said, it's never the case that something that has been truly lost is found without looking.

You might honestly say, "I don't like asking, seeking, or knocking. I want everything to happen when I say so." This has always been the appeal of witchcraft and sorcery. Say the magic words and get what you want. It is a desire to have without effort, without any appeal to God, without any curb to your appetite. The advantage of being a billionaire or a tyrant is that you have so much power that you can do whatever you want. But I've never heard of a billionaire or a tyrant who is truly happy. Without fail they are twisted and perverted. It's almost like the closer one gets to God-like powers, the more grotesque and evil they become.

Obviously, prayer is quite different from witchcraft, sorcery, and control. It is humble and creaturely instead of domineering and willful. Asking doesn't always mean you will immediately receive. Seeking doesn't always mean you will immediately find.

I have prayed for certain things for decades—important things—and I wouldn't say that those prayers have been answered the way that I would like them to be answered. Do I wish that the things I've asked God to change would be changed the way I want? Of course I do! But I'm not God.

Another component to prayer is faith. I believe that God will do what is best for me when the time right. I believe this because I know that he loves me. I know that because Jesus died for me. If my requests and desires are truly good—good for me and good for others—then I have no doubt that he will grant them, but just like when I'm looking for lost keys, I don't know exactly when that will happen. Of course we always want everything to happen now. I suppose we all wish that we were already in heaven. But we are not. We believe in the future reality that Jesus is speaking of when he says: "**For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.**" It will happen.

Finally, at the end of our reading, Jesus makes an interesting argument. He says, "**What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?**" We wouldn't give something nasty, dangerous, or harmful when we have been asked for something good. So, Jesus says, "**If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father—who's not evil—give good gifts to his children.**"—or at least that's the logic of it; that's what we expect. But there was a twist. What Jesus actually said was, "**How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!**" That is not less than what I said, but more.

This is my favorite part. It kind of loops back to the unusual but most important and fundamental things that we pray for in the Lord's Prayer.

Who or what is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is God. Jesus is saying that we can pray for God himself to take up residency within us. What do we know about the Holy Spirit? He is the Lord and Giver of life. He raised Jesus from the dead. He is the resurrecting Spirit. He is the enemy and nemesis of all evil spirits. Envy, greed, wrath, sadness—these bats and owls must take flight when the Holy Spirit comes on the scene. And the Holy Spirit does not leave us as empty vessels. He fills us with all good things that pertain to life, happiness, and joy. The Holy Spirit is at work in Christ's kingdom glorifying God's children and whisking them up into the mind and life of God. This work begins now and continues on indefinitely.

Despite my many words, trying to impress you with the grandeur of the gift of the Holy Spirit, I know that I'm not even touching the hem of the garment. The Holy Spirit is God, after all. How can anyone get that across? Words fail. But Jesus doesn't leave us with mere wishful thing. He makes a promise, and Jesus keeps his promises. **"Ask for the Holy Spirit, and your Father will give him to you."** There is no gift he gives more gladly, and no gift we need more.

So ask boldly. Pray for the curtains, but don't forget the walls, the roof, and the foundation as well. God intends to make *the entirety* of you well, not just the parts that *you* think you would like to change. A loving Father would want nothing else for his beloved children.

