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Practical Advice on Prayer from Martin Luther

MARY JANE HAEMIG

While many are accustomed to thinking of Luther as an insightful teacher, important reformer, and prominent figure in church history, fewer think of him as a pastor, giving practical advice on basic matters of the Christian life. Luther wrote and spoke frequently about prayer. His instructions on prayer permeated his work, occurring in a wide variety of his writings.¹ In all these types of speaking and writing, Luther emphasized that God has commanded us to pray and that God has promised to hear us. Luther also frequently noted that God has given us the words to pray.

Luther saw prayer as an integral part of the Christian life. He consistently advocated that prayer be frequent, bold, honest, and forthright. Prayer's starting place is not the human but rather God—God has spoken, in both command and promise, and has invited, encouraged, and shaped our response. The structure of Luther's catechisms reflects this: He placed first the Ten Commandments, a confession of how God wants us to live. The Apostles' Creed, a confession of what God does for us, follows. Then comes prayer, in the form of the Lord's Prayer, as a response to God's command and promise.

¹Luther commented on prayer in sermons, such as his 1517 sermon on the Lord's Prayer and his 1519 sermon for Rogation days, lectures and commentaries on books of the Bible, his *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), his catechisms (1529), letters, and polemical pieces, to mention a few.

Martin Luther's comments and instructions on prayer permeated his work. Luther sought to build an evangelical prayer practice that reflected the key insights of his theology: just as God redeems the unworthy human, so God promises to hear and respond to the one praying, despite his or her unworthiness.

Luther gave much practical advice on how to pray. He discussed the timing and occasions for prayer, the structure and content of prayers, specific challenges faced by those praying, and even the physical postures involved. A brief look at these is instructive. Though this article does not pretend to be comprehensive, it does hope to whet the reader's appetite to explore Luther's instructions on prayer.

OCCASION AND TIMING

In 1535, Luther wrote a book for his barber containing practical advice on prayer. In *A Simple Way to Pray*,² Luther recommended that prayer

be the first business of the morning and the last at night. Guard yourself carefully against those false, deluding ideas which tell you, "Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that." Such thoughts get you away from prayer into other affairs which so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day.³

This echoes the advice given in his *Small Catechism* (1529) where Luther provided content and structure for a blessing or prayer "in the morning, as soon as you get out of bed" as well as an evening blessing "in the evening, when you go to bed." He also provided prayers for before and after meals. Luther knew that set times and habits of prayer could be helpful to the Christian. Luther advocated daily prayer, as he wrote in the *Large Catechism* (1529):

Therefore from youth on we should form the habit of praying daily for our needs, whenever we are aware of anything that affects us or other people around us, such as preachers, magistrates, neighbors, and servants; and, as I have said, we should always remind God of his commandment and promise. . . . This I say because I would like to see people learn to pray properly and not act so crudely and coldly that they daily become more inept in praying. This is just what the devil wants.⁴

Lack of the habit of prayer can cause one to become inept! In his *Large Catechism* Luther also said that we need "to call upon God incessantly and to drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard."⁵ Note the word "incessantly" in that sentence—Luther thought that frequent prayer characterizes the life of the Christian. Also note that Luther is advocating prayer for something very specific: that God "increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments."

Luther also knew, probably from both his own experience and pastoral con-

²Martin Luther, in *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*) (Saint Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958–86) 43:193–211.

³*LW* 43:193.

⁴*The Book of Concord*, in *The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 444. All citations to the *Large* and *Small Catechisms* are to this edition.

⁵Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 440–441.

versations, that prayer happens in the midst of darkness, both the darkness of night and of despair. Commenting on Gen 15:5, the story of Abraham questioning God's promise and God responding by telling him to number the stars for "so shall your descendants be," Luther writes:

The fact that Abraham is commanded to look at the stars is proof that this vision occurred at night, at a time when Abraham was sighing and lamenting. It is characteristic of sublime trials to occupy hearts when they are alone. For this reason there is frequent mention in Holy Scripture of praying at night and in solitude. Affliction is the teacher of such praying. Thus because Abraham was occupied with these sad thoughts, he was unable to sleep. Therefore he got up and prayed; but while he is praying and feeling such great agitation within himself, God appears to him and converses with him in a friendly manner.⁶

Luther thought prayer in times of distress absolutely crucial and a necessary exercise of faith. God wants to hear our prayer, so much so that he sends events that drive us to pray. As Luther noted in his commentary on Ps 118:

Let everyone know most assuredly and not doubt that God does not send him this distress to destroy him. . . . He wants to drive him to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God's person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious. Without this experience we could never learn the meaning of faith, the Word, Spirit, grace, sin, death, or the devil.⁷

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Luther made clear that he considered the Lord's Prayer the very best of all prayers. He expressed his high opinion of the Lord's Prayer in a number of places. In *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), he wrote:

Since our Lord is the author of this prayer, it is without a doubt the most sublime, the loftiest, and the most excellent. If he, the good and faithful Teacher, had known a better one, he would surely have taught us that too.⁸

In his *Large Catechism* (1529), Luther commented, "[T]here is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it."⁹

While his explanations for each petition of the Lord's Prayer in the *Small Catechism* are well known, less well known is how Luther used the prayer in other writings. In his *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), he turned each petition into a prayer several paragraphs long.¹⁰ He did the same thing (though not with identical content) in his 1535 piece for his barber. He also reported his own experience with the prayer and warned,

⁶LW 3:17–18.

⁷LW 14:60.

⁸LW 42:21.

⁹Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 443.

¹⁰LW 43:29–38.

It may happen occasionally that I may get lost among so many ideas in one petition that I forego the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation.¹¹

Luther focused in particular on what he described as the three chief parts of the catechism—Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, and Lord’s Prayer—to shape prayers

Luther recommended the use of catechetical elements to structure prayers and shape content. In that 1535 piece, Luther reported his own prayer practice and gave concrete advice on what should precede prayer and be contained in prayer. He reported that he said “the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and...some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms” before beginning the Lord’s Prayer.¹² Luther focused in particular on what he described as the three chief parts of the catechism—Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, and Lord’s Prayer—to shape prayers. Writing for his barber, he described how he used the Ten Commandments in this regard:

I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer.¹³

Luther included similar advice for praying the Apostles’ Creed. He thought of each article as leading to our instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer. But he also cautioned against too many words:

Take care, however, not to undertake all of this or so much that one becomes weary in spirit. Likewise, a good prayer should not be lengthy or drawn out, but frequent and ardent. It is enough to consider one section or half a section which kindles a fire in the heart.¹⁴

Luther not only advocated the use of the Lord’s Prayer, he also cited other biblical examples of prayer and encouraged their use. In *On War Against the Turk* (1529), he wrote:

In exhorting to prayer we must also introduce words and examples from the

¹¹LW 43:198.

¹²LW 43:193–194.

¹³LW 43:200.

¹⁴LW 43:209.

Scriptures which show how strong and mighty a man's prayer has sometimes been; for example, Elijah's prayer which St. James praises [Jas. 5:17]; the prayers of Elisha and other prophets; of kings David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jesias, Hezekiah, etc.; the story of how God promised Abraham that he would spare the land of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of five righteous men. For the prayer of a righteous man can do much if it be persistent, St. James says in his Epistle [Jas. 5:16].¹⁵

Luther often cited biblical examples to teach the form and content of prayer and remind his listeners that God does indeed answer. Commenting on 1 John 5:14 ("And this is the confidence that we have toward God, that if we ask anything according to his will, He hears us"), Luther admonished his hearers to devote themselves to prayer, naming David and Jeremiah as examples:

[H]e who desires to pray properly should not pray the canonical hours but should say brief prayers, as David and Jeremiah did, yet in such a way that he is persuaded that he will be heard.¹⁶

Luther rejected the medieval idea that prayer was a good work, the merit of which could be increased by repetition. Luther saw prayer as true conversation with God.

Luther used biblical models to suggest structures for prayer. In his lectures on Genesis, commenting on Lot's request while fleeing Sodom (Gen 19:17–22), Luther gave a short lesson on how to structure a prayer. The three parts of Lot's petition showed "all the requirements of a good prayer."

The first requirement of a good prayer is that it give thanks to God and recall in the heart and in words the benefits you have received from God. . . . In the rules of rhetoric this is called gaining good will, which is best brought about by praise and giving thanks.

In the second place, there is either the complaint or the mention of the need. Lot says: "I am in the greatest dangers if I go up into the hills. . . ."

In the third place, Lot states what he wants granted to him. He says: "I shall flee to the city which is close at hand, and there I shall be saved." Moreover, he enlarges on this request in an excellent manner by giving particulars.¹⁷

Luther used the Lord's Prayer, elements of the catechism, and biblical models to teach both structure and content of prayer. He advocated prayer practices that were not narrow or stultifying but rather drew on the richness of scripture and Christian tradition to shape honest and forthright conversation with God.

¹⁵LW 46:173–174.

¹⁶LW 30:322.

¹⁷LW 3:287–289.

PERSISTENCE OR REPETITION? PRAYER OR MURMURING? WHAT ABOUT GOD'S WILL?

Luther encouraged persistence in prayer. God's command to pray and God's promise to hear produces utter confidence in us—and even encourages a certain brazenness. As Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*:

You can hold such promises up to him and say, "Here I come, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord nor because of my own worthiness, but at your commandment and promise, which cannot fail or deceive me."¹⁸

While Luther encouraged persistent prayer, he warned against rote prayers and mindless repetition. In his lectures on 1 John (1527), Luther complained, "In the past... we did not know how to pray but knew only how to chatter and to read prayers. God pays no attention to this."¹⁹ In his commentary on Ps 118 (1530), he warned:

You must never doubt that God is aware of your distress and hears your prayer. You must not pray haphazardly or simply shout into the wind. Then you would mock and tempt God. It would be better not to pray at all, than to pray like the priests and monks.²⁰

Luther rejected the medieval idea that prayer was a good work, the merit of which could be increased by repetition. He also rejected the belief that repetition would increase the likelihood that God would hear one's prayer. God had promised to hear—no more assurance, no human work or worthiness was needed. Luther saw prayer as true conversation with God. As Luther commented in the *Large Catechism* (1529):

Therefore we have rightly rejected the prayers of monks and priests, who howl and growl frightfully day and night, but not one of them thinks of asking for the least little thing.... For none of them has ever undertaken to pray out of obedience to God and faith in his promise, or out of consideration for their own needs. They only thought, at best, of doing a good work as a payment to God, not willing to receive anything from him, but only to give him something.²¹

To pray in obedience and faith—in response to God's command and revealing trust in God's promise—manifests a relationship with God. To consider one's own needs in this relationship is to assume that God is also concerned with those needs. Luther's comments on prayer always assumed an intimate and caring relationship between God, the giver of all things, and the human.

Luther not only encouraged persistence in prayer, he also encouraged a forthright statement of needs and requests. His explication of the fourth petition, "Give us today our daily bread," in his *Small Catechism* gives a glimpse of all the things for which we may pray. Daily bread means:

¹⁸Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 443.

¹⁹LW 30:324.

²⁰LW 14:61.

²¹Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 443–444.

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.²²

Luther emphasized in a number of places that we are not to prescribe to God the details of how prayer is to be answered. In *On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession* (1519) he admonished:

[Y]our trust must not set a goal for God, not set a time and place, not specify the way or the means of his fulfilment, but it must entrust all of that to his will, wisdom, and omnipotence. Just wait cheerfully and undauntedly for the fulfilment without wanting to know how and where, how soon, how late, or by what means. His divine wisdom will find an immeasurably better way and method, time and place, then we can imagine.²³

But Luther also believed that prayer may include contradicting God and asking God to change his revealed will. Such forthright petitions contrasted sharply with what Luther terms “murmuring.” Luther pointed out that Lot had changed God’s will to destroy the city of Zoar and emphasized the point “for our learning and comfort.” Such a specific request was, for Luther, not “murmuring.”

It is murmuring, however, when we have been offended by a perplexing situation and ask God why He does this or that in such a manner. But, as I have said, we must not be inquirers into the wherefore and say to God: “Wherefore art Thou doing this in such a manner?” We must obey His will; and if anything in His actions offends us, we must pray. Paul calls hesitation doubt. This must be completely excluded from prayer, for it alone is what vitiates prayer.²⁴

Luther pointed his listeners away from contemplating or speculating about God’s purposes and rather encouraged them into active interaction with God—interaction that can include pleading with God and boldly asking him to change his will. Luther advocates that we “direct our attention to promises and examples like those recorded here about Lot. For these things were not written for Lot’s sake; they were written for our sakes, in order that we may learn how to check God’s angry will and to meet God when He shows the rod that is near by.”²⁵

PHYSICAL POSTURES

Just as the whole person lives life, so also the whole person prays. Luther had much to say concerning the words used in prayer, but he also spoke of the physical postures, as well as the intellectual and emotional attitudes, that accompany prayer. Writing in his commentary on Jon 2:2 (“I called to the Lord out of my dis-

²²Ibid., 357.

²³LW 42:89.

²⁴LW 3:291.

²⁵LW 3:291–292.

tress, and He answered me”), Luther asserted this teaches us that “we must above all else pray and cry to God in time of adversity and place our wants before him.” Note the physical actions that accompany this: “Turn your gaze upward, raise your folded hands aloft, and pray.”²⁶

for Luther the whole physical body—both of the individual and of all Christians together—was involved in calling upon God, the postures of the body reflecting the attitudes of the heart and supplications of the mouth

In his commentary on Ps 118:5 (“Out of my distress I called on the Lord: the Lord answered me and set me free”), Luther involved the entire body in praying.

We read: “I called upon the Lord.” You must learn to call. Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself, and do not brood on your wretchedness, suffering, and misery. Say to yourself: “Come on, you lazy bum; down on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!” Read a psalm or the Our Father, call on God, and tearfully lay your troubles before Him. Mourn and pray, as this verse teaches. . . . Likewise Pss. 141:2: “Let my prayer be counted as incense before Thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!” Here you learn that praying, reciting your troubles, and lifting up your hands are sacrifices most pleasing to God.²⁷

Intellectual, emotional, and physical attitudes are intertwined. Notice the physical actions that accompany prayer. First what not to do: sit by yourself, lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Then what to do: “down on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!” Luther mentions another physical action in his opening comment on v. 6 (“With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me?”): “Leaping with spiritual and eternal joy, the psalmist here shows us what happens when his prayer is heard.”²⁸

When he wrote for his barber in *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther specified physical postures of prayer and used them to link the praying Christian to the entire Christian community: “Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing beside you and you are standing among them.”²⁹

For Luther the whole physical body—both of the individual and of all Christians together—was involved in calling upon God, the postures of the body reflecting the attitudes of the heart and supplications of the mouth.

²⁶LW 19:71.

²⁷LW 14:60.

²⁸LW 14:62.

²⁹LW 43:198.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Luther's comments and instructions on prayer permeated his work. Luther sought to build an evangelical prayer practice that reflected the key insights of his theology: Just as God redeems the unworthy human, so God promises to hear and respond to the one praying, despite his or her unworthiness. We respond to God's actions in law and promise when we pray regularly, forthrightly, honestly, and frequently. Our freedom in Christ sets us free to use prayer practices that help us to do this.

Luther preached to congregations, published a prayerbook and catechisms, wrote to his friends, admonished his students, and even wrote to his barber offering advice on prayer. Are we as persistent in teaching prayer? Is this basic conversation of faith important to us? What shall we say to ourselves, our children, and the great numbers of unchurched, concerning prayer and the God who hears prayer? ☩

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