

Prayer. There are few things as associated with the Christian faith as prayer. There are also few things as misunderstood, and with which Christians struggle, as prayer. The basic assumption of many a Christian, what is taught in most popular Christian writings on the topic, is that prayer is something we do by ourselves. It's often explained as our talking to God, it's the part that we have in a conversation, it is up to us. So prayer is made dependent entirely on our willpower, our persistence, and our performance. And that is why so many Christians struggle with praying. Christians who make regular prayer the subject of their New Years' resolution find that, like any other resolution, it doesn't last very long. Because, like any part of the Christian life, if prayer is based on you, if it is just a matter of sheer willpower, self-managed priority and dedication, you will fail.

To understand prayer rightly will change the entire way we think of prayer. Consider how Jesus speaks of prayer in today's Gospel. Jesus speaks of it as "asking." He says **"In that day you will ask nothing of Me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.... In that day you will ask in My name."**

Notice, there is no speaking of a struggle to pray, of its difficulty. Jesus states matter-of-factly that His disciples will ask, they will pray. He does not speak about getting a big number of people to pray for the same thing to "overwhelm" God into answering. He does not talk about praying the same thing so many times or for so many days. The basis of Christian prayer, what gives confidence and certainty, is that it is asked in Jesus' name. Listen again: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.... In that day you will ask in My name."**

Christian prayer is asking the Father in Jesus' name, through Jesus. To ask in Jesus' name is not a magic incantation, words that you must tack onto the end of your prayer in order to be heard by the Father. Rather it is to ask through Him by being united to Him, where you speak along with Him. Here we can ask that most Lutheran of questions: What does this mean?

What is our Lord doing in heaven, right now, from the day of His ascension until Him coming in glory? He is serving as our Great High Priest. To be a priest is to sacrifice. He is our Priest in that He has offered the once and for all perfect sacrifice of Himself on the cross. That is done, He is not eternally dying. But He is still serving as Priest. He continues to offer the sacrifice of prayer. The book of Hebrews tells us that **"He always lives to make intercession"** for us (Heb 7:25). Jesus is interceding on our behalf, presenting our needs before His Father. St. Paul teaches this also. He says that **"Christ Jesus...is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us"** (Rom 8:34). The Lord Jesus is praying for the needs of His Church, even as He did during His earthly ministry. The apostle John says **"we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins"** (1 Jn 2:1–2a). An advocate speaks. It's based on the Latin word *vocare*. It means to call, invite, or summon. It also gives us the word "invocation," which again is an act of speaking. Jesus serves as our Advocate with the Father. He is the one appointed to speak on our behalf, pleading our case on the basis of His perfect sacrifice, His making propitiation, taking away all wrath and punishment for our sins.

What does Jesus pray to His Father for us? We don't have to guess. He teaches us to pray **"Our Father."** And right there, in those two words, is the key to everything about Christian prayer. You address God as Father only because you are in Jesus, the Son. The Lord's Prayer is Jesus' prayer. He alone has the right to address God as Father; He alone has access to Him as His only Son. But you are clothed in Christ in Holy Baptism. Paul says in Galatians, **"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"** (Gal 3:27). So when you pray, you who are united with Christ, who have been clothed with Him, joined to Him, you simply join in on His own prayer that He is praying. Through your baptism, Jesus has made given you His status and included you, brought you into His own relationship with the Father. It is as though you were standing in His shoes, carried on His back. And so your words, because they are Jesus' own words, spoken by Him, are heard by the Father. You pray what your Lord is always asking the Father for you, and He invites you to join in!

So we call it the Lord's Prayer not just because He is the one who gave it, "Here, this is what you say," but because He is the One who is praying this! Here you see the closeness of Jesus to us. He, being God has no need to ask any of these things for Himself, but as a Man, having joined Himself to us to redeem us, He asks for all the things that we need: daily bread, forgiveness, protection in times of temptation, and deliverance from all the attacks of devil, world, and our sinful nature. He asks for the good things His Father has promised to give us.

So the basis of your prayer as a Christian is not your artfulness of verbiage, nor the strength of your faith. It is nothing in and of yourself. It is based on Jesus; what He has done to give you His own status before the Father, what He is always doing for you before the Father, and what He invites you into. The invitation to enter into this prayer is given especially in the Lord's Prayer, which is why there is no service of the Church where it is not prayed, why, if you follow the Catechism's directions for daily prayer, you pray it when you wake up, before and after each meal, and when you go to bed. But all of Scripture invites us to prayer. All Scripture calls us to repentance and faith in Christ. And where there is faith, there is the voice of faith. Just as where there is faith there are the fruits of faith. If there are no fruits, there is no faith. If there is no voice, no speaking with and through Jesus, then you don't have Jesus.

If you struggle to pray, remember that Christ is always praying for you and He invites you to join in on His praying. But also read your Bible. That is where the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith. It is where and how He gives you the words to pray, especially the Psalms. God's word gives certainty to the words you pray. When it is God giving you the words to pray through His own Word, you know it is a prayer that is pleasing to Him. And when you approach the Father through Jesus, when you ask in Jesus' name, you know that the Father is pleased with you and hears you. He has promised to. He does not turn His ear from His beloved Son, and you are in His shoes.

We can sum all this up in no better way than Luther's explanation of the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer: "I should be certain that these petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven, and are heard by Him; for He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us."