A Simple Way to

PRAY

FOR PETER, THE MASTER BARBER

BY MARTIN LUTHER

Translated by Matthew C. Harrison
English translation © 2012 Concordia Publishing House
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A Simple Way to Pray is translated from Eine einfältige Weise zu beten,
volume 10, pp. 1394–1415 of Dr. Martin Luther’s Sämtliche Schriften (St.
Louis: Concordia, 1885) and volume 38, pp. 358–375 of Luthers Werke:
Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1912).

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INTRODUCTION

In his many writings, Martin Luther revealed not only his thoughts but also who he was. And in his writing it becomes abundantly clear that he was a man who not only delighted in prayer but also desperately held on to it as a time to meditate on God’s great and numerous blessings in contrast, and most often in opposition, to the daily assaults of Satan—something Luther called Anfechtung.

For eighteen years Luther prepared tools to train pastors to train parents to train children. Then, in 1535, when asked for advice on prayer by his barber and friend, Peter Beskendorf, the great reformer responded with a letter in which he described his own personal practice of prayer.

At many points in my own spiritual development the writings of Martin Luther have brought me comfort and encouragement. When I am struggling under my own Anfechtung, I recall Luther’s counsel to his beloved “Lord” Katie to recite Psalm 31. Yet of all his writings, none has touched me, or been more fundamental in the development of my own prayer life, than A Simple Way to Pray. In this little work the reformer lays out his simple method of praying texts of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed. It’s brilliant. I call it “I.T.C.P”:

- Instruction
- Thanksgiving
- Confession
- Prayer

This method anchors prayer in the catechism or other biblical texts, but allows the Holy Spirit to prompt thoughts via the Word, which may be chased more freely by the mind at prayer. Praying in the way described by Luther requires a time of solitude and intentionality. It will also require a period of
preparation—perhaps following a brief order of prayer like that found on pages 294–98 of Lutheran Service Book (Concordia, 2006), or the inside front cover of The Lutheran Study Bible (Concordia, 2009).

Prepare to meditate. Find a quiet spot. A comfortable kneeler focuses the attention well, but you will probably find yourself at a table, a desk, or a favorite easy chair. Take a few deep, clearing breaths, and continue to breathe deeply. Recite the Lord’s Prayer. Clear your mind. Pray for clarity of mind and a receptive heart. Now, read the text again, slowly. What words are beginning to jump out at you? What words trouble you? Encourage you? Disturb you? Comfort you? What does this text teach you? What do you have to be thankful for in the text? What can you confess? Now pray.

Let me provide a very cursory example from Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Instruction: Lord Christ, You instruct me here that I am to listen carefully and heed the word of my pastor when he speaks Your Word. The pastoral office is profound; my pastor is not only charged to watch over my soul, but You also call him to account for his service to me. Finally, You tell me in this text that I am to be a joy to my pastor and not a pain, and this for my own spiritual benefit.

Thanksgiving: Jesus, I thank You for my pastor. In fact, I thank You for the pastor who baptized me, and all pastors who have served me in my life as a Christian. Thank You for all the sermons that have clearly shown me my sin and delivered to
me the free forgiveness of the Gospel because of Your sacrifice for me on the cross.

Confession: Lord, I confess that so often I fail to pray for my pastor. I fail to be gracious to his family. I do not pay attention to his preaching. I have gossiped and failed to love and defend him and “put the best construction on everything.” I deserve to have my faithful pastor taken away. Forgive me my many sins, and help me to do better. Help me especially to be a joy to my pastor and to encourage him in his difficult office.

Prayer: Savior, bless my pastor with faithfulness to Your Word. Cause him to grow in knowledge of Your Word. Give him courage and strength for his tasks. I thank You for (name) and for all faithful pastors. Grant success to the work of our seminaries. Bless our professors and students. And give my pastor joy. I ask all this for Your sake alone. Amen.

That’s Luther’s “I. T. C. P.”—Instruction, Thanksgiving, Confession, Prayer. You may certainly read the texts with your family at the table, with your women’s/men’s group, or by yourself, even without using Luther’s method. You can also use Luther’s method as a catechetical tool with your family or others. As you practice it daily, it will become second nature and a great blessing for your meditation and prayer.

I pray this translation of Luther’s little classic will be a profound blessing to you as you pray, and I beg you for your prayers for me and all pastors, for Christian families, and for the Church.

Pastor Matthew C. Harrison
A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY

by Martin Luther

Dear Master Peter,

I’ll do my best to show you how I approach prayer. May our Lord God help us all to do better in this regard. Amen.

First, sometimes I feel I am becoming cold and apathetic about prayer. This is usually because of all the things that are distracting me and filling my mind. I know this is a result of the flesh and the devil always waging war against me, trying to prevent me from praying. When this happens I like to take my little book of the Psalms and sneak away into a little room, or, if it is the right time or day, I like to go to church with other people.

I begin by saying the Ten Commandments out loud to myself, then the Creed, and if I have the time, I like to repeat certain sayings of Christ, or of Paul, or the Psalms, as the children do. This is why it is such a good idea to start your day, first thing, early in the morning, by praying, and then make it the last thing you do at the end of the day. This way you can prevent lying to yourself by saying, “Oh, I can wait a little while. I’ll pray in an hour or so, but first I need to do this or that.” It is this kind of thinking that will have you believe something is actually better, or more important, than prayer, particularly if some emergency demands your attention.

There’s a saying attributed to St. Jerome: “He who actually works, prays twice.” You should understand it this way, that a believing person fears and honors God in his work, and considers God’s command, and therefore, he doesn’t want to wrong anyone, steal, take advantage of, or embezzle anyone. This kind of faith and these thoughts undoubtedly make this person’s work a prayer and praise offering. But, on the other
hand, by the same token, it must be true that a work done in unbelief is merely cursing. The person who works unfaithfully curses twice—once by the thought in his heart and then by the work itself, by which he despises God. He is thinking about how to break the commandment by doing wrong to his neighbor, by stealing and embezzling from him. What are these kinds of thoughts other than vain curses against God and men? When this happens, a person’s work becomes a double curse, and he ends up just cursing himself!

Christ talks about unceasing prayer in Luke 11[:8], saying one should pray without ceasing just as one should ceaselessly guard himself against sin and wrongdoing. Yet this can not happen if one does not fear God and does not have His command before his eyes, as Psalm 1[:2] says: “Blessed the one who day and night meditates on God’s command,” etc.

We have to be absolutely certain that we do not allow ourselves to be distracted from genuine prayer. The devil is not lazy! He will never stop attacking us. And our flesh is all too ready, willing, and able to make us resist the spirit of genuine prayer. That’s why saying out loud the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the words of Jesus, etc. will move your heart and you will realize it is time for you to get down on your knees, or stand, and with folded hands look toward heaven and say out loud, or think: “O, Heavenly Father, Dear God, I am an unworthy, wretched sinner. I do not deserve to lift my eyes and

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1 “I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you . . .” (Luke 11:8–9). “Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18).
2 Luther conflates vv. 1 and 2, and does not even render the text consistently with his own published Bible translation, using the words “Gottes Gebot” (God’s command) instead of “gestetze des HERRN” (law of the Lord). See WA 10/1.106–7.
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, and then do the following:

The Lord’s Prayer: The First Petition

Repeat a part of the First Petition, or as much of it as you want. For example, say, “Hallowed by Thy name” and then say, “Oh, yes, Lord God, dear Father, hallowed be Thy name, indeed! Make it holy among us and throughout the world. Destroy and root out the horrible idolatry and heresy of the Turks, the Pope, and all false teachers and sectarian spirits, who act falsely under Your name and so terribly misuse it and blaspheme it. They boast by saying it is by Your Word and the command of the Church that they are doing what they do, but it is surely the devil’s lies and deceit. This is how they deceive so many using Your name, deplorably leading so many poor souls throughout the world astray. Through their teaching, they are murdering, shedding innocent blood, and persecuting so many, thinking that by doing this they are actually worshiping You.

“Dear Lord God, convert and restrain! Convert those who would still be converted, that they with us, and we with them, sanctify and praise Your holy name, with true, pure doctrine and good holy living. But restrain those who will not allow themselves to be converted, that they cease the misuse, shaming, and dishonoring of Your holy name, and the misleading of those poor people. Amen.”