

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, Lord Jesus Christ and our ever-present Holy Spirit. In today's gospel, we hear about God's grace to us in teaching us how to pray - "Lord, teach us to pray." The Lord's Prayer is another of God's gifts of grace to us. It is one of the greatest treasures of our Christian faith. So let's pray:

In the deepest, spiritual sense, prayer helps us to diagnose our life; so much so that the early church fathers, when greeting each other, didn't ask about health, life, family, or anything else. Instead, they would ask, "How is your prayer?" How we pray, or even whether we pray, says much about who God is for us, our life and concerns, the way we view the world and one another, and about our relationship with God.

Think of the psalms. The psalmist's primary concern is the status of the people's relationship with God. He shows that prayer is more about acknowledging who God is and what God does, than it is about how "well" we pray or leaving a shopping list of requests for him to attend to - as I've said elsewhere, a Coke machine approach to prayer.

So when one of the disciples says to Jesus, "Teach us to pray," we can be sure he is asking for more than a master class on prayer techniques that will elicit a response from God, or how to make his prayer life more "effective." There is a deep longing and desire within him. He has seen Jesus praying. Perhaps he saw Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening. Maybe he heard Jesus say that Mary, not Martha, had chosen the better part. He too wants the better part. He wants what Mary has with Jesus and what Jesus has with the Father. That certainly is about more than words or techniques.

After all, the disciples are good Jews and, just like good Christians, they have been taught the words and techniques for prayer since

they were children. Childhood is when many of us learned about prayer. Yet whether it's taught directly or learned indirectly, I get the impression that what children hear is this: "Put your hands together, close your eyes, bow your head, and tell God what you want. And if you've been good enough, if you trust with all your heart, if you say please and thank you, then God will answer your prayer."

That seems to be what we learn about prayer. I hear it when people talk about prayer or offer their prayer requests. I observe it when I hear young children pray. Some of them apparently perceive that the harder you squeeze your hands and the tighter you shut your eyes the better God hears your prayer! We seem to learn that prayer is a wish-list that we give to God. As a child, my wish list included:

- that God would protect my family;
- that the "boogie man" wouldn't get me;
- that when I went fishing I would catch a lot of fish; and
- that I would someday, get a bicycle to ride.

The problem with to-do list prayers is that they leave us seeking something from God, rather than seeking God himself. I would like to think we outgrow prayer that simply gives God a to-do list. As I listen to people pray, as people bring me their prayer concerns, as I listen to some of my own prayers, it seems that giving God our to-do list has become the predominant way of contemporary prayer. As we grow older often the only thing about our prayer that changes is the content of the list we give God. It usually matches where we are in life – finances, jobs, children, marriages, health, searching for direction and the right answer. We want God to fix our problems, deal with our concerns, and make our life easier and more comfortable. If you listen attentively to a group of people praying, more often than not, you will hear a list of various ailments to be healed, family problems to be solved, and a plea for God to "fix the world".

Don't get me wrong. God is concerned about every aspect of our lives, but the to-do list we often offer God is not how Jesus teaches us to pray in today's gospel. While we are busy trying to align God



with our concerns, Jesus is saying we ought to be aligning ourselves and our prayer with God's concerns. We are to pray according to God's perspective, God's will, not ours. That doesn't mean God is unconcerned or uncaring about our lives, but rather, that the concerns of our lives seem to work themselves out when we surrender to the concerns of God's life.

In Jesus' teaching on prayer those concerns are few and focused:

- Father, hallowed be your name.
- Your kingdom come.
- Give us each day our daily bread.
- Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone indebted to us.
- Do not bring us to the time of trial.

Jesus is not simply teaching us new words or techniques, and certainly not another to-do list for God. He is, rather, giving us a new direction and orientation for our lives. He is calling us to a deeper prayer, to a deeper level of presence. It is a place of being with God, rather than taking from God. It is a place where God himself is the truest answer to every prayer. This way of praying is less about the words we say and more about the life we live.

In Jesus' prayer we are encouraged to approach and relate to God in the same way as Jesus does. We call God – Abba, Father, Daddy – just like Jesus does. We know God as the intimate, loving, caring, Father who never abandons or hurts us. When we have that deeper relationship with God, we no longer have to compete to hallow our own names, but are free to hallow God's name.

Jesus is teaching us to accept God's life, vision, and dream for the world, his kingdom, as our own. If we truly pray "your kingdom come" then we must also pray "my kingdom go". In letting go of our own kingdom, we entrust and surrender ourselves to God. That means we see, speak, think, and behave as Jesus does. And when we do, it becomes natural to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, speak justice for the oppressed, tend the sick - without hesitation.

This life of prayer Jesus teaches, invites us to receive each day as our daily bread. Rather than seeking bread for the day, each day itself is the gift of daily bread. We choose how we will use our daily bread to feed, nourish, sustain, and grow life – our own and each other's.

Our relationship with God is made visible in our relationship with others, and how we relate to others reveals our life in God. Our relationship with God and our relationship with neighbours, friends, family, and our enemies, all of whom are as much God's children as we are, mirror each other. The Lord's Prayer reminds us that forgiveness polishes that mirror.

Finally, we are taught to live with eyes wide open knowing that apart from God, every trial, temptation, or stumbling block is more than we can handle on our own.

When we pray this way, we can have the certainty we seek, and confidence, because we aren't relying on what we are doing and what we think we are entitled to, but on the gracious promises of God. When we pray this way: when we ask, we will receive; when we search, we will find; when we knock, the door will be opened. When we pray this way, God listens and fills our hunger with his Holy Spirit.

May the Spirit of God compel you to believe the Father's mercy, the power of the Son's blood, the willingness of the Holy Spirit to give all things needful, in life now, and for all eternity. Pray often that you may be led by grace to see in Jesus all that you need.

All that's left to say is, Amen! In a translation of Luther's teaching from the Large Catechism, "Amen" is nothing but an expression of the faith of a person who doesn't doubt or pray on the off-chance, but knows that God doesn't lie, because he has promised to give' (Hebart 1983: 161-162).

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.