

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Greetings from the parsonage! I was asked a question following a chapel service a day ago that illustrates the purpose of Lent for us. The question was “What do you think about fasting, pastor?” Like a “good” Lutheran, I referred to Luther’s response. In answering this question himself, Luther explained that while fasting is a good thing to do and should be done from time to time it is not a work which saves us. The same is true of any additional things you are doing in your spiritual life this season of Lent. Jesus Himself encouraged fasting so that no one else could see it, but He Himself came to be our Savior because we could not, and still cannot, save ourselves. So if you are doing an additional or special devotion before bed or when you awake; if you are fasting; if you have given something up for Lent, good for you—just remember that nothing you do saves you. Only the work Jesus was heading to do on the cross could—and has!—saved you.

Praying the Lord’s Prayer this Season of Lent

Last month we began Luther’s section on the Lord’s Prayer in his Large Catechism. We learned how we are called to pray in the Second Commandment; and that prayer is nothing but calling upon the holy name of God in every need. “Prayer, therefore, is as strictly and solemnly commanded as the other commandments (such as having no other God, not killing, not stealing, etc.) lest anyone thinks it makes no difference whether I pray or not, as vulgar people do who say in their delusion: ‘Why should I pray? Who knows whether God pays attention to my prayer or wants to hear it? If I do not pray, someone else will.’ Thus they fall into the habit of never praying, claiming that because we reject false and hypocritical prayers, we teach that there is no duty or need to pray (BoC, p.441).”

It is true that LCMS pastors say many things about prayer or correct a lot of problematic thoughts concerning prayer today. One might hear an LCMS pastor say that prayer doesn’t solve anything; and that one may think that the pastor doesn’t believe God’s command that we are to pray. But what the LCMS pastor is actually getting at is that it is not *our action* of praying which does anything, nor the *prayer itself*—it is God who sometimes acts as we pray that He will and that it is He who solves problems, not the prayers themselves. And that is just one example. Perhaps you have heard an LCMS pastor say something peculiar about prayer, or simply not mention to do it enough (I myself am guilty of this!), and have considered that you have no need to pray; but as we’ll find, Luther shows that God through the Scriptures has a different opinion.

Luther continues: “It is quite true that the kind of babbling and bellowing that used to pass for prayers in the church was not really prayer. Such external repetition, when properly used, may serve as an exercise for young children, pupils, and simple folk; while it may be useful in singing or reading, it is not actually prayer. To pray, as the Second Commandment teaches, is to call upon God in every need. This God requires of us; it is not a matter of choice. It is our duty and obligation to pray if we want to be Christians, just as it is our duty and obligation to obey our fathers, mothers, and the civil authorities (BoC, p.441).”

We’re currently in the season of Lent, going with our Lord Jesus to the cross of Calvary in our readings. But we are at the same time living in a time after Jesus has already completed His mission of going to the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. He has come, died, risen, and ascended. So, too, we have already heard the Word and been brought into faith by the washing of Holy Baptism. At our baptism, we have received the Spirit of God who sanctifies us—makes us holy—both by keeping us coming to be sustained by God’s Word and Sacrament, and by appealing to us by the mercies of Christ to live holy lives, that is, doing good works. So we not only have God’s command to pray and honor authorities and the like, but also His appeal because of the mercies He has shown us in sending His Son to die for you and for me. By God’s Spirit at work in you and me, we desire to do what God wants us to do.

So Luther instructs us: “By invocation and prayer the name of God is glorified and used to good purpose. This you should note above all, so that you may silence and repel any thoughts that would prevent or deter us from praying...*as though prayer were commanded for those who are holier and in better favor with God than we are. Indeed, the human heart is by nature so desperately wicked that it always flees from God, thinking that he neither wants nor cares for our prayers because we are sinners and have merited nothing but wrath. Against such thoughts, I say, we should respect this commandment and turn to God so that we may not increase his anger by such disobedience. By this commandment, he makes it clear that he will not cast us out or drive us away, even though we are sinners; he wishes rather to draw us to himself so that we may humble ourselves before him, lament our misery and plight, and pray for grace and help* (BoC, pp.441-42).”

This season of Lent, may the Spirit of God so work in our hearts that we humble ourselves before God throughout whatever Lenten devotion we are doing—even if it is simply coming to hear the Word—and that we might also begin to or continue to pray to God for His grace and help, for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Your brother and under-Shepherd in Christ,

Pastor Josh