

# **The Christian Day School Teacher's Understanding and Application of Prayer**

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## Introduction

In Jesus name, dear co-laborers in the work of our Lord!

A moment to remember in my early years of college teaching was the day that a student asked, "Why should I pray?" We were reading and discussing one of Luther's writings, when out of the blue came the question, "If God already knows what will happen before I ask and everything happens according to His will, why should I pray?" For a moment I was taken aback. No one had ever asked the question in that way! And while it is not our intention to anticipate the answer to that perplexing problem now, we have little difficulty recognizing that the student was searching for a basic understanding of prayer.

We may have similar concerns in wanting to hear the topic for this session: "The Christian Day School Teacher's Understanding and Application of Prayer." Whether our interest in the subject is for our personal prayer life or for application in the classroom, in either case the subject of prayer reaches into the daily execution of our work. Questions concerning the purpose or practice of praying are therefore vital to us. We find them raised in the first place in our own hearts. As toddlers in the faith we ask in all simplicity, as the disciples did, "Lord, teach us to pray!" Besides our personal interest in prayer, we are also confronted by other sorts of challenges in our open and frank society. We need to face those who seem to be indifferent to religion and do not feel the need to pray. We may even meet those who openly scorn prayer and consider it nothing but a pious form of superstition which is no longer needed. On the other hand, we may come into contact with just the opposite opinion. Many today are seeking to recapture the inwardness of life through prayer, by engaging in forms of meditation, or trying other spiritual outlets to God. And so our own personal needs, as well as our responsibilities, drive us to hear again the lessons of prayer, as they are taught in the Holy Scriptures. There we seek the understanding of prayer, as God would have us learn to know it. The search should offer us an opportunity to handle the subject of prayer, not abstractly in theory, but to examine it personally as Christian people. In turn, we will be able to apply what we have learned to our life and to our work.

### I. The Understanding of Prayer

To begin with, we must remember that we Christians are not the only ones who pray. People from ancient times to the present have bowed their knees, fallen on their faces, or lifted up their hands in prayer. Temples and shrines and churches dot the landscapes of the nations as indicators of worship. We have all undoubtedly seen the slides of somebody who has been abroad. And here is another Buddhist Temple, and here is the Taj Mahal, or the Totem Pole or the Great Spirit. But seeing slides is one thing and witnessing the worship is another, as any missionary will tell us. An article on Arab oil in the October (1975) issue of *National Geographic* carries a picture of Arabs praying in an auto-sales room. The author felt obliged to note in the by-line: "The call of Allah turns an automobile showroom into a place of prayer in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Even in the midst of a commerce that looms ever larger in their lives, the Moslem faithful take off their shoes, unroll their prayer rugs, and kneel toward Mecca in answer to the muezzin's sundown summons." On the other side of the land, who can forget that one of the first acts of the Israelis after the Six Day's War was to bulldoze away the building that obstructed the Wailing Wall and to make it into a large open square for praying? Even militant atheists in Communist countries have not succeeded in stamping out worship. People still pray.

In his work the Apostle Paul recognized that prayer, like religion, is common to all mankind. As he stepped into the market-place in Athens, he came face to face with a great human culture. And when invited, he talked to the Athenians on Mars Hill tactfully, yet truthfully, "I see that in every way you are very religious," he told them. "For as I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I found even an altar with this inscription: To an Unknown God." But Paul was willing to go even farther than this observation. In his talk he may have recalled a line from a prayer to Zeus. The prayer reads:

Most glorious of immortals, many named,  
Almighty and forever, thee, O Zeus,  
Sovereign o'er nature, guiding with thy hand  
all things that are,—we greet with praises thee,  
'Tis meet that mortals call with one accord.  
*For we thy offspring are,* and we alone  
Of all that live and move upon this earth  
Receive the gift of imitative speech.

What an opportunity for Paul to use this sense of God as a contact point for preaching the Gospel! And so he proceeded to identify the unknown God as the God "who made the world," and who "gives all men life and breath," and "determines" their lives. "God did this," Paul says, "so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For (and here he quotes from Epimenides of Crete) 'in him we live and move and have our being.'" And then he adds from the hymn to Zeus the line we read before, "As some of your own poets have said, 'For we are his offspring,'" (Acts 17) So in his mission work Paul knew what the pagan Cicero had already observed.

"No tribe is so barbarious, no one of all peoples so fierce, that the idea of God has not filled the mind. Many people hold depraved opinions about the gods, for this is a common thing, owing to corruption; all, however, believe that there is a divine power and essence." (Tusc. Disp. I)

Paul knew, as we must, that God "has not left himself without testimony" (Acts 14:17). There is in all men a natural knowledge of their Creator. Only the "fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1). Call him Supreme Being, Unknown God, Allah, the Father, men by nature have a sense of God and offer him prayer spontaneously and naturally.

Not all prayer, however, is acceptable to God, Witness the scene on Mount Carmel in Elijah's day. The prophets of Baal and those of Ashtoroth, eight hundred and fifty strong, tested the power of prayer before the people of Israel. The prayer-contest with Elijah was an earnest one. The continuous wail from sunup until noon, "O Baal hear us!" was met with an even louder silence. "There was no voice, nor any that answered." "And they leaped upon the altar!" How the mocking suggestion that Baal was either meditating or on a journey or sleeping must have aggravated the obvious silence. And in frustration the prophets tried to force the god's hand by slashing themselves to give of their own blood in sacrifice. But all to no avail. There was no answer. (I Kings 18)

Yet the unacceptable prayers of the heathen are no different from those of any heart which is hardened against God. The hardened heart which has despised God's counsels and warnings prays either out of fear and despair or in vanity and pride. Think of two men who approach God in prayer. The one is Saul (I Sam. 28). The King of Israel had been used to reliance on God for guidance. Often he had inquired of God through Samuel concerning His will. But Saul's heart had turned from God. And Samuel was dead. When the Philistine army marched

to Gilboa, the King became afraid. In fear and despair he inquired of the Lord in every way he knew how. But the Lord did not answer him, “neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.”

The other was a Pharisee. He has no name. We know him only by parable. But he is representative of a type. This man went to the temple to pray. In a show of righteousness he breathes a prayer of thanks for what he is. “God I thank thee that I am not like other men are!” (Luke 18). Note he thanks God for what he is. But the real burden of his message now comes out. There is no asking God but merely glorying in the differences between his good life as measured against others’ weaknesses. Thanks to God he was not like the scum, the unjust, the prostitutes, or the dirty tax-collector. He did more than God would ever expect, gave more than ten percent to church, deprived himself of food in self abstention. What a man! But oh the Lord’s own judgment on that prayer. Unacceptable! The tax-collector in the back of the room with his simple prayer for forgiveness went home justified rather than that Pharisee.

James puts the whole problem of the unacceptable prayer in a nutshell. He writes, “When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3). Wrong motives! The prayers of men are unacceptable because they are self-seeking rather than God-fearing. In seeking God, men by nature really listen to the counsels of their own hearts rather than setting their trust in the counsels of God. God does not want us to be fooled by the counterfeit, no matter how much it may look like the real. The prophets of Baal were dead-serious. Saul earnestly sought a solution to his fix. The Pharisee approached God in apparent humility. But all their efforts were unacceptable to God. Therefore, in our understanding of prayer, God’s warning needs to be taken to heart:

“But because you refused to listen when I called,  
because no one attended when I stretched out my hand,  
because you spurned all my advice  
and would have nothing to do with my reproof,  
I in my turn will laugh at your doom  
and deride you when terror comes upon you,...  
Insolent men delight in their insolence;  
stupid men hate knowledge.  
When they call upon me, I will not answer them;  
when they search for me, they will not find me.  
Because they hate knowledge  
and have not chosen to fear the Lord,  
because they have not accepted my counsel  
and have spurned all my reproof,  
they shall eat the fruits of their behavior  
and have a surfeit of their own devices;  
for the simpleton turns a deaf ear and comes to grief,  
and the stupid are ruined by their own complacency. (Prov. 1:24-29)

The rest is silence!

How then is God’s silence broken? It isn’t, as far as we can help it. The deafening silence of God’s anger remains as long as we are committed to ourselves, as long as God leaves us ‘go it alone,’ as we have wanted to do since Eden. Every prayer that seeks to break God’s silence is muffled by the silence of God’s answer. We are lost. Yet God himself provided the remedy for this. He himself could not keep silence. His own love moved Him to do what we could never have done by our seeking. He made His name known among us so that we could call on him.

And that name *is* love. For God is love (I Jn. 4:8). He made a record of this love in promise and in Christ. To our fathers He promised, “In all places where I record my name, I will come unto you and I will bless you” (Ex. 20:24). Perplexed, Moses asked for a more precise definition of that name. And God told him, “My name is I AM,”... “Jehovah, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant goodness and truth” (Ex. 34:6f). The God of mercy broke silence finally and for all time by sending His only Son into our world. There He himself pronounced that name clearly and explicitly for us to hear, “This is my beloved Son. Hear Him!” In listening to Jesus, we will hear God speaking. We will know God in truth. For Jesus put the seal on God’s love by dying for our sins. On Calvary God spoke loudly to all men. And what He said is truly good news—“We are redeemed and acceptable in His sight.” By the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead God made both us and our prayers acceptable to himself in Christ.

Here then is the secret of true prayer. It is a response to God’s speaking. Our speaking in prayer is an answer to God’s having first spoken to us. True prayer, therefore, hears God’s Word and in return calls on His name, as He has revealed it to us,—“that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10f). What then is the basic understanding of prayer? True prayer and acceptable in the sight of God is the worship of God in truth. And prayer itself is an act of devotion in which we offer response to God for all that He has done for us. So Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, “Those who worship God must pray to Him in spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:24). Otherwise our prayer is sham. Prayer to Baal was not prayer in truth. Nor, for that matter, is prayer to Buddah, or Allah, or to the Supreme Being of the Deists. These are not gods who have broken silence and spoken to us in love. Those who pray to such gods will hear the silence of God. Their prayer is vain.

Yet even within Christendom dead prayers are offered. We are totally mistaken if we think or teach that prayers consist only in folding our hands and speaking to God. God wants more than words. He wants our hearts. More than words, our entire life is to be a life of prayer to God.

Prayer, you remember, is an offering we bring to God in response for His work. Liturgists have called this offering “sacrificial” as opposed to “sacramental” or that which God brings to us. Not long ago in a discussion I asked whether we bring a sacrifice at the Lord’s Supper. This was not intended to be a trick question, but to make the class aware of our celebration. The idea of sacrifice was rightly repugnant to them, as they thought about reception of the Lord’s Supper. But I reminded them that we do bring a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for what we received. The idea still seemed somewhat Roman, until we recalled that we do not hesitate to sing, “And the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Ps. 141:2). Then all things came into focus. We do offer the sacrifice of praise.

But the Apostle Paul takes even a wider look. He encourages us to offer even more than hands uplifted in prayer to God. To the Romans he writes, “Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). Here Paul understands the essence of prayer. The entire life of a Christian is to be a prayer to God. Prayer encompasses more than my words. It takes in my whole life.

Without listening to God, we cannot truly respond. Without trusting in God’s mercy, we have no real reason to pray and our words are babble. Without repentance, we are dead to God and the activity of prayer is a worthless going through the motions and an abomination to God.

You all remember how God was insulted at Israel's worship and praying. It was not as if the people were not doing anything. The temple was a beehive of activity, people praying, heifers dragged in for the slaughter,—turtle-doves, if you were poor. All this happened in response to God's command. And there was nothing wrong with God's command. But after a while God could not stand the smell. The sacrifices did not have a sweet-smelling savor. They just plain stank. And why? Let the prophet speak:

Your countless sacrifices, what are they to me? says the Lord...

I have no desire for the blood of bulls...

The offer of your gifts is useless,  
the reek of sacrifices is abhorrent to me.

When you lift up your hands outspread in prayer,  
I will hide my eyes from you.

Though you offer countless prayers  
I will not listen.

For there is blood on your hands;  
wash yourselves and be clean.

Put away the evil of your deeds, away out of my sight.

Cease to do evil and learn to do right.

Pursue justice and champion the oppressed. (Is. 1:11ff)

What was wrong anyway? The people were no longer leading the life of faith. Their lives betrayed their prayers. They prayed, to be sure. But their prayers were but chaff; the kernel was gone. Without faith their prayers were a hollow echo of their own hearts. They were listening to themselves and the desires of their hearts alone.

What then is the secret of prayer? It is faith. We pray because we trust God. Our praying is not a matter of being spiritual athletes. It is rather a matter of being thrown on God Who, we have confidence, can and will hear what we have to tell Him, and does answer us. Now that is not easy. To pray is not an easy thing, even as the life of faith is not easy. No one truly knows what prayer is who has not experienced the strength of prayer in the face of trials.

The reason why we can and do pray in faith is not to be found in our natural inclination. But God helps us. Here is the mystery of prayer; that God not only invites us to pray, but at the same time gives us the power to do what He asks. If that sounds odd, it is no different from God's command to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply." God not only gave them the command to have children, but at the same time He gave them the power to fulfill what He commanded. So it is with prayer. God invites us to pray and at the same time gives us the strength to do so. Such is the power of God's Word. Listen to Paul's explanation to the Romans:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Romans 8:26-27)

Since God himself is the author and finisher of our faith and the life of faith we will approach him *in Jesus' name* and pray *according to His will*. What does this mean? I am afraid there has been much confusion in the understanding of prayer at this point. Satan is afraid of our reliance on Jesus' name. Therefore he would try to turn our faith into a vain probing into God's hidden will. Instead of relying on God and committing our cause into His hands in all affairs of life, the devil would have us dictate the terms in our prayer to God. It is a subtle temptation. If, therefore, our prayers are not answered in the terms we had requested, we attribute the failure to

our lack of faith. (Little do we know that God's answer has come to us in a very different way than we had asked and for our own benefit!) Or else we leave ourselves open to the scoffer's jab, "Why do you pray? God does what He wants to anyway." In this way Satan seeks to pervert our faith into a vain imagination of our powers, or he causes us to doubt whether we should pray at all. So he makes us either an enthusiast or a scoffer.

Let me illustrate the problem of understanding the will of God in our prayers. I would like to do this by contrasting the counsel of two men. Both write on the problem. Their names shall remain anonymous. The one says:

We have to learn what God's will is and then pray according to God's will (I John 5:14). This is such an important thing that we put it at the head of the list, not at the tail. If you put it at the tail of a prayer of faith, you ruin the prayer. Have you ever caught yourself doing this? You pray and pray, you put your heart and soul into it, and then you tack at the end, "If it be Thy will." Jesus never did that. "Rise up off your pallet, if it be God's will. If not, then lie there and suffer the rest of your life." That is completely contrary to Jesus' technique. Before He spoke a prayer of faith, He had already determined that it was God's will. What if you don't know whether it is God's will? Then don't pray for it. If you don't know that something is God's will, you have no business praying for it. It would be better then to pray a prayer for guidance and determine what God's will is... When you have discovered that your prayer project accords with God's will, you must enter into it with the confidence that God is with you and that God wants you to carry this through to a successful conclusion. In the Lord's prayer Jesus told us to pray, "Thy will be done." That means that God's will does not get done all the time without our prayers. Otherwise why would He tell us to pray this prayer? In some things we share responsibility for bringing God's will to pass.

Thus far the one author. Now for the other. He starts at the same point by discussing I John 5:14: This leads over to a discussion of an important Bible-passage bearing directly on this subject. I John 5:14 the apostle tells us: "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us." And you might say this is a commentary on the passages we have been considering, in which Jesus has promised us fulfillment of every prayer which is spoken with full confidence. It answers the question for us when we can have full confidence as to the fulfillment of our petition. The reply is, When our prayer is according to God's will. If you have the assurance that God really wills a certain thing and expects you to pray for it, you may pray for it without the shadow of a doubt in your mind as to the granting of the petition, and it will be heard and fulfilled. When we ask ourselves, what are the things that fall into this category and are according to His will? The answer is, all spiritual blessings which we need for our soul's salvation. God has promised them to us, He is anxious to bestow them, and when we pray for them in true faith, they are actually given us... With respect to temporal blessings, as I pointed out before, we cannot pray with the same assurance except for the general conviction that God will do what is best for us. In such matters our vision is imperfect and defective and might overlook grave perils, and hence we cannot arrive at the full confidence that a certain thing we desire is absolutely the only good and proper boon for us under the circumstances. We know that it is God's will to bless us; but this very will of His may withhold from us the thing which we are asking for, because it would work harm to us if we received it. (Arndt, p. 51)

An illustration clarifies what the man means on the latter point:

A Christian business man having climbed to great heights in the financial and industrial world, through no fault of his own is confronted with the peril of bankruptcy. He prays devoutly to be spared such a calamity; but the collapse comes and he loses everything he has in his attempt to satisfy his creditors. To the end of his life he remains a poor man and never again cuts any sort of a figure in the financial world. People who knew with what earnestness he approached the throne of God in the hours of impending humiliation will be inclined to say that God did not hear and grant his prayer. He himself probably to the end of his life, while having unalterable trust that God's ways are right and for our good, will be unable to demonstrate that God heard and helped him at that time. In yonder world the mystery may be unlocked for him, and he may learn that he through his business success had been carried perilously near to the edge of puffed-up conceitedness and self-sufficient pride and that his case required heroic measures, a major operation, which the divine Physician in mercy performed. What is important for us to see is that our failure to discern, distinctly or faintly, the fulfillment of our petitions must not be regarded as proof that they have not been heard and favorably acted upon. (Arndt, p. 43)

Did you sense the difference and difficulty with regard to the question: What does it mean to pray according to God's will? The first man maintained one should not condition one's prayer in any way. A faith-prayer, like a faith-healer, must determine the will of God in all cases before he asks. If he prays in faith, the prayer will be granted. If he cannot determine the will of God, he shouldn't pray. If he does pray and tacks onto the prayer, 'according to Thy will,' he is really doubting. The second man claims that we cannot divine the will of God in all cases. Yet we pray because God has promised to hear us, if we ask anything according to His will. Therefore we must divide the will of God as He has revealed it to us. Where His will is clearly known to us with regard to spiritual matters, we can pray with full assurance that this is what God wants. But where He wills not to be known to us, we must pray with the conviction that He will do His will.

The essential difference, therefore, is that the first man seeks to penetrate the inscrutable will of God and to determine it. Yet this is impossible for us. In praying for temporal things we must flee to God's merciful will. In deepest agony in Gethsemane the Lord Jesus Christ himself—the first man's claim to the contrary—did commend His prayer to the will of His heavenly Father at the end of his prayer, "Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done." And when a prayer for healing was recorded, not as the command of the Savior-God, but as a plea to Him instead, it read, "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me whole." The conditional, 'if Thou wilt,' was not an expression of doubt or uncertainty concerning the prayer itself. It was rather a firm statement of trust that Jesus would do what was best according to His good and gracious will as Lord. Asking according to God's will did not find any particular position at the beginning or at the end of the prayer. As with any true prayer, the will of God *surrounds* our prayer.

This is what it means to ask in faith. By faith we ask, and seek, and knock on the door of God's heart. And He hears our prayer and answers, as He has promised to do. We trust He will not give us the wrong answer and present us with a stone, if we ask for bread. As our Heavenly Father, He is concerned about our welfare, that lesson is the lesson of faith, and it is not an easy one. Remember Job? Job had to learn from sad experience that the God in whom he trusted must be trusted in all circumstances of life, even when he could not understand *why* things were happening to him. The forgiven David was so confident in God's mercy that he even prayed for the life of his child, when God had revealed His will to him that the child of his adultery would die. Before the child's birth David continually pleaded for the life of his son with tears. But when the child was born and died, David accepted the will of God and ceased his prayers.

Luther summarizes why Christians pray with an “if”:

Whatever pertains to our salvation and directly to the glory of God we should ask for in prayer without any doubt, for it is clear that God wants to have His glory and our salvation unimpaired. But when temporal affairs are concerned, God’s will is not so clear. A person may be poor, sick, miserable, and despised and yet be saved, as happens to all Christians. Since then salvation is not affected by the lack of such temporal things but this lack may often produce something good, he who prays for aid and help should certainly believe that God helps and will help. Yet he should make his will depend on God’s will. If the desired help does not serve God’s glory, or is harmful to our salvation, we should be glad to bear the cross still longer. This is praying aright in such matters, namely, believing that God can help and yet not prescribing time, degree, or end to God, how and when He is to help us. (Plass, II, 1099)

Every prayer, however, is not only ‘according to God’s will.’ We also pray ‘in Jesus name.’ In his discourses with the disciples the Lord himself tells us, “You may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it” (Jn. 14:13). And again, “In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you anything whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (in. 16:23f). Just what does it mean to pray ‘in Jesus’ name’? It means to pray in faith. It means, not to pray to some abstract Being called God, but to pray in the name of Him who revealed God to us. It means to pray believing that what Jesus claimed is true, when He said, “I and the Father are one. No one comes to the Father except by me” (Jn. 10:14). For without Jesus we would not truly have known God. “No man has ever seen God; but God’s only Son who is nearest to the Father’s heart, he has made him known” (Jn. 1).

To insist that every prayer must use the word ‘in Jesus’ name,’ however, is not right. The words themselves are a beautiful expression. But they are not a magic wand to be placed over our prayers. The Lord’s Prayer itself does not contain them. Yet it is a prayer of faith from Jesus himself. So it is enough that every prayer must be prayed out of a heart of faith in our Savior. As our Redeemer, His work stands central to our faith, as it also does to our prayers, even though we do not actually think of Calvary when we blurt out in a moment of anguish, “God, help me.” Our heart knows then what our lips do not express: Our help is in the name of the Lord. “So my beloved,” Luther has the Savior say to us, “if you cannot pray in your own name, then pray in my name; if you are not sufficiently worthy and holy, let me have these qualifications.” How wonderful! No personal qualifications needed—intelligence, goodness, wealth, big name, or fame. Beggars or babies can come in Jesus’ name, as well as doctors and princes. God be praised!

But does not all that we have said so far make prayer a vain exercise on my part? We are supposed to let God’s will be, and to pray in the name of another. Where do I come in? Haven’t I been practically eliminated from the process? It all seems like a useless expenditure of energy when I could be doing something that really have results. Reason can conclude nothing else; it’s all fate anyway. *Que sera sera*, “whatever will be, will be.” We may still have the student’s questions ringing in our ears, “If God already knows what will happen before I ask and everything happens according to His will, why should I pray?”

Why should I pray? How easily similar thoughts pass through our minds, so that we become negligent in prayer. In answer, God gives us two basic reasons why we should pray. The first and most necessary reason is *God’s command*. Even if we do not feel the need to pray, and especially then, we should pray out of obedience to God. Here let us remember the Second

Commandment. God wants us to call on His name. In fact, he requires that we do so. If we do not, we are despising His name. Just as He wants us to show our love to our neighbor by obeying those in authority, by honoring another's life and livelihood, so He also wants us to accord Him honor by praying. Indeed, such showing honor occupies a primary place in our life. For we are honoring Him who gave us life, sustains our life, and provides eternal life for us. So this handful of dust who will return to the ground dares to be so presumptuous as to talk to God. The pot dares to address the potter, precisely because God has commanded us to do so. In an interplay of modesty and confident faith, Luther once prayed: "Dear Lord...Let my presumption—that I dare boast in your presence of being God's child—appear as great as it pleases; yet I must be obedient to you who would have it so, that I do not charge you with a lie and to the other sins committed against you add the more grievous ones of despising your command and disbelieving your promise."

Why does a Christian pray? It is an exercise of his faith in God who has a right to command such honor. In review of all that God gives, "clothing and shoes, meat and drink and all that I need to keep my body and life," we rightly conclude: "for all of which *it is my duty* to thank and to praise, to serve and obey Him." God's command gives us the right, yes, the duty to pray.

But God's command does not stand alone. It joins hands also with God's promise. The right to pray is made into a privilege by the promises of God. By them He gives us confidence to pray. Listen! "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find, knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7). "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify Me" (Ps. 50). "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11). These are not idle words. These promises alone are enough to take the fatalistic attitude from our prayers. For our eyes here are turned to view God's majestic and unsearchable will and ways in the light of His all-embracing love, compassion, mercy, and grace.

Not fatalism, but trust in God's merciful justice moved Abram to pray for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in which Lot lived. And God answered that prayer, not by saving the cities but destroying them, since not even the ten righteous for which Abram pleaded were to be found there. Not fatalism, but trust in God's promises led Moses to appeal for God's aid at the Red Sea. The Syrophonecian woman did not feel she was going through a vain exercise when she would not be turned away even though Jesus seemingly ignored her. Called to the bedside of Melanchthon, Luther did not feel it worthless to pray, even though his dear friend, seriously ill, told him, "Why don't you let me depart in peace?" "We can't spare you yet, Philip," Luther replied, and then added in his own inimitable way, "Philip, take this soup or I will excommunicate you." "Kate," he later told his wife, "God returned Melanchthon to life in answer to prayer." In the midst of tragedy, the loss of his wife and children during the Thirty Years War, deprived of his pulpit and livelihood for refusing to use the new liturgy of the Union church, Paul Gerhard could still write a commentary in song on Romans 8: "If God himself be for me" He says:

Though life and limb it cost me  
And everything I own,  
Unshaken shall I trust thee  
And cleave to thee alone. (L.H. 528)

Only the Word and promise of God created such confidence of faith, No Christian would turn that around and make claims on this confidence itself. Christian prayer is not a means of obtaining grace. That would be putting the cart before the horse. We are not bold because we

pray. But God's loving grace gives us the boldness to pray. Call it the foolishness of prayer, if you will. It remains the foolishness of God, who in the final analysis will turn all our smart and sophisticated reasonings on their head. If the Gospel itself is the foolishness of God to the worldly-wise, can we expect the prayers which He commands to be viewed differently? If trust in God's unknown judgments is folly to the sign-seekers, can we really expect them to understand God's promises? So the foolishness of prayer is the Christian way. We pray and we act—and we see no contradiction between them. We know that prayer is not a substitute for our acting. Instead it is a plea that what we do may be in accord with what God wants. This is the very confidence with which Luther went to Worms. He took the step and was ready to go there, if there were as many devils in the city as tiles on the rooftops. But it was not a foolhardy step in his eyes. "The cause is the Lord's," he maintained. "If what I do is right, He will make it prosper. If not, He will bring it to naught."

But while we face the fatalist by showing him that prayer does not make us hesitate to act, we must also confess to the pragmatist that we do not despise prayer in our doing. For the pragmatist wants to convince us that everything depends on our doing, on our action, anyway. You are all perhaps aware of the classic put-down on prayer. The story is of a German Christian, and an American Christian, both soldiers in World War I. Both pray to the same God for protection in battle. Both happen to line one another up in the sightings of their guns. What is God to do? Whose prayer should He answer? Doesn't all in the final analysis depend on their action anyway? So, why pray? There is no easy solution to the hypothetical case, if viewed from our judgments. Who are we to judge with our limited knowledge?—if that is the intent of the story. But behind all, is this not just another attempt to lay blame on the will of God, or to mock Him? One thing is certain. Acting without prayer, whether in the battle of war or in the battles of life, is not the Christian way. We do not despise prayer in our doing, be it in choosing a mate, or toting a gun as a soldier, or teaching little children. For we know that "all things work together for good to them that love God," (Rom. 8) even though the lesson is still being learned. In that confidence we can live and act and conduct our lives.

## **II. The Application of Prayer**

Before entering the subject of applying prayer to ourselves as teachers, and without students in the classroom, I would like to make several observations. First of all, Christianity is very practical and the applications of prayer are so many and varied that we cannot exhaust the subject, lest we become exhausted. For this reason, we will stay with some basics. I trust you will have matters to contribute or questions to ask from your own classroom experience. Secondly, Scripture most often refers to prayer as personal and a private thing. We will need to recognize that 'joint prayer,' or 'public prayer' if you prefer, carries its own set of responsibilities. To lead others in prayer, therefore, needs to be discussed in its own way. With these things in mind, let us look at the application of prayer by considering the form and content of prayer, the teaching of prayer, the manner of praying, the use of prayer in the classroom and the like.

In considering the form and content of prayer, we need to remember that no set form is prescribed and no specific words demanded. Where there is faith in the heart, the prayer will follow. "Out of the overflowing of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12). Since our communication is to God, prayer speaks its own kind of language according to the fervor of the heart. Being spontaneous, our prayers need not be concerned about grammar, punctuation,

complete sentences, or inflection. They are a sort of stream-of-consciousness out of a heart of faith. God understands and the Spirit helps us. The cry of a grateful heart or the sigh of a trembling heart are most pleasing prayers to God. We may often have breathed an unworded sigh-prayer to God without thinking ‘now I am praying.’ It is not false piety to blurt out “Thank God” or “God be praised,” when one experiences good fortune. Like any prayer, when such expressions are done merely for effect and not natural to the heart and conversation, they become a matter of outward show. If so, very pious words become an abomination to God. Let God judge! But I fear we often hesitate to issue such prayers, especially in our open conversation. At the risk of being too personal, let me offer a personal experience. The other day in the Senior *Confessions* course, we were talking about not being able to see faith in the heart. In personalizing that truth, I remarked that some of us could be hypocrites, a thought so awful that I felt compelled to add, “God forbid that it should be so!” Notice how Luther does this very thing in that hard to memorize part of the First Petition. Twice he breaks out, “To this help us, dear Father in heaven!” and “From this preserve us, Heavenly Father!”

Luther also commends the practice of children crossing themselves, when anything monstrous or terrible is seen or heard, and exclaiming, “Lord God, protect us” or “Help, dear Lord Jesus” in the time of need. Such single cries form the basis for our praying together and help to give form to our joint prayers. From the simple and spontaneous “Thank the Lord” of our heart, we join in forming the mealtime prayer: “We thank the Lord for all this food through Jesus Christ, our Lord.” Or, “O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endureth forever.” So in all our praying, no specific words are necessary and no specific order demanded.

Yet from the prayers of the Christian heart, we can detect that prayers generally contain one of three parts or combinations of them. These three are: telling, asking, and thanking. Put into other terms, they are: confession, petition, and thanksgiving. When our heart by faith is moved to pray, the content of our prayer presses for a form. The form, while not prescribed, may assist us in constructing our prayers, especially when we are to lead others. What generally then is the basic form of prayer? Since our speaking is directed to someone, the prayer begins with the *Address*. Then follow our *confession, requests, or thanks*. There is no sacred order. Examples are to be found in many orders. The prayer then may conclude with the *affirmation or assurance* of faith, namely: “Amen,” or “Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

The Lord’s Prayer serves as a model. It follows this order, as recorded in the Matthew 6 version: Address, Petition, Thanksgiving, Affirmation. According to the Luke or shorter version, there is: Address, Petition. In the Small and Large Catechisms Luther, as you may not know, ended his commentary with the Seventh Petition (“But deliver us from evil”) and then finished with the “Amen” and its meaning. The Doxology or thanksgiving portion (“For thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever”) in accord with Matthew’s record was added to the Catechisms in the Nurnberg edition of 1558. In looking at the Lord’s Prayer, therefore, we can learn from the Master’s teaching not only to pray but also the form of prayer.

It may be a good exercise, when teaching the Lord’s Prayer, to have the pupils construct their own prayers in writing. We could suggest the forms to them with explanation: Address, confession and/or petition and/or thanksgiving, affirmation. The *address* can be varied according to the dictates of one’s heart and the nature of the prayer. For the names of God as revealed to us are many. “Dear Father” or “Lord God, our Heavenly Father” fit more naturally to prayers of preservation, guarding, thanking for sending Jesus, requests for the Spirit. For many of these same things, we may invoke Jesus name, “Dear Lord Christ” or the like. Our prayer may be to the Spirit of God, “O Holy Spirit,” thanking of His sevenfold gifts, for love, joy, peace,

longsuffering, and so forth. The *telling*, *asking*, and *thanks* could be related to some Bible story we are studying, referring to some truths that have been drawn from the story and applied to our lives. The Bible text will then be coordinated with our prayers and help to suggest the words of our prayers. How many saints of God have not done just that. Think of the sources of Mary's "Magnificat," drawn from Hannah's song, from the Psalms, and also Malachi. The addition of the *affirmation* would then end the prayer.

Such an exercise would serve a double purpose of the teacher. It would help us to formulate our own prayers—for one never learns a subject more than when one has to teach it. The exercise would also give us opportunities to suggest other areas that can be spoken of in prayer. This is a time to widen our pupil's horizons, and our own, by recalling some of the Biblical instruction in prayer: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority" (I Tim. 2:1),—prayers for all, friends and enemies, Presidents, Secretaries of State, Governors, widows, orphans, the poor and the needy. The Bible is full of such prayers. At the risk of attempting to classify prayers, let me mention the richness of variety that is to be found. In the broadest terms, there are prayers for guidance (Lord, teach me thy ways), prayers of adoration and praise (Lord God, we praise thee), prayers of confession (Lord, thou hast searched me and known me, against thee have I sinned), prayers of supplication and intercession (Help me, O my Savior; or, As this child has now become thy child, we pray). There are also the sigh-prayers and the out-cry prayers (Help me!). Pages 102-109 of our Lutheran Hymnal list forty-nine different kinds of prayer: for the church, for ministers, for health, for the Jews, for enemies, for prisoners, for peace, for the sick, for mothers, etc.—all these besides the occasional prayers, i.e., prayers for specific occasions. Study these prayers. Ask the children to divide the formal parts of these prayers: To whom is the prayer addressed? Is there any confessing or asking or thanking? Is there a word of assurance or affirmation? In regard to the content, what is asked for? How many petitions are there? In the process the children will learn to recognize the infinite variety of praying in addition to the so-called standard prayers at mealtime, bedtime, and in church. They will learn to ask for much and please God in doing so. Luther remarks, "If the richest and most powerful emperor were to bid a poor beggar ask for whatever he might desire...but the fool were to beg only for a serving of common soup, he would justly be considered a rogue and a scoundrel who made the command of His Imperial Majesty the object of mockery... In like manner, it is a disgrace and a dishonor to God if we, to whom He offers and promises to many unspeakable blessings, despises them, ...and if we scarcely venture to ask for a morsel of bread." So much for form and content of our prayers.

Now, the manner of praying. Here, too, as with the form of prayer, the manner of praying is left free. Neither time, nor place, nor posture is prescribed. For this is the wonderful liberty of the Gospel in which we live. We are not bound under a set of regulations, as the people under the Old Covenant. Living with the Gospel is so wondrous that it does not give us the freedom *from* prayer, but the freedom *to pray*, so that our life is to be a life of prayer. The heart that looks to God also knows its own weakness. We look for guidance and examples of Christian prayer to assist us. In our midst, the times for joint prayer are quite standard: at mealtimes, during devotions at school or home, on Sundays at church, or at certain meetings.

The time for personal prayers, on the other hand, may vary. Luther suggests an evening and morning prayer. Bedtime prayers are a favorite with children. Prayers upon rising in the morning may not be as common. The Roman Catholic church leaves the doors of its churches open for the use of the people who wish to find a quiet place for prayer during the day. The time

of private prayer is a very personal thing. We need to examine our own schedules for this purpose and find our time. Not all are in agreement that bedtime is the best time, even though for most the bedchamber is the quietest. C. S. Lewis, the Christian apologist, quite frankly admits his problem: "The condition of the body comes in," he says. "For I suppose a man may be in the state of grace and yet very sleepy. And, talking of sleepiness, I entirely agree with you that no-one in his senses, if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bedtime—obviously the worst possible hour for any action which needs concentration." Luther, on the other hand, used the evening hours for prayer. Jonas tells us of the last month of Luther's life: "We observed that on each of these twenty-one nights, he rose from the table in the big room at eight o'clock or even earlier, went to his little room, and then stood for a good long time by the window. There he said his prayers so fervently that we were, to our surprise, able to hear several words quite clearly. ... Afterwards he would turn away from the window, cheerful (as if he had shed a heavy burden), usually talking to us for another quarter of an hour before going to bed" (Ebon. p.55ff). In any case, morning or evening hours still now the best time for personal prayers. Mine is morning. As an aside, let us not leave children with the impression, that if they do not ask God to forgive their sins before they fall asleep, they are in grave danger. Children worry about such things.

What about the place of prayer? The Biblical instruction of "going into one's closet" is only a guideline in seeking a quiet place. The prayer on the crowded streetcar is no different from the one in the bedroom. Yet the privacy of one's room, where one is undisturbed aids against distraction. In private there is no pretense; just God and we are there. Here, too, the situation of everyone is different. Some may have no room to call their own. They may on occasion sit on a hillside and pray. Christ went to a garden outside the city. Often, time may be the deciding factor.

If one has found a time and place for one's personal prayers, it is of little significance what posture we assume. Custom may decide. The ancient people lifted up their hands and their eyes. Reynold's painting "The child Samuel in prayer" displays this attitude—a fine portrait for any Christian classroom. We today are accustomed to fold our hands or cross them, and to look down or shut our eyes. Others may kneel alongside the bed and cradle their head in their hands. Another, like Luther, may stand at the window. The bodily gestures are ours, and no one is looking but the Lord. So if we are digging in the field, as pictured in Jean Francis Millet's "The Angelus," or lying on our bed, the prayer is not ill done, if the heart prays. The main thing is that we are praying.

Luther's barber, Peter Beskendorf, once asked Luther for a simple way to pray that an ordinary man could use. In response, Luther wrote him a delightful little pamphlet. In it we get a unique insight into Luther's own practice. I used to think it impossible for a man to pray several hours each day. Having heard a portion of the pamphlet, "A Simple Way to Pray," I think you will have a better insight on how Luther was able to do this:

Dear Master Peter: I will tell you as best I can what I do personally when I pray. May our dear Lord grant to you and to everybody to do it better than I! Amen.

First, when I feel that I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other tasks or thoughts (for the flesh and the devil always impede and obstruct prayer), I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself and word-for-

word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and if I have time some words of Christ, or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do.

It is a good thing to let 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...

We must be careful not to break the habit of true prayer and imagine other works to be necessary which, after all, are nothing of the kind. Thus at the end we become lax and lazy, cool and listless toward prayer. The devil who besets us is not lazy or careless, and our flesh is too ready and eager to sin and is disinclined to the spirit of prayer.

When your heart has been warmed by such recitation to yourself (of the Ten Commandments, the words of Christ, etc.) and is intent upon the matter, kneel or stand with your hands folded and your eyes toward heaven and speak or think as briefly as you can:

O Heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward thee or to pray. But because thou has commanded us all to pray and hast promised to hear us and through thy dear Son Jesus Christ hast taught us both how and what to pray, I come to thee in obedience to thy word, trusting in thy gracious promise. I pray in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all thy saints and Christians on earth as he has taught us: Our Father who art, etc., through the whole prayer, word for word... Then repeat one part or as much as you wish, perhaps the...fourth petition "Give us this day our daily bread." Say "Dear Lord, God and Father, grant us thy blessing also in this temporal and physical life. Graciously grant us blessed peace. Protect us against war and disorder. Grant our dear emperor fortune and success against his enemies. Grant him wisdom and understanding to rule over his earthly kingdom in peace and prosperity. Grant to all his subjects grace to serve him loyally and obediently. Grant to townsman and farmer to be diligent and to display love to each other. Give us favorable weather and a good harvest, I commend to thee my house and property, wife and children. Grant that I may manage them well, supporting and educating them as a Christian should... (Luther then goes on with other of the six petitions).

You should also know that I do not want you to recite all these words in your prayer. That would make it nothing but idle chatter and pratter, read word for word out of a book as were the rosaries by the laity and the prayers of the priests and monks. Rather do I want your heart to be stirred and guided concerning the thoughts which ought to be comprehended in the Lord's Prayer. These thoughts may be expressed, if your heart is rightly warmed and inclined toward prayer, in many different ways and with more words or fewer, I do not bind myself to such words or syllables, but say my prayers in one fashion today, in another tomorrow, depending upon my mood and feeling. I stay, however, as nearly as I can, with the same general thoughts and ideas. 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 disregard the other petition, 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...

If I have had time and opportunity to go through the Lord's Prayer, I do the same with the Ten Commandments. 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.

Thus Luther's simple way to pray suggests how we may use God's Word as a basis for our personal meditation and prayer. In that way, no matter what our manner of praying, we have a format for the content of our prayers.

May I close now with words of advice and encouragement to you as Christian teachers in our Day Schools concerning the use of prayer in the classroom. It is perhaps presumptuous to mention the burden of our responsibility over against the children in our charge. I assume we are all keenly aware of this. But the reminder is necessary, if for no other reason than to act as a spur on our flesh: We used to pray for our children, to bring the needs of all in our charge before our heavenly Father daily. If the pastor prays for guidance in presenting the precious truths of the Scripture to the congregation and for his work among them, are we, as Christian teachers, in any different situation? One who prays has well accomplished half the daily task, At 8:30 a.m., when you see those little ones or not so little ones whom you have borne on your heart, as naughty and difficult and trying as they may be, you will remember them as objects of God's love and seek to treat them according to His Word. Our position as teachers is little different from that of a child's sponsors. We do well to apply the counsel given them to ourselves:

"You should at all times remember them in your prayers, put them in mind of their baptism, and, as such as in you lies, lend your counsel and aid. ...that they may be brought up in the true knowledge and fear of God."

In our personal, private praying, let us cultivate the remembrance of our pupils in our prayers with their own specific needs and so mature in praying. This, too, is our responsibility.

The second area of prayer in connection with the classroom responsibilities is, of course, the use of joint prayer in the classroom. Here we, as teachers, have a special charge. Where other Christians, little Christians, are involved in our praying, we must lead and not hinder them. So preparation is necessary. Like the devotion that we conduct, we will meditate on what we are going to say beforehand. Now, here there are three kinds of persons, and even as with preaching, the gifts of the Lord are distributed differently in His church. Some people are readers of traditional prayers, In public prayer they hesitate for some reason or other to compose their own prayers. Or they prefer to use the prayers of those who have more talent in saying things. Certainly there are Christians who have more maturity in praying. We use their prayers. It is only to be hoped that a reader is not hiding behind his own laziness in this most important task, when he reaches for the prepared prayers found in books. On the other hand, one may have the desire but not the ease to construct one's own written prayers. For many, German Lutheran Stark's

*Gebetbuch* was an old favorite. It followed the church year nicely with short meditations and prayers for each day. Our *WELS Meditations* seeks to accomplish this task in our midst. Heads of families use these prayers in their home devotions, and some teachers may do the same in their classrooms, although the meditations are not always geared to the young.

The second kind of person is a composer, He writes out his own prayers and seeks to have them relate to the devotions or to the needs at hand, confessing, petitioning, interceding, praising. Prayers that are self-prepared talk like the individual does. It usually has his personal flair and flow to it. Constructing our own prayers, we will be able in a smoother and more normal fashion to work in such petitions and thanks which are connected to our circumstances. To do this with a prayer-book prayer is more difficult. If you write your own prayers, keep them in a little 3 x 5 loose-leaf notebook for yourselves. You may want to use them again or rework them. In reading any prayer in the classroom, let me encourage you to read in such a fashion that the prayer does not sound read. Since we are talking to God, talk to God, even though it is on the basis of prepared notes.

The third kind of person prays *ex corde*. The term which means "from the heart" may carry the wrong implication that other prayers are not from the heart. An *ex corde* prayer is one which has been thought about beforehand, but more or less constructed on the spot. My father, as many pastors do, used to pray *ex corde* in the prayer after the sermon. What he prayed was related to what he preached. We have all heard such prayers and recognize that they sound most like talking. Not all have the facility to lead fellow Christians in this way. Like our private prayers, *ex corde* praying is an art to be cultivated. Now, we may be all three people, in some fashion or other. I have, for example, often read prayers from the agenda and inserted petitions on the spot.

One important thing to remember, when we are leading the children in prayer, is that in praying I relinquish my responsibility as teacher. If our prayers are really prayers *with* the children, they are not prayers for their instruction. Nothing compels me to step out of my role as teacher and to demonstrate my being equal with the children in a common faith in God, as uniquely as prayer. In praying, I, too, become a child, a child of the Heavenly Father, in whom I trust, just as I am. Here teacher and pupil stand together, beggars before the throne of mercy and grace.

For the pupil, therefore, praying is not the time for instruction as such. While we are edified in praying together and we do learn from prayer, prayer would lose its character as prayer, if it is itself instruction. We are not talking here about the former suggestion of teaching pupils to write prayers. But the prayer, when prayed, is a talk with God. We do petition God, "Teach us, dear Lord." Yet to use prayer, for example, to discipline a child on the spot, shifts the focus from the petition to the offender. And besides, the offender may learn to hate prayer thereby.

Classroom prayer is one of the things that gives our schools their Christian character. Such prayers are not only rising-from-our-seats, folding our hands, and speaking. Hymns, too, are prayers and should be used as such. Some of you may use the litanies as responsory prayers. Whether singing God's praises with the sounds of music or speaking to God in confession and petition, whether telling, asking, or thanking, we are engaging in a joint form of prayer. So our pupils in the Christian Day School, together with you their teachers, are able to live in an atmosphere which bespeaks our trust in God.

Dear Lord God, bless our schools. Make them nurseries of useful knowledge, that they may bring forth the wholesome fruits of life. Amen.