

***Reclaiming Our Christ-Centered Lutheran Devotional Heritage***

***Part 3: Growing in the Gift of Word-Focused Prayer***



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# RECLAIMING OUR CHRIST-CENTERED LUTHERAN DEVOTIONAL HERITAGE

## PART 3: GROWING IN THE GIFT OF WORD-FOCUSED PRAYER<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

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More than anything else, I would like to be good at praying. That's what I have been called to do as a disciple of Christ; that's my basic task as a member of God's holy priesthood. I truly believe that much more is accomplished by prayer than by anything else I do. Yet I must admit that I have been anything but a man of prayer.

A sense of spiritual frustration, coupled with the longing for spiritual fulfillment, is common among devout Christians all over the world. Our disappointment is precipitated by the difficulties that we experience in prayer and in our personal devotional life. Here we experience the biggest gap between the way things should be and the way they actually are. (Kleinig 2008, 151–152)

Who of us has not felt that same frustration about which Kleinig speaks? That “gap between the way things should be and the way they actually are” is indeed often the most intense in our devotional life when it comes to prayer. On the one side are the rich encouragements in Scripture to be praying continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17), to be asking, seeking, and knocking with full anticipation of doors being thrown open to us (Matthew 7:7ff), to know that our heavenly Father will give us whatever we ask in Jesus’ name (John 16:23). Yet on the other side is the sluggishness we so often face when we set out to pray, or worse, our cold resignation to the status quo that doesn’t even bother to lift up our voice.

Yet even in the midst of what may often frustrate us in our prayer life, our Lutheran devotional heritage helps us understand here too that we are dealing with a gift of grace in multiple directions.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is the third of a five part series. The first part of the series (“*Drawing Our Devotional Life from the Gospel*”) sought to explore the gospel-centered approach to personal Word and prayer that has been a hallmark of Lutheran spirituality over the centuries. The next three parts – including this essay - focus one by one on helping us understand a Lutheran approach to the three ways Luther believed God grows a theologian: *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *tentatio*. The fifth part of the series is a resource packet that a pastor can use to plan ways to strengthen his personal time in Word and prayer. That last part also includes books and schedules that some pastors have found useful for their devotional life.

Those who have not read the first two parts of the series are encouraged to do so before reading this essay since there is a logical flow of thought that follows along through all four essays.

## RECOGNIZING A UNIQUELY LUTHERAN CHALLENGE

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Yet before we turn to that key point of prayer a gracious gift in multiple directions, it may also be of benefit to confront what may be a uniquely Lutheran barrier to our use of the gift of prayer.

As Lutherans we are particularly sensitive to the common error in the Evangelical world of making prayer a means of grace. We know that prayer is not the tool by which God's grace comes to us since that is the sole province of the gospel in Word and sacraments.

But as is so often the case in theology, the tendency of human nature is to overreact to a challenge in one direction by falling into the opposite danger. As much as we must maintain that prayer is not a means of grace, yet the opposite danger is that we end up downplaying the rich gift that prayer truly is. In our zeal to keep prayer properly categorized we can end up with the nebulous fear that anyone who is too fervent and frequent in prayer must be a closet Pietist or religious fanatic. By this a proper desire to keep prayer in its proper category ends up unintentionally putting prayer in a protected cage as if it were not one of God's richest gifts to us in this life.

One solution to that mistaken hyper-Lutheranism that downgrades prayer or looks on the importance of prayer with suspicion is to listen to a respected father of our Lutheran Church as he extols the glory of this gift of God to his people. Listen as one of the leading Lutheran dogmaticians, Johann Gerhard, in his devotional book, *The Daily Exercise of Piety in Four Parts*, adds his imprimatur to the words of another Lutheran theologian.

If someone desires to adequately describe the usefulness of pious and earnest prayer, he will, in my opinion, surely find a beginning more easily than he will find a conclusion. For pious prayer, advanced in faith, is familiar conversation with God, and a salutary remedy in all the difficulties of life. It is the key to heaven and the door to paradise. It shows us how submissive we are to God, and is a ladder of ascension to God. It is a shield for our defense and a faithful messenger of the ambassador. It is refreshment in the heat of misfortune, it is medicine during illness. It is a winch, drawing us up to heaven, and a vessel drawing water from the font of divine kindness. It is a sword against the devil and a defense against misfortune. It is a wind dispelling evil and bringing earthly benefit. It is a nurse which nurtures virtuous qualities and a conqueror of faults. It is a great fortification for the soul and free access to God. It is a spiritual feast and a heavenly delicacy. It is a consolation for the dejected and delight for the holy. It grants knowledge of the secret things of God, and acquires His gifts. It upholds the world and rescues people. It is a joy for the heart and a jubilation for the mind. It follows God's gifts of grace and it leads ahead into glory. It is a garden of happiness and a tree full of delights. It quiets the conscience and increases our thankfulness. It sends demons running and draws angels close. It is a soothing remedy for the misfortunes of this life and the sweet smell of the sacrifice of thanksgiving. It is a foretaste of the life to come and sweetens the bitterness of death. The distinguished theologian, Johann Arndt, did well in assembling the long list of terms describing prayer in books, 2, chapter 36, of his book, *True Christianity*. (Gerhard 1998, 13–14)

There is certainly no damning by faint praise here!

## PRAYER: A MULTIFACETED GIFT OF GRACE

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But now let's go back to the key insight this series of essays is seeking to share in each of the three areas of how God grows a theologian. Here that means emphasizing that we also see *oratio* every bit as much as a gift of God's grace — God at work for us and through us — as *meditatio*. And this goes strongly counter to much of what is written about prayer in current devotional literature.

Our sense of failure in prayer is worsened by much of the teaching on prayer in the Church. This teaching implies that if only we were more disciplined and more methodical and more spiritual we would succeed and become spiritual dynamos. Yet, no matter how hard we try, we just can't seem to meet our spiritual goals. Again and again we set out to improve and develop a disciplined practice of regular daily prayer. We might have success for a while, but it does not seem to last. Again and again we fail to achieve our goals, and a sense of disappointment sets in. Others may be good at praying, but we aren't. It may be right for them, but not for us. Worst of all, we feel guilty about our failure to be people of prayer. The guiltier we feel, the harder it is to pray. Satan uses our guilt to undermine our faith so that we give up on daily prayer.

This has been, in part, the story of my spiritual life, a story of disappointment with myself and with my performance, a story that, from my point of view, is marked by much more failure than success. Every time I try to turn my prayer life around, I seem to run out of steam. (Kleinig 2008, 152)

Here again the natural work-righteousness that can plague our whole devotional life, takes root in particular in our approach to prayer. So much of what is taught about prayer in the visible church is but thinly veiled work righteousness that seeks to “cheer” us into greater human determination to being more devoted “prayer warriors.”

Again, even a bit of our unique Lutheran challenge in prayer may creep in here to make the problem worse. The fact that prayer is indeed our speaking to God (and therefore not a means of grace — which is the other direction) can become the errant assumption that prayer therefore must be the fruit of our effort. While prayer is not a means of grace through which God's grace comes to us, yet the power to pray is still God's gift by his grace. If we forget where the strength to pray really comes from, then we erroneously conclude that if we were only “more disciplined” we would be better at prayer. And so we go looking to solve our prayer struggles by human tips, tricks, and techniques that can improve our performance.

What a better path it is simply to confess to God the painful reality of our numerous failures in being men of prayer. Then, grasp the truth that growth in prayer is not a matter of promising to do better in the future, but a matter of believing better how God's grace enables and empowers our praying!

[O]ver the years I have also learned a different story from the Scriptures and my own experience about the gift of prayer. I learned a story of reliance on Christ and empowerment by His Holy Spirit, a story of His success with me in my failures. Little by little, God the Father has used the school of hard knocks to join me with Jesus in His praying and to rely on the prompting of His Holy Spirit, rather than my own resources, in my spiritual life. So I now no longer regard prayer as an obligation, a duty that I must fulfill, but as something that is given to me, something that I

receive from the triune God. The main thing in prayer is a trustful, receptive heart that takes in what God has to offer. (Kleinig 2008, 152–153)<sup>2</sup>

It is just such reliance on the grace of God that can transform our prayer life by taking the monkey off our back (as if we were all about our performance) as we put our hope in God to produce growth in us in using his gift of prayer.

The first way to enjoy the power of grace in prayer is to reiterate what was mentioned earlier in the first essay in this series: Jesus has fulfilled everything that was commanded of us in prayer as well as bleeding for all our failures in prayer. Every prayer during Jesus' state of exinanition not only sought blessings from his heavenly Father, but each prayer was also a vicarious fulfillment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment.<sup>3</sup> And then, we who must confess a record of so often failing to pray even though by faith we already reside as citizens of heaven, know that he who prayed even while suffering hell has paid for every last bit of that guilt too. The first and more important gift to receive in regard to prayer is to hold tightly to the gift of a perfect and spotless record of prayer that belongs to you ever since your baptism! Here too there is nothing left to prove to God!

But the list of God's gifts in relation to prayer does not end with that preeminent gift! In particular, though Jesus' substitutionary prayers in our place have reached their fulfillment with the end of his exinanition, Jesus' ongoing intercession for us (Romans 8:34) at the right hand of the Father is a powerful additional comfort and encouragement. For all the times I have failed to remain constant in prayer for my own needs and for the needs of those entrusted to my care, Jesus never goes silent! I have not been called to be the Messiah of this world, nor have you, that job is admirably filled by him who sits at the Father's right hand in constant intercession for his Church. And if you are ever wondering what he is saying in his ongoing intercession, you can't go too far wrong if you ponder John 17, his great high priestly prayer, and assume that his praying for his believers has not changed much since!

But God's gifts in regard to prayer do not end there! What is the further evidence that growth in prayer depends on his grace and not on us? One of the most common complaints of believers about what stunts their prayer life is the lack of knowing what to say. Here's how two fellow called workers from the South Atlantic District expressed this frustration in their prayer lives:

- "'Creative' prayer in the sense that it is not merely the same thing every day that becomes rote and mindless and eventually leads to praying 'small.'"
- "I don't necessarily feel like I am the best pray-er. I hear other people pray and think... 'Man, that was a great prayer. Wish I could be better that way.' Just don't always feel like I pull together all the thoughts in the best way."

But how short sighted we are to God's goodness and grace whenever we get stuck in wrestling with such frustrations!

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<sup>2</sup> This way of wording the argument sounds a bit antinomian. According to God's law, prayer is a command of God, But after that command leads us to our knees to confess our failures, then indeed it is time to tell the law to get lost as we find in the gospel the power of what is done (in Christ) as well as the strength to imitate him in prayer.

<sup>3</sup> During the 2012-2013 church year, St. Luke will especially call our attention to Jesus' prayer life. Remember: as much as that is a beautiful example for us, it is first and foremost a beautiful, perfect, human obedience in our place that Jesus is rendering as our true brother. For me he lives in the perfect trust of casting all his cares before his Father in heaven!

The Scriptures are our listening post for learning the language of the soul, the ways God speaks to us; they also provide the vocabulary and grammar that are appropriate for us as we in our turn speak to God. Prayer detached from Scripture, from listening to God, disconnected from God's words to us, short-circuits the relational language that is prayer. (Peterson 2009, 104)

Where did we ever get the idea that we have been left on our own to conjure up the words we need to speak to our Father? Every verse of Scripture is not only an invitation to pray; it is a rich gift of the very words to speak back to God in that prayer! To understand this is to shift the burden of “what am I going to say” from ourselves to our God! And he is more than willing to take it! Isn't that what Luther was seeking to teach us as he wove his cord of four strands as he wrote to his barber in ***A Simple Way to Pray?***<sup>4</sup> After urging us to ponder the “what does this mean?” of the Scripture portion before us, each of his next three strands is begging us to turn those words of Scripture into a prayer: a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of confession, a prayer of personal petition and broad intercession. When we recognize that Scripture is handing us the very words to speak back to our Father, then devotional study of Word and prayer becomes the beautiful two-way communication that God always intended it to be! And the beauty is that God's words provide **both** directions of the communication! How gracious is that!

And this gracious jewel of the gift of the very words to say in prayer has multiple facets to its beauty! Whenever you are reading Scripture, and you run across a promise of God, you can do nothing better at that moment than to take those words and turn them into a prayer! Consider the example of that found in Daniel 9.

In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom — in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. (Daniel 9:1-3)

That day Daniel gained more than an enlightening insight into a promise of his God. He gained the words of a prayer to speak to his God. He took that promise of God of deliverance for his people from captivity and prayed it back to God. Like Jacob, he wrestled in prayer, asking God to be faithful to what he had promised. And nothing delights God more than when his children take his promises — and their fulfillment — seriously! Those who take hold of God by his promises find that he cries out “uncle!” very quickly, or, to be more precise, our Abba cries out: “Dear child, of course the answer is ‘Yes.’ Why do you think I gave you that promise in the first place! Of course I will keep it! And I delight in keeping it **for you!**”

Another particular facet of Scripture as our ready source of words for our prayers comes when Scripture hands us ready-made inspired prayers from the mouth of one of his children. As pastors, as we listen to the prayers of Paul for the Philippians or Ephesians, God is handing to us words to pray for the sheep entrusted to our care!

Of course, the preeminent example of this in all of Scripture is the Lord's Prayer, as Jesus himself hands us the words with which we come to our Father. Listen as our Confessions extol the glory of this particular gift to his Church:

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<sup>4</sup> These four strands (four questions) are discussed in detail in the previous essay in this series.

Furthermore, we should be encouraged and drawn to pray because, in addition to this commandment and promise, God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use. In this way we see how deeply concerned he is about our needs, and we should never doubt that such prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard. So this prayer is far superior to all others that we might devise ourselves. For in that case our conscience would always be in doubt, saying, “I have prayed, but who knows whether it pleases him or whether I have hit upon the right form and mode?” Thus there is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it. This we should not trade for all the riches in the world. (Kolb and Wengert 2000, Large Catechism, Third Part: The Lord’s Prayer, 22–23)

But this gift of the very words to pray has one more facet to its beauty. This time he fulfills this promise even when it seems like little if anything escaped our mouths! Even with all the words of Scripture before us, when the struggles of life have so perplexed us that we can do little more than groan heavenward, the gift of beautiful words reaching our Father’s throne is fulfilled in a most astounding way. Even when we are utterly perplexed about what to say, even then beautiful words, interpreted by the Spirit himself, are reaching the throne of our God. Who can fully measure the rich comfort of knowing that even when “[w]e do not know what we ought to pray for,” that “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26)? God’s gift of words to fill our prayers includes this awesome mystery that fills our prayers with perfect words even when words fail us! Such is the gracious gift of prayer!

With each facet of this gift of words to say in prayer, the burden of knowing what to say is removed from us. What a comfort to be able to take our eyes off ourselves and how we are “performing” in prayer and fix them steadily on our Triune God and his promised gifts!

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## PRAYING FOR EVERYONE

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Here it is critical to remember that this rich gift of prayer and the words to speak are not just handed to us for ourselves! Now, it is *not* selfishness at all to bring our requests for our own needs to our God. Consider where Jesus begins in his own prayer in John 17. Yet it would be rank selfishness to end there! How broadly Paul urges us to open the aperture of our prayer lens when he says, “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone” (1 Timothy 2:1)!

But right here, as we live in an interconnected, digital age, there is a temptation lurking to short circuit the biblical encouragement to use our gift of prayer – and the words that go with that gift – to speak for everyone. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is hardly a catastrophe or display of human suffering anywhere worldwide that is not beamed broadband to our television, computer, tablet, or phone screens.<sup>5</sup> That can have a chilling impact on our eagerness to intercede for our fellow man in at least two directions.

In one direction, it can lead to prayer “burn out” if we adopt a Messiah complex that begins to think that the welfare of the entire suffering world ultimately rests on our shoulders, rather than on the capable shoulders of the One who is “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5). If we adopt such a Messiah complex, we will exhaust ourselves in the attempt very quickly.

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<sup>5</sup> This essay is being completed just days after the brutal mass murder at Sandy Hook Elementary School rocked our nation.

In the other direction this exposure to so much human suffering and need can lead us to grow cynical and calloused. We can abuse Jesus' statement that "the poor you will always have with you" (Matthew 26:11) as if that meant that there is almost no use in praying in the midst of so much suffering. We can begin to develop a Teflon exterior that refuses to let almost any of a sinful world's suffering move us.

So what is the answer? How do we use this great gift of intercession for everyone while avoiding the Messiah complex on one side and loveless cynicism on the other?

I do not claim to have solved this challenge. Too often I find myself mired in the muddy ditch of cynicism! Nor do I claim that what has proved helpful to me to steer a middle course must be the same answer for everyone who reads this essay. Yet, here is what has begun to help me to make use of this gift of praying for everyone without pushing Jesus off his throne as Messiah or refusing to care about the hurts of my fellow human beings all around me. For the sake of those who may forever remain unknown to me in this life, but whose earthly need and suffering has just been paraded before my ears or eyes, for their sake there seems to be wisdom in turning the reading or watching of the news into an instantaneous occasion for prayer. Why not carry on a running conversation with the One who alone has shown himself worthy to hold and open the seven-sealed scroll of the world's history (Revelation 5) as that parade of human need runs past our eyes and ears? As the hurt of countless souls is catalogued briefly before my mind's eyes, there is opportunity right then and there to hold up those needs before "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3).

But there are also those for whom God has given me special direction to pray because of my God-given vocations in life. In a special way he has put some in my closest circle of concern (immediate family, extended family, church family) or in my broader family of faith (fellow Christians, especially those of my fellowship). Others he has called my attention to by giving them to me as his representatives (those serving me in the church, or in local, state, and federal government). For those whom God has put squarely into my prayer view finder, there is a blessing in developing a plan. A prayer routine, for lack of a better term, can keep me from neglecting regularly to take words God gives me to hold up those souls with all their cares before the throne of heaven.

Many have endeavored to develop for their prayer life just such a plan and schedule. Some of you may be familiar with the weekly plan for intercession suggested by John Doberstein in *Minister's Prayer Book* which was also adapted for inclusion in *Christian Worship Supplement* (78-79).

For the sake of example I will share an ever-morphing pattern that has helped me greatly in remembering those entrusted to my care as well as others who are God's rich blessing to me. The pattern follows a "weekday" format since I dispense with most routines and scheduling patterns on Saturday, and on Sunday the focus is on corporate worship as the family of God. This is my pattern:

- **Monday is for my immediate family:** this includes my wife, children, children's spouses (prayed for by name if known, or as unknown where a marriage has not yet occurred), grandchildren, their future spouses, great-grandchildren, their future spouses, great-great grandchildren, their future spouses, and great-great-great grandchildren, and their future spouses. (I add "if you let the world go on that long" for those last three generations who have not even begun to see the light of God's day of grace for this world.)
- **Tuesday is for God's representatives in the wider church and in government:** this includes all the congregations/schools that have been a direct blessing to our family, the faculty/staff/students of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and their families, our synod presidium, Conference of Presidents, Synodical Council, workers at our synod administration building, all WELS circuit pastors, and those who serve in local/state/federal government.



- **Wednesday is for extended family on my side:** this includes, siblings, spouses, their children, their spouses, including also all their known and yet to be determined spouses and children.
- **Thursday is for extended family on my wife's side:** this includes my mother and father-in-law, my wife's siblings, spouses, their children, their spouses, including also all their known and yet to be determined spouses and children.
- **Friday is for my current "congregation":** this includes god-children, and my present and former student advisees, spouses, and their children, including also their known and yet to be determined spouses and children.<sup>6</sup>

This pattern has holes yet to be filled and changes yet to be made, and during my parish ministry days it looked quite different, but it allows me to pray for many hundreds of people by name every week. The specific content of what the prayers will be is not determined ahead of time, since the prayers are drawn from the words of Scripture that will be pondered on that particular day. In particular for individuals, the basic pattern followed when praying for each one, one by one, is this:

- **Praying for their relationship to God:** I look for something in the reading that gives me words to pray for what can be strengthened in their relationship to God — an element of grace for them to grasp more clearly. As that part of the prayer for them is spoken, their name is written in my devotional journal and an arrow is drawn vertically "up" from their name.<sup>7</sup>
- **Praying for their relationship to their neighbor:** I look for what the reading is suggested as the fruit of God's grace as it is lived out toward all their neighbors in general. As that part of the prayer is spoken a horizontal arrow is added to their name.
- **Praying for their callings within their families:** I apply that same truth from the Scripture reading just mentioned to their relationship to their present/future spouse and their present/future children. As that part of the prayer is spoken a double arrow connects spouses horizontally and an arrow is added from the spouses vertically "down" towards their children.
- **Praying for those called into the public ministry:** Finally, for those serving in public ministry, four lines are added under their name. Each week I pray that the Lord may make them public ministers who are faithful (with and to the Word), zealous, humble, and encouraged.

Here we also need to mention two side benefits God's grace allows us to realize in the midst of intercessory prayer. First, on any given day, by the time we have prayed through the insights of that day's Scripture lesson for multiple people (or groups), we understand that portion of Scripture with significantly greater clarity in its application to our own hearts and lives. God's grace never ceases to give! Even as we are asking him to give it to others, he keeps on giving to us!

Second, praying through the Scripture's for others, reminds us powerfully that the others on our list are eternal souls no more (and no less) in need of God's blessings in Jesus than we. The harsh judgments we can so easily form against one another, the impatience that can grow so easily in daily life together in family, church family, or church body, find a powerful answer of law and gospel as those truths are being prayed for them again and again. Especially for those who share a common faith with us, we are reminded in Word and prayer that we are part of the same body of Christ. We speak to a common Abba

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<sup>6</sup>What this calendar does not include are those who make direct requests for prayer in daily conversation or by email or text. I have tried to learn to pray for them immediately after the conversation ends or as I am responding to the email or text. That has greatly helped me to reduce the "oops" factor in forgetting to pray for them. If their special needs are ongoing, those individuals and their needs can be added into the pattern above until God has shown what the specific answer will be.

<sup>7</sup>The writing of names helps me stay focused on each individual or particular group.

as children and heirs in the same family. Beams in my eye toward those others begin to be more obvious and specks in their eyes begin not to look so big and bothersome.

While there may be some exuberant overstatements in the following quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, there is also some wise and powerful encouragement shared with us to take God's gift of prayer - and his gift of the words to pray - and to use those gifts more for one another.

A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others. There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as far as our side of it is concerned. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. The struggle we undergo with our brother in intercession may be a hard one, but that struggle has the promise that it will gain its goal.

How does this happen? Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the Cross of Jesus as a poor human being and sinner in need of grace. Then everything in him that repels us falls away; we see him in all his destitution and need. His need and his sin become so heavy and oppressive that we feel them as our own, and we can do nothing else but pray: Lord, do Thou, Thou alone, deal with him according to Thy severity and Thy goodness. To make intercession means to grant our brother the same right that we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.

This makes it clear that intercession is also a daily service we owe to God and our brother. He who denies his neighbor the service of praying for him denies him the service of a Christian. It is clear, furthermore, that intercession is not general and vague but very concrete: a matter of definite persons and definite difficulties and therefore definite petitions. The more definite my intercession becomes, the more promising it is.

Finally, we can also no longer escape the realization that the ministry of intercession requires times of every Christian, but most of all of the pastor who has the responsibility of the whole congregation. Intercession alone, if it is thoroughly done, would consume the entire time of daily meditation. So pursued, it will become evident that intercession is a gift of God's grace for every Christian community and for every Christian. Because intercession is such an incalculably great gift of God, we should accept it joyfully. The very time we give to intercession will turn out to be a daily source of new joy in God and in the Christian community. (Bonhoeffer 1954, 85–87)

Before our all too natural defenses go up for why this will be impossible in our busy schedules, please realize that right here there is a powerful encouragement to live by faith and not by sight — to live by God's doing and not our own. To allow our ministry of intercessory prayer to grow as Bonhoeffer encourages would almost certainly mean that more of our time each day is spent in prayer. We may very well get less done on our "to do" list.

But isn't that the point? Prayer is taking cares off our "to do" list and casting them to the "to do" list of him who cares for us and the others for whom we pray (1 Peter 5:7). We may seem to have less time to get things done. Yet, we trust that our dear heavenly Father's answer to every prayer of his dear child

spoken in faith in Jesus is always “Yes!”<sup>8</sup> In that way, so much more is actually being done — and done well — because it is God at work, not us. When we have done such “job shifting” from ourselves to our heavenly Father, we have already accomplished far more than if we had successfully decreed that from now on all days will be 25 hours long and all weeks will be 8 days. In heaven we will stand in open mouth astonishment just how often God was indeed -in answer to our prayers - moving whole mountain ranges whenever we paused long enough to ask, seek, and knock rather than devoting all our time to our frantic scooping at those same mountains with our toy sandbox shovels.

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## CONCLUSION

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All gifts, all grace, all blessing: such is the goodness of God found in both *meditatio* and *oratio*. As we learn more and more to approach personal Word and prayer as God’s doing for us, not our doing for him, we find rich treasure of blessing waiting for us in every direction.<sup>9</sup>

And this blessing prepares us for the reality of what we sinner/saints will face as we step out into the battlefield of our lives in this world. That brings us to the next gift of God, *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*, to which our last essay in this series will direct us.

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<sup>8</sup> It is certainly true that speaking prayers as a child loved by God the Father in Jesus means that we will leave room for God to answer 1) according to his timetable (Luke 18:1); and 2) with the freedom to improve on our prayers by offering a “yes” that we might at first perceive as a “No!” Yet, I am uncomfortable with the all too frequent use of the “stoplight” analogy (green, yellow, red) for how God answers prayer: yes, no, and wait. Yes, we must avoid the foolish and unbiblical “name it and claim it” idea that treats God like a divine vending machine who must grant whatever we want. Yet we also must avoid downplaying clear passages of Scripture (such as Matthew 7:7-11; John 15:16, and many others) that speak of him always and every time answering his children in Christ with a “yes.” We can end up so afraid of the sinful nature’s selfish and distorted twisting of the gift of prayer that we fail to speak the beautiful promises of Scripture at full face value. We must use the law to call to repentance for “prayers” that are a mockery of God’s gift. But we must not fail to speak gospel promises in all their beauty as well! As Luther does in his explanation of the doxology of the Lord’s Prayer, we would do well to ponder the meaning of the word “Amen!” We must find a more consistent way to speak on this whole issue lest in our eagerness not to say more than the Scripture says we end up saying less.

<sup>9</sup> In the fifth part of this series, there are some planning tools and other resources that can help you begin to plan for strengthening your grip on the beauty of God’s gift of *oratio*.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR USE WITH GROUPS

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Referring to the prayer portion of our devotional life, John Kleinig makes this observation: “Here we experience the biggest gap between the way things should be and the way they actually are.” What leads you to agree or disagree with Kleinig’s comment? And to whatever amount you agree with his comment, what is it that makes this part of our devotional life so challenging?

The essay suggests that there may be a uniquely Lutheran reason for downplaying the importance of prayer. How much does our concern about prayer being wrongly considered a means of grace hinder us from speaking as highly as Scripture does about God’s gift of prayer?

Which facet of the multiple ways that prayer is God’s gift do you believe is most helpful in taking the burden off our shoulders to conjure up the words to use in prayer?

What do you find most challenging when it comes to putting into practice Paul’s encouragement that “requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone” (1 Timothy 2:1)?

This essay shares a rather detailed day by day plan to include intercessions in multiple directions during personal devotional time. Evaluate the usefulness of such a plan for intercessory prayer and offer suggestions for improvement or correction to what is found there.

On page 10, there is a lengthy quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in which he speaks of what he believes is a wonderful side-benefit of intercessory prayer. He suggests, when we are regularly praying for others, that it is much harder to be harshly judgmental with those for whom we are praying (congregation members, brothers in the ministry). Evaluate Bonhoeffer’s argument.

What other insights or suggestions have you found helpful in growing in making use of God’s gift of prayer in your devotional life?