



## How I Pray

### ***Counsel on approaching the Almighty***

How should I pray? What exactly should I say? How long should I go on? Such were the questions Luther's barber and lifelong friend, Peter Beskendorf, put to him. In response, Luther composed *A Simple Way to Pray*, in which he showed how the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles' Creed can guide prayer. Here is an excerpt of the first two sections of Luther's 1535 booklet.

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.

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.

It may well be that you may have some tasks which are as good as or better than prayer, especially in an emergency. There is a saying ascribed to St. Jerome that everything a believer does is prayer, and a proverb, "*He who works faithfully prays twice.*" Yet 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 hast 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.

Luther then advises that Peter repeat and elaborate on each petition. For example, here is how the second petition, "*Thy kingdom come,*" might be developed:

Say: "O dear Lord, God and Father, Thou seest how worldly wisdom and reason not only profane Thy name and ascribe the honour due to Thee, to lies and to the Devil, but how they also take the power, might, wealth and glory which Thou hast given them on earth for ruling the world, and thus serving Thee, and use it in their own ambition to oppose Thy kingdom. They are many and mighty; they plague and hinder the tiny flock of Thy kingdom who are weak, despised, and few.

“Convert them and defend us. Convert those who are still to become children and members of Thy kingdom so that they with us and we with them may serve Thee in Thy kingdom in true faith and unfeigned love and that from Thy kingdom which has begun, we may enter into Thy eternal kingdom. Defend us against those who will not turn away their might and power from the destruction of Thy kingdom, so that when they are cast down from their thrones and humbled, they will have to cease from their efforts. Amen.”

Or as another example, take the sixth petition, *“And lead us not into temptation.”*

Say: “O dear Lord, Father and God, keep us fit and alert, eager and diligent in Thy word and service, so that we do not become complacent, lazy, and slothful as though we had already achieved everything. In that way the fearful Devil cannot fall upon us, surprise us, and deprive us of Thy precious word or stir up strife and factions among us and lead us into other sin and disgrace, both spiritually and physically. Rather grant us wisdom and strength through Thy Spirit that we may valiantly resist him and gain the victory. Amen.”

Mark this, that you must always speak the *Amen* firmly. Never doubt that God in His mercy will surely hear you and say “yes” to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling, or standing alone; rather, think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you, and you are standing among them in a common, united petition, which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, “Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.” That is what Amen means.

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 prattle. Rather do I want your heart to be stirred and guided concerning the thoughts which ought to be comprehended in the Lord’s Prayer.

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 forgo the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us, we ought to disregard petitions, 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.

It is of great importance that the heart be made ready and eager for prayer. What else is it but tempting God when your mouth babbles and the mind wanders to other thoughts?

A good and attentive barber keeps his thoughts, attention, and eyes on the razor and hair and does not forget how far he has gotten with his shaving or cutting. If he wants to engage in too much conversation or let his mind wander or look somewhere else he is likely to cut his customer’s mouth, nose, or even his throat. How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart!

This, in short, is the way I use the Lord’s Prayer when I pray it. To this day I suckle at the Lord’s Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the Psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real Master composed and taught it.

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

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.

Luther demonstrates his approach for the first commandment, *"I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me."*

Here I earnestly consider that God expects and teaches me to trust Him sincerely in all things and that it is his most earnest purpose to be my God. I must think of Him in this way at the risk of losing eternal salvation. My heart must not build upon anything else or trust in any other thing, be it wealth, prestige, wisdom, might, piety, or anything else.

Second, I give thanks for His infinite compassion by which He has come to me in such a fatherly way and, unasked, unbidden, and unmerited, has offered to be my God, to care for me, and to be my comfort, guardian, help, and strength in every time of need. We poor mortals have sought so many gods and would have to seek them still if He did not enable us to hear Him openly tell us in our own language that He intends to be our God. How could we ever — in all eternity — thank Him enough!

Third, I confess and acknowledge my great sin and ingratitude for having so shamefully despised such sublime teachings and such a precious gift throughout my whole life, and for having provoked His wrath by countless acts of idolatry. I repent of these and ask for His grace.

Fourth, I pray and say, "O my God and Lord, help me by Thy grace to learn and understand Thy commandments more fully every day and to live by them in sincere confidence. Preserve my heart so that I shall never again become forgetful and ungrateful, that I may never seek after other gods or other consolation on earth or in any creature, but cling truly and solely to Thee, my only God. Amen, dear Lord and Father. Amen."

These are the Ten Commandments in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book. They are intended to help the heart come to itself and grow zealous in prayer.

Take care, however, not to undertake all of this or so much that one becomes weary in spirit. Likewise, a good prayer should not be lengthy or drawn out, but frequent and ardent. It is enough to consider one section or half a section which kindles a fire in the heart. This the Spirit will grant us and continually instruct us in when, by God's word, our hearts have been cleared and freed of outside concerns.

Nothing can be said here about the part of faith and Holy Scriptures (in prayer) because there would be no end to what could be said. With practice one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them as flint and steel to kindle a flame in the heart.

Martin Luther

©2017  
[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)