

**St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church Capital Campaign**  
**Prayer Instruction Book**



**Luther Teaches**  
**His Barber to Pray**

Helpful Pointers for Prayer



# Luther Teaches His Barber to Pray

## Helpful Pointers for Prayer

(All quotes from Martin Luther are in italics.)

*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.*

*Martin Luther, 1535 (in his letter to Peter the Barber)*

What a great blessing to have Martin Luther teach us how to pray! Better yet, his teaching comes to us in the quaint setting of a letter to his barber. 'Our capital campaign, "Paid in Full," will depend a great deal on personal and corporate prayer and so we turn to Luther for guidance and he does not disappoint.

His advice to his barber goes a lot deeper than our traditional "Now I lay me down to sleep..." prayer. Get ready to take prayer to a new and deeper level.

## Don't Cut Your Nose Off with the Razor

This pamphlet teaches us some profound things about prayer but it's nice to know that it comes from instruction for an everyday sort of guy like a barber. Here's what he said about prayer and his barber's razor:



*So, 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. Thus if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one's senses and members, as the proverb says, "He who thinks of many things, thinks of*

*nothing and does nothing right.” How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer!*

So let’s keep our attention focused on how to pray and see what Luther has to teach his barber and us.

## **The Great Gems in Luther’s Letter to His Barber**

Probably the greatest question about praying is simply this: “*What do I say?*” Luther answers that enduring question. As a matter of fact, the whole letter to his barber is an answer to that question.

The answer is simply this – pray the Catechism and pray the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms. That seems to be a foreign concept to many Lutherans today but it’s the fundamental way Luther teaches us to pray so it would be good to learn how.

“The Catechism is something to be learned and memorized, and the Scriptures are something the pastor preaches,” we say. True enough. But the Catechism and the Scriptures are also texts for meditative prayer.

Praying them is simple. You simply read a line or two and then think on it and talk to God about it. *This causes your prayer to be a matter of speaking back to God what He has spoken to you.* When you do that it not only gives you the words to say but it guarantees you that you are praying words that please God. Every father likes it when his son says back to him something he learned from “good ‘ol’ dad.” That’s the highest form of compliment and flattery. In the same way, our heavenly Father loves it when we speak back to Him the words He spoke to us.

The Catechism is not Scripture word for word but every word and teaching of the Catechism is drawn from the Scriptures.

For instance, if you used the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as a springboard for this type of prayer it might go something like this:



First you would read the first line of the Psalm – *The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.*

Then you would simply say something like this, something that the first line gives rise to – *Lord, I keep wandering away from You after the things of the world but You lovingly come and find me. Thank You for being my Shepherd and making sure that I have all that I need in life, even though I take You for granted... or anything similar to that.*

At first your prayers will be simple but the more you read the Scriptures and the Catechism the richer they will become. Here are some examples from Luther's letter to Peter the Barber.

## **Examples from Luther of Praying the Catechism**

The examples below from Luther are quite lovely and rich. Don't be discouraged by Luther's richness. Instead simply see his prayers as examples to emulate. Here are some excerpts from Luther's letter to Peter:

*The second petition: "Your kingdom come." Say: "O dear Lord, God and Father, You see how worldly wisdom and reason not only profane Your name and ascribe the honor due to You to lies and to the devil, but how they also take the power, might, wealth and glory which You have given them on earth for ruling the world and thus serving You, and use it in their own ambition to oppose Your kingdom. They are many and mighty; they plague and hinder the tiny flock of Your kingdom who are weak, despised, and few. They will not tolerate Your flock on earth and think that by plaguing them they render a great and godly service to You. Dear Lord, God and Father, convert them and defend us... against those who will not turn away their might and power from the*

*destruction of Your kingdom so that when they are cast down from their thrones and humbled, they will have to cease from their efforts. Amen.”*

Here is another example.

*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 Your 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 Your 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 Your spirit that we may valiantly resist him and gain the victory. Amen.”*

## **Another Help – The Four Garlands of Prayer**

Luther also teaches a simple fourfold way to help provide you the words to say in prayer when you are praying the Catechism or the Scriptures. He teaches us to divide each phrase or sentence of the Commandments, the Catechism or any part of the Scriptures, into four parts or, as he likes to call them, four garlands of a strand of rope.

*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**.*



For example with the Second Commandment (“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain”) we might pray

- 1) *Lord teach me that Your name is holy and that I should revere it.*
- 2) *Thank You for giving me Your name to call upon in every trouble and to praise and give thanks to You.*
- 3) *Forgive me Lord for the many times I have used Your name like a throw-away word. Have mercy on me and patience for not thanking You each day as I ought and not praising You for all Your blessings.*
- 4) *Help me now today to use Your name in praise and honor. Help me to resist the temptation to throw Your name around as though it means nothing. I bless and praise Your name dear Father.*

## **A Few More Practical Pointers**

Here are a few more miscellaneous pointers on prayer from Luther:

1. Pray first thing each day or at night before you go to bed. *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.*
2. The proper posture for prayer: *Kneel or stand with your hands folded and your eyes toward heaven and speak or think as briefly as you can...*
3. Use few words and do not necessarily recite: *You should also know that I do not want you to recite all these words [Luther’s words] in your prayer. Rather do I want your heart to be stirred and guided concerning*

*the thoughts which ought to be comprehended in the [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.*

4. Don't forget the "Amen" and what it means: *Finally, 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.*

## **A Simple Routine to Follow for Godly Prayer**

Here is a good way to put all of this together:

1. Select your prayer time: right away in the morning; at noon; and/or at bedtime.
2. Choose a section of the Catechism or Scripture for a week or month of prayer.
3. Read a phrase, a sentence or two.
4. Pray what comes to your mind in response and do so in a spirited manner.
5. During the days of our "Paid in Full" campaign pray the daily petition in the *100 Days of Prayer* booklet.
6. Speak the "Amen" with confidence in your Lord Jesus Christ that He has paid for your sins and won for you eternal life and the right to go to God in prayer.

May God richly bless your prayer life not only during this campaign but throughout your life so that it will be pleasing to Him as we remain committed to Christ for the long haul. Finally, make sure to use the *100 Days of Prayer* booklet included in this mailing.



**PAID IN FULL**