

## ***Hallowed Be Thy Name***

In the name of him who taught his disciples to pray, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned earlier, the general theme for this year's series of Lenten devotions is prayer. It's a topic I've wanted to address for some time – and for several reasons. One is that we just don't talk about it enough (I know I haven't, and that's a pity). Some people make the mistake of assuming that if you're a Christian then you automatically know all you need to know about prayer – after all, it's just "talking to God". What could be simpler? More and more I've come to understand that it's a little more complicated than that. Like anything else meaningful and worthwhile, prayer is a discipline that has to be learned. I think too that I may have shied away from discussing it as much as I should in the past because it's awfully easy to fall into the trap of legalism when discussing prayer. I mean prayer is something that Christians are *commanded* to do – and so sometimes it comes across as an tedious duty that we are required to perform and people are made to feel guilty if they don't spend so much time a day on their knees; or worse, it turns into a spiritual gauge by which people measure the quality of their Christian life. "The more I pray the better a person I must be" – which of course is nonsense.

But prayer is an important part of the Christian life – it was certainly an important part of Jesus' life when he was here on earth. And as he taught his disciples to pray, we too should be learning from him how to do it and what to say. I think it's particularly needful that we do this because there is at present so much disinformation being passed around in Christian circles on the subject. Let me give you a couple examples of what I'm talking about. A few years back there was a little book that swept through churches called the *Prayer of Jabez*. Its theology of prayer was terrible – there's no other way to say it. It essentially taught that if you recited several times a day this very short and fairly obscure little prayer found in the Old Testament, then riches, fame, and fortune would come pouring into your lap. But that was yesterday's fad. Right now there is a very popular book on prayer in the stores that I've heard highly recommended by certain Evangelical pastors. It's written by a woman who (to give you just a sample) in the course of the book tells this story: one night, at about two o'clock in the morning, she felt that God was telling her to get up, get dressed, go downstairs and pray for a certain person. But she was very tired, so she resisted this feeling and delayed until at length she fell back asleep. The next morning during breakfast the phone rang, and she received news that the person had died during the night. Now, quite naturally, she feels terribly guilty about it: the death is on her head. And so, she effectively teaches her readers that God sits up there in heaven as if with a sniper rifle gleefully picking off the people so unfortunate as to have only sleepy, lazy Christians to pray for them. And then he wags his finger at those worthless sleepyheads who failed their fellows and says, "See, I told you to pray. Now it's all your fault." I don't even know where to begin to say what's wrong with such a concept of prayer. Suffice it to say it's totally messed up.

Another major misunderstanding has to do with what people call the "power of prayer". Most of you know that's an expression I don't care for. It certainly isn't biblical. It's been popularized in recent decades by books like those written by Christian fiction writer Frank Peretti. In his books he describes how the holy angels of God are literally empowered by prayer. When God's people aren't praying the angels sent to protect them are weak and lethargic. They get pummeled by Satan's demons who are then free to work their evil mischief on God's people; but when the faithful huddle together in little groups and spend hours passionately pouring their hearts into their prayers it works like high octane angel fuel – sort of like Popeye's spinach. The muscles of the angels bulge and they give those demons a sound thrashing. All of which is ridiculous, of course. I know I've said it before; but it bears saying again: prayer is not powerful. The God to whom we pray is. It's *him* not our prayers that gets things done and accomplishes his good and holy will in the world.

Still the Lord does indeed ask us to pray; and rather than see it as a burden to be borne, or a duty to fulfill, or some way to manipulate God and tap into his power, we should see it for what it is: a gracious invitation to present our needs and concerns to our true Father in heaven. He wants us to know that we can and should at all times present our requests to him secure in the knowledge that he loves us for Christ's sake, that he hears our prayers, and that he is always glad and willing to do what is best for us. Jesus makes this clear in the passage we read from Luke's Gospel. "Which of you fathers", he asks, "would give your child something that

might harm them like a snake or scorpion if they asked for something to eat? None of you would. So then, if you who are sinners and whose hearts are evil know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven who is perfect and who is able to grant any request give you what is good when you ask it of him?" Our Father in heaven truly delights in giving us what we ask for – just as any parent is happy to give their children the wholesome desires of their hearts. So, ask because he wants to give.

Earlier in the same section of Scripture, Jesus explains that the Lord has another reason to answer our prayers: to protect his own good name. That's what the little story about the man who goes to his neighbor at midnight asking for bread to serve an unexpected guest is all about. Unfortunately, that may not be clear from the word that translated "boldness" in the passage. It makes it sound as if the guy finally gets out of bed and helps his neighbor because he realizes he'll never be able to get back to sleep as long as he's out there pounding on the door. But that's not the idea at all. A better translation than "boldness" in that sentence is "shame-faced-ness" and it refers to the guy who's at home and in bed, not the guy knocking on the door. You see, having a reputation for hospitality was very important to the Jews of Jesus' day. And to be known in the community as a guy who wouldn't spare a loaf of bread for a neighbor in need would have been just about the worse reputation you could have. So the idea is this: just because the guy who needs the bread is a friend may not be enough to get the man out of bed to come to his rescue; but he's going to have to do it anyway to protect his own good standing in the community. So carry it over to the divine side, and the gist is that sure, the Lord loves us and wants to answer our prayers; *but even if he weren't so inclined*, he would want to answer our prayers because he has his own good reputation to think about. He is by nature loving and generous and caring – and he wants this to be known in the world so that people will come to him. Therefore, he cannot ignore our prayers without getting a reputation for being like a fabulously rich man who starves his own children and dresses them in rags—something he could never allow.

So both on account of his fatherly love for us and because of his desire to have his name held in high regard he really wants to answer our prayers. Of course, sometimes that means responding negatively to our requests. If you ask for an egg, he's not going to give you a scorpion; but if you foolishly ask for the scorpion (or something else that he knows will not be good for you) he's going to say "No". We who are parents do this with our kids all the time – and sometimes they don't understand why the answer is "no". They don't see all the potential problems that their parents do; they simply don't have the same knowledge and experience. In the same way, the Lord is in a better position than any of us to know what is ultimately good and what will cause problems, and he answers our prayers accordingly. He always does what is best for his children.

And what is ultimately best for us in all circumstances and at all times of life is that we hallow God's name. There's a reason this is the first petition of the prayer our Lord taught us. It is the source and foundation of every blessing that God could possibly give to us. But what does it mean to *hallow* the name of God? Simply stated "to hallow" something is an old English of saying, "to regard it as holy". So at the most basic level it means that when we pray the first petition of the Lord's Prayer, we are asking the Lord to ensure that his name be honored and held in the highest respect, and that it not therefore be subject to common, frivolous, or meaningless usage; like when people say things like, "Gawd" or "Jeezus" to express amazement or anger. It means too that we not invoke God's name to call down curses on people or things; like when someone says, "God damn it" or "God damn you" – as if the Lord were subject to our commands about such eternal judgments. And it means also that we not use the Lord's name to swear oaths either frivolously or falsely, as happens when people tag the expression "I swear to God" after every statement they make, or when they deliberately lie under oath. So at the most basic level, hallowing the name of God has to do with what we Lutherans would call "second commandment stuff".

Now, in the Small Catechism Luther correctly points out that the name of God is holy in and of itself. That can never change – but our own usage of it can; and so, what we're really praying for in the first petition is that our heavenly Father would give us the grace always to respect and honor his name, to hold it above all other names, and to use it only in proper ways. But there's a whole lot more to regarding God's name as holy and using it properly than just the way we might say the actual word "God" or "Lord" or "Jesus" in a sentence, and that has to do with the idea of authority. Most newspapers have a "letters to the editor" section in which you can read what people's opinions are about this or that. Usually a paper won't print any letter that is unsigned. They do this, in part, so that you the reader can know how much weight to attach to the words. If the individual writing in is known to be irritable lunatic who rants and raves about everything and seems to

know nothing about anything, you read the comments and say, “there he goes again”. If on the other hand a letter is signed by someone you know to be intelligent, well informed, and thoughtful, you’re more likely to sit up and pay attention to what they have to say.

So take the same idea and multiply it a thousand fold and apply it to the Word of God. It has *his name* attached to it. And so what is the biggest and most important part of keeping God’s name holy is that we regard his Word as holy. It’s in a category all by itself. It is absolutely truthful and authoritative, and we hallow God’s name when we treat his Word as such. Conversely, God’s name suffers abuse when we ignore his Word, treat it lightly, disagree or argue with it, or worst of all, when we change or alter it. To say “God said” when he did not, or to say “God never said” when he did – and to teach such lies to others is the worst thing anyone can do because it misrepresents God and leads souls to hell. Not coincidentally, that’s exactly what Satan does.

So, in praying the first petition, we are asking the Lord to keep us from dishonoring his name by any of these sins against his Word and we’re asking him draw us to himself by the Word, to give us the right understanding of it and a proper appreciation for it, and the grace to trust in it with our whole hearts. And more than that, we’re asking him to shape us by the Word so that we order our lives according to it. That’s because there’s yet another way we can dishonor the name of God; and that’s by our improper behavior.

You see, all of us who were baptized had God’s name placed upon us. We were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us with his precious blood, and the Holy Spirit who washed and sanctified us by the water and Word – the God who did all that for us placed his own name on us. He made us part of his family. So now whatever we do reflects upon the family name. If we do well, people will know it and God’s name will be honored by them; but if we sin shamelessly and flaunt our offenses openly we bring discredit upon the Lord and his church. This is why it’s always so tragic when well-known church leaders are exposed as being involved in ongoing scandals. The enemies of the church rejoice to see such hypocrisy revealed – and they get further entrenched in their rebellion against God and their resistance to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. But it’s not just famous church leaders who dishonor God’s name this way. Anyone known as a Christian who is observed in any sort of bad behavior does the same thing.

And that’s why the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer is so important. In praying “hallowed be thy name” we are asking our Father for the grace to keep him the center of our devotion, to regard his saving Word as sacred and true, and to conform our thoughts and actions to it so that we live as his children and do what’s right. It’s what being a Christian – *that is, bearing the name of Christ* – is all about. And we can pray this petition with the confidence that our Father in heaven really wants to give us exactly what we’re asking for three very good reasons: because through his Son he taught us the prayer, because he knows it’s what’s best for us, and because he wants it too. And so we pray, “Father, among us may your name be hallowed” in Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***