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The one true God commands His thankful people to pray

Preached by Rev. W. Bredenhof on Sunday, November 13, 2005 (Afternoon)

Reading: 2 Samuel 7; Matthew 6:5-15

Text: Heidelberg Catechism: Lord's Day 45

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

How are things with your prayer life? A lot of times that's a question we'd rather not answer. When it comes to prayer, there always seems to be such a gap between what it is and what it should be. Maybe this has happened to you too: it's bedtime and you're praying to the God who made heaven and earth and everything in them. You're praying, speaking with the King of the universe – and then you fall asleep right in the middle of it. Or I think we can all relate to the tendency that all our prayers start to sound the same. Dads who have to pray at the beginning and end of each meal start to use stock prayers with stock phrases. That can quickly lead to formalism and just a going through the motions. The Lord's Prayer too can be rattled off in such a way that its meaning and purpose are lost to us. Then we have all sorts of questions: should I kneel when I pray? Should I pray only to the Father or may I also directly address our Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Do we always have to mention the name of Jesus at the end of every prayer? And we could go on.

All of the problems we have with prayer and our many questions brings us to an inescapable conclusion: prayer is not something that's natural for us. We are not born as people who automatically and without a second thought speak with their Creator. No, we have to be taught how to pray. That's why our Catechism devotes the last section to this very important topic. We learn in our Lord's Day this afternoon that prayer is in a certain sense the starting point of our thankfulness. God wants those who are bought with the precious blood of his Son to be thankful and he wants them to express that thankfulness in the first place through prayer. So we're going to learn this afternoon that the one true God expects his thankful people to be a prayerful people.

We will see that there is:

1. A profound need for prayer.
2. A proper attitude for prayer.
3. A perfect model for prayer.

Do we need to pray? That's an important question to consider. Can't Christians get by without it? Or perhaps can we just do it once in a while if the time is right and we feel like we need it? That type of thinking fits right in with today's consumer approach to Christianity. Maybe you've seen the One Minute Bible for those people who can only spend one minute a day reading their Bible. There's the



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One Minute Bible for Students: “Between classes, homework and extracurricular activities, what teenager has time for devotions.” Certainly one minute is better than no minutes, but you can imagine what prayer is probably like for the people who read a One Minute Bible. However, when something terrible happens in their life, then God had better be there for them. That’s when they need prayer – only when it suits them. God has become a back-up, someone who is only there for emergencies. Prayer becomes a sort of 911 emergency number.

The Scriptures will have none of that and so neither will our Catechism. The Catechism says in the first question and answer that prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us. The most important part. “Now hold on,” you might say. “Even more important than keeping the law?” You might almost get the idea that the law is more important, after all it does come first. First the section on the law and now a section on prayer. But the Catechism doesn’t work that way. Just because something is first in order doesn’t mean that it is first in importance. According to what we confess here, prayer is even more important than keeping the law as a way to show our thankfulness.

Nevertheless, we have to keep the idea out of our heads that one person prays and another person keeps the law to be thankful and then the one who prays is doing a better job. As if we could make a choice: keeping the law or prayer and you better choose prayer if you really want to be thankful. No, the keeping of the law and prayer, they belong together like two sides of one coin. The reason the Catechism puts the law first is that the preaching of the law logically leads us to prayer. When we hear God’s law explained to us this leads us to eagerly ask for the grace of the Holy Spirit so that we may keep the law and show ourselves thankful.

So there is this profound need for prayer. Oftentimes it’s said that prayer is for us spiritually what oxygen is for us physically. Just as we need oxygen for our bodies, so we also need prayer for our souls. There’s a lot of truth in that -- although we certainly need prayer for our bodies too. Without prayer we cannot show the thanks to God that we ought to. We get stalled in the process of sanctification, of becoming more and more Christ-like. If we’re trying to live a godly and holy life and then ignore prayer as if it’s an optional, add-on item, then we’re on the wrong road. Then we’re just deceiving ourselves if we think we really care about godliness and holiness. Quite simply put: you can’t be a Christian without prayer.

We need it. This is even more so, because as we confess in the Catechism, God will give his grace and Spirit only to those who ask him for these gifts and thank him for them. We must constantly be going to God and asking him for his grace and Spirit. That’s why Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Pray continually. Not just at the end of the day on the edge of your bed. Not just around the supper table. Continually. Although in many instances it’s appropriate to do so, you don’t have to pray sitting down or kneeling. You can pray as you do your work, even as you’re driving. We can pray at any time, in fact the apostle’s command means that we must. That not only means asking for things of one



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sort or another. We can and should also pray to God and thank him. Thank him whenever you receive something good from his hand. Thank him when you are awestruck by something in his creation. "Give thanks in all circumstances..." Find the good and beautiful in your life and thank the Lord in prayer!

But we also have the privilege of asking the Lord for things. In fact, we are commanded to ask for certain things. We have to ask God for his grace and Holy Spirit in our lives. Does that mean that before we pray we don't have the Holy Spirit? To answer that we have to keep in mind where we're at in the Catechism. We're in the last section concerning thankfulness, or sanctification. We're speaking here as believers in our Lord Jesus. We are believers who have been given the gift of faith through the Holy Spirit. That means we're speaking here in QA 116 about the continuing gift of the Holy Spirit, that he continues to work in us. It's this that we have to pray for constantly and with heartfelt longing.

So don't you see then that the Holy Spirit is essential to our prayers? We must pray for him to continue his work in us, that he will draw us further along the road to holiness. But there is more because we learn from Scripture that when it comes to prayer, he also works for us. That's clear from Romans 8:26-27 [read]. Isn't that comforting? Because this is so we can go to God with confidence. When we stumble in our prayers and struggle to find the right words, it doesn't matter because God hears us through the intercession of the Holy Spirit. He will lead us further in our lives before his face. But this can only take place when we do pray, when we turn to God realizing there is no other to whom we can turn. We have a profound need for prayer because we need God. That's why there is this command to pray constantly and with heartfelt longing.

Do you know that heartfelt longing? That requires some effort – it's not something that can be left for one minute in our day. We have to be conscientious and apply ourselves to improving our prayer life. What's the best way to do that? Simply immerse yourself in the Word – your prayer life cannot exist in isolation from the sincere study of God's Word. And if our prayers are simply repeated over and over again in insincerity and mindlessness, simply out of habit, then that needs to be addressed. That's because there is also a proper attitude for prayer.

Sometimes you hear people say that you can come to God just as you are. God will unconditionally accept you no matter what. In a certain sense this is definitely true: God will accept all sinners who come to him. However, we have to add the words, "in repentance and true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." Only sinners who come to God in that way will be accepted by him – and so there is really no such thing as God's unconditional acceptance of sinners. You can't come to God with disrespect and be accepted by him. You can't come before his face with arrogance or with cursing and bitterness. Loved ones, the Bible is clear that those who would come before the Almighty have to do so with the right attitude.



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We see that in the passage we read from 2 Samuel 7. If we pay careful attention to King David's prayer from verse 18 to the end of the chapter, there are some valuable things we can learn. First of all, notice the way that David addresses God. He doesn't speak to him as if God is his buddy, his friend to whom he can say anything he wants in whatever way he wants. Instead, David's words are pregnant with fear and respect. He calls him, "Lord GOD." Literally the Hebrew text says there, "Lord Yahweh." David uses that term throughout this prayer, from beginning to end. There is no other Lord Yahweh. With no doubt David calls upon the one true God who has revealed himself in his Word – and he does so in full recognition of who this God is and who he is as his creature.

He comes before Lord Yahweh in humility. That too is clear right from the start. "Who am I, O Lord Yahweh, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" Anyone who would come before Yahweh in arrogance will be cast away. God cannot stand people who are proud and arrogant. David learned that the hard way. He had it in his head to build a house for God. God told him to back off: "Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?" But even though he was given this rebuke, David was still blessed with rich promises, Messianic promises. Because of that David is struck with awe and wonder and that's the attitude with which he draws near to God in prayer. Those promises were all fulfilled and now we are even richer than David. We have the realization of those promises: we've been blessed with salvation in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When we think about it, that ought to humble us and make us thankful – it ought to give us the right attitude for prayer. When we consider the fact that God's own Son came to earth to suffer and die for us, we're reminded of our need and misery. We're reminded that we were alienated from God by our treason. But now we've been reconciled to him in Christ. We ought to look up to heaven in thankful adoration. We ought to be awestruck.

Last winter, something amazing happened. Niagara Falls froze over. It doesn't happen very often, but when it does we are awestruck at the sight. Even otherwise Niagara Falls is an awesome sight to see. If you have friends and family visiting Ontario, it's one of the must-see attractions. When you see all that water and its power as it flows over the Niagara escarpment, you feel struck with wonder. So much water flowing over such a great drop – there's force and power in that. Now if that makes us awestruck, how much more should we be in awe of the One who made it? How can we come before that God in a cavalier manner, as if it were a small thing to speak with the King of Creation? And far greater than Niagara Falls is the salvation we've been freely given. How can our attitude be anything other than one of humility?!

But we need more than just humility to come before Lord Yahweh. We also need faith. We need to believe in the one true God only and call upon him as he commands us to do. Listen to what James says on this in James 1:9-11 [read]. Brothers and sisters, that means that doubt is sin. Prayer is pointless if you have doubts about God and his ability to care for you as his child. If we want to be heard by God when we pray, then we can't approach God like we're making a gamble, saying in effect, "I don't know if



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you're really there, but if you are..." That's not the way of faith, not the way of a prayer which pleases God and will be heard by him. God must be approached on his terms, which is to say, in faith.

And so it is obviously not just faith in some vanilla type of god. We are speaking about the only true God, Yahweh, the God of David, the God of Paul. He will only hear our prayer when we approach him as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, we have his sure promise that he will hear us when we come as such. We find that promise in places like John 14:13-14.

Now the fact that he has promised to hear us doesn't mean that we always get what we want. Our God knows better than we do what's the best for us (it takes humility to acknowledge that as well!). He is the overflowing fountain of all good. We must trust that he will always do what is best for us even when this isn't obvious to us. This is part of the firm foundation that the Catechism speaks about in QA 117. He knows what we need and therefore he also teaches us how to pray. And that's why he also gives us a perfect model for prayer.

We noted right at the beginning that prayer doesn't come naturally to us and so there's this need for instruction about how to pray. Now this instruction can be found throughout the Bible. If you want to learn how to pray, it's not in the first place a matter of learning by doing. Instead, it's a matter of closely studying the Scriptures. Scripture and prayer belong together. When we study the Scriptures we find many places which give us the instruction we need. Think of the book of Psalms. In the Psalms, we find many instances of David and other psalmists addressing God in prayer. That can be very instructive for us. Our Catechism could have taken such an approach, but it wouldn't have been very concise. Instead, we look to the prayer that the Christian church has always held up as the perfect model for prayer: the prayer which our Lord himself taught us, the Lord's prayer. Our Lord Jesus also recognized the need for instruction on this point and we find some of this instruction in our reading from Matthew 6.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount is devoted to the topic of prayer. Our Lord Jesus begins by instructing those listening about the right attitude. Here we go back to what we already learned a minute ago, though Christ does take it further. Jesus teaches us that prayer is not a matter of proud public displays; it's a matter between God and the believer. And so prayer is also not about many words and vain repetitions. A good prayer is not necessarily long, nor are good prayers those that are repeated over and over again with no thought to what is being said. We're told not to be like pagans or Gentiles, not to be like the hypocrites. Why? Because our heavenly Father knows what we need before we even pray. We pray sincerely when we take into account the fact that God is all-knowing, omniscient. We have to know God rightly to pray rightly.

So how then should we pray? "Pray then like this..." says Jesus, and then follows the well-known words. The Lord's Prayer is there for us as a model to teach us all the things that we need for body and soul. And again, we should realize that the focus here is on our needs, rather than our wants. That's an important distinction to keep in mind when we pray. We need certain things – food, clothing, shelter,



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health – and many other things are just luxuries. The Lord’s Prayer is here to help us make that distinction. It’s also there to teach us the proper attitude to God, to ourselves, and to our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord’s Prayer sets a valuable pattern for us in our prayer lives – that we may truly show ourselves thankful both with our lips and our lives.

So, loved ones, we’re here again at the section on prayer. Some of you have gone through this countless times. For some of you, maybe it’s the first time. But every time, it’s important to pay attention. We desperately need this reminder of how to pray. It’s not easy for weak and sinful people to pray. With the help of the Holy Spirit let’s therefore learn prayer from our Master. He will teach us the fear of God’s Holy Name. He will teach us what we need to know and to know our need. As we learn from Jesus in this age, we can look forward to the age to come when all our communication with God will be natural and perfect. AMEN.