

Prayer: The Chief Part of Thankfulness

Lord's Day 45

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The Scripture reading this morning is found in the letter to the Ephesians, Ephesians 6. We read the whole chapter. Ephesians 6, part of that section of Ephesians that applies in the truth of God's word speaking of our thankfulness that we show to God. Ephesians 6:1,

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. 2 Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) 3 That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. 4 And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. 5 Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; 6 Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; 7 With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: 8 Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free. 9 And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him. 10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; 15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: 18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; 19 And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that

therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. 21 But that ye also may know my affairs, and how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, shall make known to you all things: 22 Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that ye might know our affairs, and that he might comfort your hearts. 23 Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.

That far we read in God's inspired word. May God bless that word to our hearts.

Before we turn to the Catechism, we read from Scripture, Ephesians 6:18, "Praying always" this follows on from the call to put on the whole armor of God, verse 13, then in verse 18,

18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

It's in connection with that that we look at the truth of Scripture summarized in Lord's Day 45. Lord's Day 45, Questions and Answers 116 through 119.

Q. 116. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us: and also, because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them.

Q. 117. What are the requisites of that prayer, which is acceptable to God, and which He will hear?

First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested Himself in His Word, for all things, He hath commanded us to ask of Him; secondly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty; thirdly, that we be fully persuaded that He, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His Word.

Q. 118. What hath God commanded us to ask of Him?

All things necessary for soul and body; which Christ our Lord has comprised in that prayer He Himself has taught us.

Q. 119. What are the words of that prayer?

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead

us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Catechism puts the treatment of the Lord's Prayer also in the section on thankfulness indicating that thankful people will be praying people. Are we, beloved, thankful to God? We may ask ourselves that question, does your thankfulness show itself in how you pray? Does your thankfulness show itself in how often you pray? Does that thankfulness show itself in the things that we ask of God? Does it show itself in how we praise God for the things he has given to us? I ask myself the same questions. Prayer, beloved, is a means of expressing our thankfulness for all that God has done for us.

In the book of Ephesians, it begins with the glorious message, the first half of the epistle begins with all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus. He chose us in Christ Jesus before the world began. He redeemed us through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. He has given to us a glorious inheritance. And even now, he has given to us the earnest of that inheritance in the Holy Spirit. We were once dead but he has given to us spiritual life. Thankfulness calls us to live now to the glory of God. That's the order that the apostle follows in the epistle to the Ephesians and that's why after speaking of all of those benefits that God has given to us, the inspired apostle at the end of the first section, at the end of chapter 3, verse 21, he says, "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

That's thankfulness. After speaking of all the benefits that God has given to us, thankfulness will seek the glory of God, and then beginning in chapter 4, the inspired apostle tells us how we might express that thankfulness, how we give glory to God. Chapter 4, verse 1, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." Walk worthy. It's all about thankfulness. Don't walk in the vanity of your minds. Walk in love as Christ has loved us for you ere sometimes darkness but now are ye light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.

Beloved, if we're going to walk in that thankfulness, and that's the section of the Catechism which we treat at this time, if we're going to walk in that thankfulness, then we need to find our strength in the Lord and in the power of his might. If we're going to walk in thankfulness, then we also need to be on the whole armor of God and we need to pray. Praying always. Yes, put on the whole armor of God, praying always with all prayer and supplication.

Prayer is the chief part of thankfulness. We want to consider, then, the Lord's Day under that theme, "Prayer: The Chief Part of Thankfulness." Let's note in the first place the necessity of prayer. Prayer is necessary. Secondly, acceptable prayer. And lastly, complete prayer, speaking of the things for which we pray. Prayer: the chief part of thankfulness. That's what the Catechism teaches us and Scripture as well, beloved. Prayer is the chief part of the thankfulness that God requires of us.

It's true that unbelievers also have a duty to pray to God. They have the duty of confessing their sins and calling upon God for mercy in repentance, but the Catechism is especially concerned with Christians. Why is prayer necessary for Christians? Then it uses some very strong language: prayer is necessary for Christians. Prayer is necessary. Then it goes on to speak of the thankfulness which God requires of us, Question and Answer 116. Then the next Question and Answer, we are called to pray for all things that God has commanded us. Then Question and Answer 118, "What hath God commanded us to ask of Him?" That's striking, beloved. God requires thankfulness of us and the chief part of that thankfulness that God requires of us is prayer.

Now I want to ask the question, beloved: does that sound a bit strong, the language of the Catechism? Thankfulness is required of us? That's what the Catechism says, does it not? And is that not like saying, we might ask, "If you say that prayer is required, is it not like saying you'd better be thankful or else you have something else coming? Thankfulness is required, isn't that saying that? You'd better be thankful." Then we might ask the question: isn't thankfulness something that I am? If I'm not thankful, you can't just command me to be thankful, can you?

Well, in that connection, beloved, we can ask a similar question: how can God require us to pray? Isn't prayer a spontaneous thing that arises out of our love to God? Surely God doesn't want us to simply go through the motions just to fulfill our duty. Isn't love simply something we have? And to be sure, beloved, there is an element of truth in those thoughts because if you and I simply go through the outward motions, following God's commands outwardly because we are forced to do that, only because we are forced to do that, if that's the only reason, that's not thankfulness. If I pray only because I know that's what's expected of me as the head of a household or as a minister I pray only because, well, I have to pray. I don't really want to pray but I have to, if that's the only reason that I pray, that's not thankfulness. Prayer must arise in the heart and thankfulness has to come from the heart.

Do you ever catch yourselves, beloved, catch yourself saying the words of a prayer and not really meaning them? Or do you ever forget that in your prayers, you're entering into the very presence of God? That ought to affect the reverence of our prayers. Do you ever find, beloved, your minds wandering in prayer? You begin a prayer and pretty soon we're thinking of something else. God would have our prayers arise out of sincere hearts. God would have our thankfulness arise from sincere hearts.

So there is something to be said. We ought not simply pray because, "Well, that's something I have to do." But that still doesn't reckon with the fact that God requires thankfulness and God commands us to pray. One response to that would be to say, "Well, those requirements and those commands, well, that's just the law and we are no longer under the law. We are under grace so those commandments and those requirements don't apply to us anymore." That would be one response. And yet the inspired apostle, beloved, writing to the Ephesian saints, he doesn't hesitate to command the saints of Ephesus, those who were elect in Jesus Christ, those who were redeemed by his precious blood,

those who were already given that new life, he does not hesitate to command them and us to pray.

And other commandments as well. Ephesians 6:13, we read that, "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." There is the imperative, take the whole armor of God. Take it up. Take it to yourself. Verse 14, "Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness." And then in connection to that, he tells us the way to accomplish that standing. Stand, verse 18, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit."

Needless to say, if we are commanded to stand by praying, the implication is here too, God requires us to pray. Now maybe that's indirect and not so straightforward. Praying always is not in the imperative in this particular verse but time and time again in Scripture, we find the command to pray. Psalm 50:15, "call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." Psalm 122:6, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee." Mark 14:38, Jesus says to his disciples, "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak." Pray without ceasing. God commands us, his beloved children, to pray. All of those are in the imperative.

Why? Why does the Holy Spirit command you and me to pray? Is it because he comes after us with a whip to beat us into submission? Is that why God commands his dear children to pray? That's not why he does it. Because he knows our sinful hearts, beloved. God knows the weakness. He knows we are spiritually lazy and he knows that if we waited until we felt like praying as we ought to feel like praying, we might go entire days and maybe weeks without folding our hands and bowing before our God in prayer. Why does the Holy Spirit command you and me to pray? Why does the Catechism stress the necessity of praying? Because none of us prays enough, beloved. None of us is convinced enough of the necessity of praying.

How much time did I spend this morning preparing to worship God? How much time did you spend in prayer this morning or this last week? How does that time compare, the amount of time we spent in prayer, how does that compare to the time we spent on Facebook or Snapchat or whatever other social media we use these days? How does that compare? We spend a lot of time, beloved, complaining or talking or arguing. How much time have we spent in prayer?

So we ask when we consider that, we ask our merciful God as the disciples asked Jesus, "Teach us to pray. Not just teach us how to pray, we ask that too, but teach us the necessity of prayer. In all of our labors, in whatever we are doing, teach us to pray."

How necessary is prayer? Well, the Catechism expresses it strongly, "God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them." Strong words, again, only to those who ask and are thankful. Can that really be? Does the Catechism overstate it? That may even sound a bit

conditional to some. "You mean to say I have to fulfill this condition in order to earn God's grace and Holy Spirit?" But let's note in the first place, beloved, the Catechism is talking, again, to Christians. Why is prayer necessary for Christians? Because someone who is not a Christian will never ask for God's grace and his Holy Spirit. Not sincerely from the heart.

The Catechism is talking to us, then, who are already God's people, those who already belong to our faithful Savior in body and soul, who purchased, that is, Jesus Christ purchased already for us all the blessings of salvation including the blessings that we pray for, and all those blessings, beloved, are not conditional. They do not hang upon conditions that we must fulfill. All those blessings will certainly be applied to every single one of God's elect children.

That in the first place, prayer is necessary for Christians, but then in the second place, it's important to note that God has a certain order in which he gives to us the blessings that Christ has earned, and this is the order. Jesus states it in Matthew. He says, "Ask, ask and it shall be given unto you." Ask. Then what follows? "Seek. Be seeking and ye shall find." There's an order. "Knock and it shall be given, knock and it shall be opened unto you for everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened."

That's the order that God uses to give us the blessings of salvation and that means if we don't ask for greater measures of God's grace, and we don't ask for the Holy Spirit, and we aren't thankful for those gifts, God won't give them. Here again, the Catechism is not saying that we have to meet these conditions in order to earn God's gifts, but it's simply saying that prayer and thankfulness are the necessary means that God uses to give greater measures of his grace and Holy Spirit, and when God wants to bestow greater measures of grace and his Holy Spirit, he will convict us through the command to pray, through the requirement to pray. God will by his Holy Spirit convict our hearts. He will work in us so that we give ourselves more and more to the holy exercise of prayer.

That's why prayer is necessary for Christians. Not because God depends upon our fulfilling a condition, but because he uses that prayer to bless us. That's why the inspired apostle commands us to be praying always with all prayer and supplication, because when we are truly thankful to God, we will follow his ordained way of seeking and obtaining his grace and Holy Spirit.

Thankfulness leads us to ask for his blessings and to express thankfulness for his blessings. Not only that, beloved, the more thankful that we are to God, the more we will want our prayers to be acceptable to God. Well, obviously the prayers of the wicked cannot be in any way acceptable to God. I'm talking about the reprobate wicked. Proverbs 28:9, "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law," someone who has rejected God and rejected love for God, Proverbs 28:9 says, "even his prayer shall be abomination." God detests the prayers of the wicked. They can say the sweetest things ever but when that prayer is spoken in hypocrisy as all prayers of the wicked are spoken, that's an abomination in God's sight.

That is not acceptable. That is not pleasing to God. But now the Catechism is talking about the prayers, again, of Christians, children of God who partake of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. We want our prayers to be acceptable to God, pleasing to him. Not, again, because we want by our prayers to earn somehow God's favor because the fact is, if we were trying to earn God's favor by our prayers, even our best prayers fall far short in our sincerity, and in our love for God, and in our zeal for him, and in our purity, our prayers can never earn with God.

But the more thankful we are to God for his gracious salvation, the more we will want our prayers to be acceptable to God, and the fact, beloved, that the Catechism lists certain requirements for prayers to be acceptable to God implies that some prayers are acceptable to God and some prayers are not. This is talking about the prayers of Christians. Your prayers and my prayers, some are acceptable to God and some are not. God is pleased with some prayers more than with others and as we said, some prayers are downright displeasing to God.

Beloved, that's like saying this about believers: some believers have stronger faith at times, and some have weaker faith at times, and some have even the smallest amount of faith at times. There are different amounts of faith. There was the centurion who sent messengers to Jesus. When he had called, when those messengers had called for Jesus, the centurion sends out more messengers to say, "Don't bother coming to my house. I'm not worthy that you would even come into my house." He told Jesus simply to speak the word and his son would be healed. What did Jesus say about him? Matthew 8:10, "When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." Jesus recognized some have greater faith than others. Romans 12:3, "I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith."

There are measures of faith and the point is, beloved, there are also measures in which our prayers are pleasing to God. There are degrees. Some of our prayers are more pleasing to God than others. Some of the prayers we make, we lack in faith. What does James, the inspired James say about prayer? James 1:6-7, "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord."

There are degrees in which we exercise our faith in prayers and there's also prayers in which, beloved, we ask for the wrong things. James 4:3, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." James, beloved, is not just talking about unbelievers in the congregation, he's talking to believers.

We do well, then, to learn the requisites of those prayers that are acceptable to God. What are the things that cause our prayers to be pleasing to God? Well, first and foremost, beloved, those prayers must arise from the new life of faith that God has given to us. Without faith, it is impossible to please God and that's why the inspired apostle in that

verse that we read in Ephesians talks about praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, because without the operation of the Spirit, our prayers would only be abominable in God's sight. If the Holy Spirit had not given us life and faith, that's what our prayers would be in God's sight.

So we can break that down into three things that should characterize our prayers. The most basic element of that prayer which is acceptable to God is the prayer that is directed to the true God. Someone who directs their prayer to some god that they have imagined in their hearts, a Muslim or a Jew or some other pagan, they're not directing their prayers to the true God. Their prayers are not acceptable in God's sight. God would have us direct our prayers to the Father in Jesus' name.

Not only, beloved, must our prayers be to the Triune God, God also wants us to pray to him as he has revealed in his word. We mustn't just say, "Well, I'm directing my prayer to the true God," and that's all that's necessary. No, we ought to direct our prayers to that true God according as he has revealed himself in his word. God has revealed himself as a glorious, transcendent, powerful, righteous God, a majestic God. Well, our prayers ought to reflect that. A language we use in our prayers ought to reflect the majesty of the God to whom we pray. Fitting reverence.

God has revealed himself as a God who hates sin and, therefore, our prayers also ought to reflect the same hatred of sin and sorrow for sin. God has revealed himself as a God who truly loves and cares for his people, therefore, our prayers ought to reflect a confidence in God's care and love for us. Pray that God that we know through his word, according as he has revealed himself in his word.

More than that, beloved, not just the outward form of prayer, God wants those prayers to arise from sincere hearts and desires because it's possible that we could pray for the right things and yet not truly to desire those things. Augustine speaks of himself when he was yet walking in sin, he expresses that he prayed to God, as it were, "Deliver me from the sin of adultery, but not yet." And we can do the same thing, beloved, we can pray and yet not have the desire that God would truly answer that prayer. And maybe we don't vocalize those same words, "Deliver me, but not yet," but we might have that attitude. "Lord, lead me not into temptation," and then we walk into the way of temptation.

God wants us to draw near to him with a true heart and if we have a true heart renewed by God's grace, a heart of sincerity that seeks after the living God, we will come to him in humility and confidence, humble because God has revealed to us also in his word that we are miserable creatures apart from Jesus Christ. And when we realize, beloved, our neediness, we will call upon God to help us who is the only one who can help us. We need to see ourselves as beggars before God, who need his grace and his Holy Spirit. Not just once in a while, we need his grace and Holy Spirit at all times. Not, beloved, that God wants us to grovel in self-pity, but he wants us to see ourselves as unworthy even of the least of his favors. To whom will God look in favor? Isaiah 66:2 says, "to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."

God wants us to come in humility and then also with confidence. We mustn't equate humility with a lack of confidence. When we see our sins, maybe we're tempted to say, "Well, God won't answer my prayer because my heart is not sincere enough and I'm not sorry enough and I'm not good enough." But that's not humility, beloved, in fact, it's a kind of pride because it says, that kind of idea says, "If I work hard enough, then God will hear me," and that's trying to earn something with God. That's a serious mistake. God would have us be humble but also confident. Confident that God will answer our prayers not because we are worthy, but for Christ's sake. God will answer our prayers because Christ has earned the blessings for which we ask. Then we can be confident that God will give us what we ask for.

What are the contents of a complete prayer, a prayer that is according to God's will? When we pray for those things that God has commanded us to ask for. 1 John 5:14, "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him." So we may not ask for every desire of our hearts because, the fact is, many of those desires are sinful. God wouldn't have us to ask him to pray to him that we might win the lottery as we go purchase a ticket. We don't pray to God that he would keep us from being caught in a crime. No, whenever we ask according to our lusts, then we ask amiss, but rather we ought to pray that God would never give us anything that would harm us.

What has God commanded us to ask for? All things necessary for our bodies and our souls. And notice the order there. Our souls take first priority. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things," these other things, "shall be added unto you." Spiritual needs are the greatest needs that you and I have. God wants us to pray for those spiritual needs. Pray for the grace of forgiveness. Pray for the grace of sanctification. Pray that God would preserve us in the way. Pray for faith to believe God's promises. Pray for love, to be patient with our children and with our brothers and sisters. Pray for wisdom to deal with circumstances. God has certainly commanded us to pray for these things and, therefore, he will give those things that we ask when we are thankful for them.

Pray for spiritual needs and then pray also for physical needs, and that's included in the Lord's Prayer, all the things that we need. Pray for health. Pray for daily food and drink. Pray for work. Pray to be protected from danger in traveling. All those things are necessary for life, yet even here, beloved, we need to be careful because sometimes those things are not necessary. Sometimes those things are not the most profitable things for us. God may take some of those things away for a time because that is for our good. He may take away our health, he may cause us to fall into danger so that we learn to depend upon him greater, to a greater degree. He may cause us to experience trials and suffering so that we learn, again, to look to our faithful heavenly Father.

So as regards those physical things, jobs and health and danger, we add those words, "If it be thy will. If it be thy will, provide. Provide that work. Provide the health that we desire.

If it be thy will, give me the strength to labor. If it be thy will, provide a marriage partner. Grant, O Lord, those things that are necessary for our bodies and our souls."

So in the future weeks, beloved, Lord willing we will look at those petitions of the Lord's Prayer, but as we consider those petitions, may this be our prayer, "Lord, instruct us. Teach us how to pray and teach us the necessity of prayer that we may give glory to thee." Amen.

Our Father which art in heaven, we thank thee for thy grace and thy goodness towards us. We thank thee that thou dost care for us more than we can care for ourselves. Father, teach us to pray. Teach us the necessity of prayer. Teach us the things for which we ought to pray, that we may give to thee the honor and the glory that is due. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.