

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It's always helpful when the Evangelist tells us at the beginning of a text how to understand it, in this case a parable that Jesus taught His disciples. Luke tells us that Jesus "*told them a parable to*" teach the disciples of the importance of prayer, of the necessity "*to pray and not lose heart.*"

In fact, picking up on what Jesus talked about in the Gospel a couple weeks ago, prayer is the duty of a disciple. It's what believers do. It's a command from our Lord. Jesus commands us to "*ask*" (Luke 11:9), and He told Peter to "*[w]atch and pray*" (Matt. 26:41). That means the Lord's Prayer as Luther teaches us: "He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Conclusion), and we acknowledged the command to pray more generally in our collect today. Luther says this in the Large Catechism: "nothing is more necessary than that we should continually turn towards God's ear, call upon Him, and pray to Him." "[I]t is our duty and obligation to pray," Luther says, "if we would be Christians" (*Concordia*, Large Catechism, III:2, 8).

But more than the command, a law motivation to pray, there is a Gospel motivation, a Gospel reason for God's tender invitation for us to come to Him in prayer. I love the way Luther talks about that invitation to pray the "Our Father" as we sometimes call it. "With these words God **tenderly invites** us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that **with all boldness and confidence** we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Introduction).

Children ask their dear fathers and mothers because they know their parents love them and care for them and will give them what is best for them. Jesus taught, "*What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion*" (Luke 11:11-12)? Of course, they won't.

How much more do we know that our Father in heaven loves and cares for us. His love is evident in His Son. St. John writes: "*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*" (1 John 4:9-10). And St. Peter reminds us of how God cares for us: "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you*" (1 Pet. 5:6-7). Thus, even more, our Father in heaven will give us what is best for us, for Jesus doesn't just command us to ask, but He promises us that God will answer our prayers: "*ask, and it will be given to you*" (Luke 11:9). Through the psalmist, the Lord promises: "*When [the believer] calls to me, I will answer him; I*

will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation” (Ps. 91:15-16).

So Jesus tells the parable in our Gospel today to encourage our prayers and to encourage us not to get discouraged. The parable does present us with a challenge, however, in particular with the judge. Jesus calls him “*unrighteous*,” and says he “*neither feared God nor respected man*.” Yet, surely this judge is meant to represent God in the parable.

The widow, on the other hand, represents believers — “*his elect, who cry to him day and night*.” The unrighteous judge refused her many entreaties for justice. She wasn’t asking for something extravagant ... only justice, and the judge refused to answer her prayer.

But isn’t that the way it seems to us sometimes in our prayers? We think our cause is just and that God is unfair if He refuses our prayers. And so, we wrestle with God, and sometimes we lose heart. But as Jacob demonstrated in our Old Testament lesson and as Jesus teaches us in our Gospel lesson, let us not become discouraged in our prayers. Let us pray with dogged persistence, and let us refuse to let go until we have been blessed.

For we know that “*the LORD God*” is not unrighteous in any way. He is good and holy and righteous. As the Psalmist says: “*The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works*” (Ps. 145:17). “*For the LORD God is a sun and shield*”; He “*bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly*.” And He calls that person blessed “*who trusts in [Him]*” (Ps. 84:11-12)!

Yes, this parable makes its point by way of contrast, as Jesus had done earlier in teaching about prayer. He said: “*If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him*” (Luke 11:13). In the parable, this is Jesus’ point: if this unrighteous judge will answer the petitions of this needy widow, **how much more** can we needy believers rely on a God, who *is righteous*, to answer our fervent prayers! If the unrighteous judge, who had no regard for man, answered the widow’s pleas for justice, **how much more** can we depend on answers from the God who regards us in love, enough to send His own Son unto cross and death, showing Himself to be a God who is just and who justifies (Rom. 3:26)! **How much more** can the elect count not simply on justice but on grace to sinners and forgiveness when we fail! **How much more** can we trust that the Righteous Judge will answer our prayers, not because He tires of hearing them, but because He invites us to pray, and promises to hear us, and wants what is best for us!

How much more can we be consoled when cross and trial are grieving us that Christ is near with His cheer, that He will never leave us or forsake us (LSB756:1)! Therefore, let us be about prayer!

And don't misunderstand. God does not need our prayer to act. "The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer." "The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer." "God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, 2nd, 3rd, & 4th Petitions). God doesn't have to be cajoled or coaxed into having mercy on us.

Rather, it flows from His good and gracious will toward us. God's will especially is for our salvation (1 Tim. 2:3-4), and it didn't take our prayer for God to promise the offspring that would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15); and it didn't take our prayer for God to fulfill His promise: "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons*" (Gal. 5:4-5). And speaking of His impending crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples: "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*" (John 12:23) — all without our prayer.

Nevertheless, God wants our prayer, regular prayer, floating up like the smoke of incense to God, as the psalmist sings, and we also do in our liturgy: "*Let my prayer rise before you as incense*" (Ps. 141:2; LSB Evening Prayer, 245). And this is especially so with prayer that is connected up to God's word, prayer that flows from God's word. Remember Luther said "[I]t is our duty and obligation to pray if we would be Christians." Not that prayer is some work that merits salvation, but by prayer connected to God's word, God Himself preserves us in faith. Remember how Jesus concluded His parable on encouraging prayer: "*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*" With Christians diligent in prayer, the answer is yes. But those who neglect prayer are neglecting God; and neglecting God leads to neglecting His word and Sacraments; and neglecting God's word and Sacraments is to starve oneself of God's means of grace; and that (although it may take some time) will lead ultimately to the loss of faith.

To that we pray: "God forbid! Keep us steadfast in prayer, in good times and in bad, that we may be steadfast in Your word and Sacraments, that we may be preserved in steadfast faith in Your Son, so that, when Jesus comes again in glory, He may indeed "give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, 7th Petition).

Lord, grant us our prayer ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.