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Our Prayers

In our prayers, exactly as in our faith, we need not be anything but what we are; on the contrary, we need only be completely what we are. Whether we are sorrowful and in distress or laughing and inclined to feel sure of ourselves, we must approach God just as we are and put ourselves in his hands. Prayer, therefore, must never be thought of as a kind of insurance which is added to our concern, in the sense that our *concern* performs the function of devising a comprehensible remedy for our difficulty, and the prayer is then an additional attempt to cover our rear in the incomprehensible case that it might be of some importance to God. This would be a gross misunderstanding of prayer. To pray in need does not mean to whistle in the dark like a child and still go on anxiously peering into the dark to see what menace it may bring forth. We are not merely making a psychological observation, but expressing a thought that is connected with the very essence of prayer, when we say that this peering into the darkness paralyzes the wings of prayer, just as Peter's look at the waves paralyzed him, even though—and this is a parable for all who pray—he was eager to rush into the hands of his Lord.

What prayer is in this respect—namely, that it faces need

realistically and accepts it as being real and tangible, that it calls a spade a spade and mentions hunger and fear by name, but nevertheless proceeds to put all this in the hands of God—this is made very clear in the Lord's Prayer. That is to say, there are three things in the Lord's Prayer which turn my gaze away from myself.

First, in my praying I must not wish to perform an act in the sense of a performance by virtue of which I put myself in the center of things. I must not, for example, "heap up empty phrases" or "prattle" (as Luther put it), but rather "speak" as one would speak with one's father. But when one speaks to one's father, one does not gaze into a mirror, but rather one looks at *him* (Matt. 6:7).

Second, when I pray I do not think of myself as an individual alone in this world, but rather as being in the fellowship of *all* believers and all who pray. That's why I say "*our* Father." This word "our" indicates that every prayer takes place in a twofold "space," in two dimensions. First this "space" consists, figuratively speaking, in one's "closet," one's own inner chamber (Matt. 6:6). This image indicates *one* of the two dimensions which determine my life with God. Before God I am in some measure always an "individual" and to that extent nobody can take my place. In all the decisive things of our life—specifically the "distresses" of life—we actually stand alone; every man suffers his own illness, his own particular cares, his own death, and every man bears his sin completely alone. It is impossible for Adam to share his sin with Eve or for Eve to share it with the serpent or for one to shove it off upon the other. Or, rather, there is only *One* who bears all this with us and for us, and this One is not a man like us. Therefore this One is also the only one who shares the solitude of our prayer and is with us in the utter privacy of the "closet." This is precisely the meaning of prayer "in the name of Jesus" (cf. John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23, 24, 26, etc.). We may also express the meaning of this prayer in this way: in that "closet" the Word of God is with me, the judging, fatherly, condescending, and—so far as my own conviction is concerned—the crucified Word. I am alone with this Word; *it is the ground on which I stand and the*

name in which I come when I raise my voice.

On the other hand, however, there is a second dimension: this “closet” is only a niche in the cathedral of the *whole* church—that church which is present wherever two or three are gathered together “in his name,” and which is at the same time the church of all believers all the way from the patriarchs and prophets and apostles to the choir of the redeemed and the kingdom to come beyond our death. What binds all these together, beyond every individual concern expressed in their prayers, is the *praise* of God. Therefore the praise of God is really *the* function of prayer which holds the church together, for in *that* prayer we are one with the patriarchs and the people of the Last Day, “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven,” however we may differ in the personal concerns and petitions of our prayers. Praise bursts the bounds of the “closet”; in praise I stand in the midst of the chorus of the praying church, the choir of the holy, universal, Christian church. That’s why I begin my prayer by saying, “*Our* Father.” When I say “our” I strike the note of praise.

Third, this has already suggested the third characteristic that determines the structure of the Lord’s Prayer, and that is that its petitions are inlaid in this praise. I must go by way of the praise of God if I want to become a petitioner who is really speaking to *God* and not going in the wrong direction. I must praise his *name*, the coming down of his *kingdom*, and the holiness of his *will* before I can allow my attention to slip back to myself and begin to “petition.” It is true that these first clauses of the Lord’s Prayer are called “petitions,” but actually they are rather praise, because I pray to God that his glory may become known. Moreover, the Lord’s Prayer also ends in praise and adoration. At the close my attention turns away from myself and turns once more to the center, in order that in my concern about the gifts I have prayed for I may not forget the Giver, in order that I may remember that the theme of all prayer is the *hand* of God and not the pennies in that hand. Just as the *First* Commandment was intended to shine through all the rest of the Commandments, so the individual petitions of the Lord’s Prayer are meant to be transparencies of the glory of God which are extolled at the beginning and the close of

the Prayer. And just as the fulfillment of the individual commandments should be fundamentally nothing else but our "fearing and loving God," so God must be "praised" throughout all the individual petitions of the Lord's Prayer. The goal of all prayer is always God himself; and if there is any criterion of prayer, and above all any criterion by which we may criticize our own prayers, it is this: There is not only a "First *Commandment*," but also a "first *prayer*."

This thought that the praise of God is the ultimate theme of all prayer makes it clear that our *petitionary* prayers, too, must always be aimed at bringing our will into oneness with the will of God. It would be presumptuous to want to force God's will down to ours instead of uniting our will with his. This would only mean that we distrusted his gracious condescension to the crib and to the cross. No, the Father is already at our side as our Lord and our Brother; he is already down in the depths from which we cry, and here below, where he already *is*, we ought to unite our wills with his, which means that we should trust that his will goes far beyond what our will may ask or think, or better and more accurately, that he descends to the depths and is near to us. This is really what the petition, "Thy will be done," is saying to us. It is true that this petition sets a limitation upon our prayer, but only in the very definite sense that this limitation results, not from any surmise concerning the external possibilities of its fulfillment, but rather from the inside, from faith itself. This means that we trustfully lay our will in the hands of God and leave it to that hand to grant our petitions or to set limits upon them. The emphasis lies on the word "trustfully," for we go on praising the will of God no matter what he may do about our will. And how else could we praise his will except by trusting its goodness!

After we have thus poured out all that is in our hearts, after we have spoken like beloved children with a loving father, we draw, as it were, a thick line beneath it and write: "There, now we have said all that we think. Do thou with it what *thou* thinkest best; for thou art good and we are safe with thee." That, and nothing else, is what is meant by "Thy will be done."