

The Right Way to Pray.

Text: Psalm 86:1-4

Suggested Hymns:

426, 420, 425, 291, 427

- 1) Humility in prayer
- 2) With trust and confidence
- 3) With persistence
- 4) Thankful prayer

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Psalm 86:1a, 2b, 3-4, *¹ Bow down Your ear, O LORD, hear me; You are my God; Save Your servant who trusts in You! ³ Be merciful to me, O Lord, For I cry to You all day long. ⁴ Rejoice the soul of Your servant, For to You, O Lord, I lift up my soul.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today's sermon is based on the introit. The subject is prayer and the right way to pray.

If you were to appear before some very important person for the purpose of asking for help, a promotion, or a favour of some kind, perhaps from a high government official or the financial officer of a bank or the president of the firm in which you are employed, you would certainly pay a good deal of attention to the way that you are going to state your request.

You would choose your words carefully so that your sincerity would be apparent and your need evident, and you would try to place your request in the best possible light so that you would be making your petition in the right way.

We approach God frequently in our prayers for the purpose of asking for the many things that we need and that only God can give us. We not only ask for things that we need and want for this earthly life, but also for the things that we must have to assure us of our eternal salvation.

God has told us in His holy Word that we may and should pray to Him for all our needs, and He has promised to hear us. One of God's promises is written in Psalm 50:15, *¹⁵ Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and*

you shall glorify Me.” Another one is written in Matthew 7:7, ⁷ *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”*

But then we must be careful, too, that we are praying in the right way, and we must give some thought to the manner in which we make our requests to God. This is something that we can learn from the words of Psalm 86 from which our text is taken.

This psalm has the heading *“A Prayer of David.”* There is only one other psalm that has this heading,¹ and surely, a prayer written by David, who was so close to God, can teach us how to pray. We can learn from David’s prayer the right way to pray. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Humility In Prayer

David begins his prayer with the words ¹ *Bow down Your ear, O LORD, hear me.* The English Standard Version translates it as, *“Incline Your ear, O Lord, and answer me.”*

David does not approach God on the same level, as one person approaches another. He is placing himself far, far beneath God, and He asks God, who is far, far above him, to bend an ear to him. He asks God to be like the doctor, who stands at the bedside of a suffering patient and bends over low, so as to be able to hear his patient’s heartbeat. Or to use another illustration, like the mother who stoops low over the bed of her little sick child to take care of its needs.

So David places himself in a very humble position before God, and his prayer is spoken in humility and meekness. He realises that he is unworthy to make his petition to God and that his only hope of being heard will be if God, so far above him, will bow down to him.

And that is the way that we must pray if our prayers are to be right. We must pray with humble hearts, realising our own unworthiness before God. We must realise that we are sinners before God, that our sin has made a gulf between us and God, and that we do not deserve to be heard by Him.

This position of humility in our prayer has been described very well in *Luther’s Small Catechism* in the words,² *We ask in this prayer that our Father in heaven would not hold our sins against us and because of them refuse to hear our*

prayer. And we pray that He would give us everything by grace, for we sin every day and deserve nothing but punishment.

That is the reason why we begin every Sunday Worship Service in our church with the confession of sins. We cannot approach God in any other way. We cannot pray in any other way. Before we even bring a prayer to God in our Worship Service, before we ask for anything at all, we first show God the true humility of our hearts, our knowledge of our sinfulness, and our sorrow over our iniquities. Only after this is done we make our petitions to God. Then our prayers are right, when they are made in true humility.

It is taught in the Bible that God expects such humility from us. In Psalm 10:17 we read, ¹⁷ ***LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will prepare their heart; You will cause Your ear to hear.*** In Psalm 34:18, ¹⁸ ***The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart.*** In Psalm 51:17, ¹⁷ ***The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart -- These, O God, You will not despise.***

And in 2 Chronicles 7:14, ¹⁴ ***“if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven.”*** That is the right way to pray, with humble hearts. If we come to God that way, we shall never be grieved if we have to wait for the fulfilment of our prayers.

We shall never think that God does not hear our prayers. We shall never have any doubts about prayer. We shall never blame God if we have to wait. We shall realise that it is only His love and mercy that make Him hear us at all. We shall be like the centurion who said to Jesus, ***“Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof.”***³

2. The Right Way To Pray Is With Trust And Confidence

The second pre-requisite for right prayer is trust and confidence. David prayed, ***You are my God; Save Your servant who trusts in You!*** David is not approaching God with a doubting heart. He does not question the promises that God has made. He is sure God will answer his prayer.

In another psalm, the 27th, David says, ***When You said, “Seek My face,” My heart said to You, “Your face, LORD, I will seek.”***⁴ In Psalm 145:18

David says, ¹⁸ ***The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth.***

All these promises for prayer David knew, and he believed them. Although he realised his unworthiness, he relied on God's promises and prayed with assurance, trust and confidence. He calls himself a servant who trusts in God.

That is the right way for us to pray. God has given us many great reasons to believe what He promises. We remember His promise in Psalm 50, ***"I will deliver you."*** We remember the words of Jesus, ⁸ ***"For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."***⁵ And then there is that strong assurance of the sincerity of God's promises, in Psalm 33:4, ⁴ ***For the word of the LORD is right, And all His work is done in truth.***

It does happen sometimes that a Christian's trust in God is weakened and his confidence is disturbed. The answer to our prayer does not seem to come. God makes us wait. Jesus made the Syrophenician woman wait, and she had to pray again and again. God tests our faith and trust by causing us to wait.

But when we begin to waver in our trust and wonder whether we can still have confidence in our God, then we recall God's many promises, we remember that God is faithful, as St. Paul wrote to Timothy, ***He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.***⁶ Then our trust is renewed and our confidence is restored.

This trust and confidence that we should have when we pray is made possible through our faith in Jesus, the Son of God, our Saviour. Because Jesus bore the sins that separated us from God in His body on the tree of the cross, He healed the breach between us and God and made us God's dear children.

Jesus obtained the Father's pardon for all His children by substituting for them on Calvary. Now we are God's dear children, and He hears our prayers gladly. And because Jesus said, ***"Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you,"***⁷ we can have the firm trust and confidence, as we pray, that God will hear us. That will make our prayer right.

It is for this reason that the Gospel for this Sunday, which you heard a little while ago, tells us, ***"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on.***

Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ *“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”*⁸ All this tells us that our heavenly Father knows our needs, that it is His purpose to take care of us, and that we may and should pray to Him with full trust and confidence.

3. Persistent Prayer

Then to pray rightly, we must also pray with unremitting persistence. David says in his prayer, *“Be merciful to me, O Lord, For I cry to You all day long.”* David’s prayer life was not haphazard and spasmodic. He did not pray only once in a while, at great intervals when some great emergency drove him to his knees.

He did not try prayer as a last resort, when all else failed. He was a much-praying child of God. And that is the right kind of praying, with unremitting persistence. It should be a part of our daily life. God wants it so. He tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, *¹⁷Pray without ceasing.*

By praying continually we learn the language of prayer. We learn to pray. Sometimes people say that they cannot pray, they do not know how, they cannot find words for prayer. This is because they have not learned the language of prayer. It has to be learned like every other language.

Of course, God understands English, but there is a language of prayer. The disciples of Jesus wanted to learn it, and when they asked Jesus to teach it to them, He did so in the Lord’s Prayer.

We can learn the beautiful language of prayer by reading the psalms and other parts of the Bible, and by using prayer books in our devotions. And we become familiar with prayer language when we use it often. You can learn a foreign language out of a book, but you do not really know it until you use it in talking to people. When we pray often and persistently, we learn the language of prayer.

There was once a man who bought a fire extinguisher for his home, put it away, and forgot all about it. Then one day a fire broke out in the house. He hunted for the fire extinguisher, but he could not find it. Finally, when he did find it, he did not know how to use it. And when he had read the directions, it

was rusty and the container was empty. That is what some people do about prayer. Let us not make a fire extinguisher of our prayer privilege!

Christians have endless occasions for prayer, in the morning and in the evening, at meals, in church, and Sunday school, and many other times. In days of joy and days of sorrow, in times of plenty and times of scarcity, at all occasions they “*take it to the Lord in prayer.*” And that is right prayer, persistent and unremitting prayer.

4. Thankful Prayer

Finally, prayer must be made with the intention to thank God for granting the petitions. David says in our text, ***Rejoice the soul of Your servant, For to You, O Lord, I lift up my soul.*** The expression “*rejoice the soul*” means “gladden the soul.” David is saying that God would make him glad by granting his prayer, so glad that he will lift up his soul in gratitude.

David will thank God for hearing his prayers. And that is what God expects of us. We remember the words of Psalm 50:15, ¹⁵ ***Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me***” and Psalm 118:1, ¹ ***Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.*** That is the reason that so many of the prayers we use in church and at home begin with the words “*We thank Thee, heavenly Father.*”

Thanksgiving to God also brings about another thing. Thanks in action. The Epistle lesson⁹ for this Sunday tells us, ¹ ***Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, ...*** ² ***Bear one another’s burdens, ...*** ⁹ ***And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.*** ¹⁰ ***Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.***

All this means that our hearts which are thankful to God should become loving and helpful to other people. Then our prayers are right, when we thank God for hearing our prayers.

We have now refreshed our memories and learned how to pray rightly, in humility, in trust, with persistence, and with thankful hearts.

And when we know how to do a thing well, and know that we are doing it the right way, we will do it gladly and will do it often. A person who knows how to play a musical instrument very well and also knows that he is playing it right will love to play it a great deal.

The Christian who knows how to pray and is sure that he is praying rightly will pray gladly and much. He will lead a life of prayer. Let that be our way of life, a life of prayer. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Psalm 17

² *Luther's Small Catechism*, Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer

³ Matthew 8:8

⁴ Psalm 27:7

⁵ Matthew 7:8

⁶ 2 Timothy 2:13

⁷ John 16:23

⁸ Matthew 6:25

⁹ Gal. 5: 25 - 6:10