

# How to Pray

**The Big Idea:** When we pray we open a connection with God.

**Learning Goal:** Learners will understand the role of prayer in the Christian life, different appropriate methods of prayer, and the benefits of spiritual discipline. **Students note: you will need your Lutheran Handbook and a Bible ready!**

**Opening:** Begin by sharing a high and a low from the past week or the recent past. When each person has had a chance to listen and to share, open your session together by praying the following prayer together, out loud.

## Opening Prayer

**L:** Lord Jesus, remember us in your kingdom, and hear us as we pray; *(repeat together the Lord's Prayer)* Amen

**Read:** Read the following together, either silently or out loud and pay attention to the questions that the reading brings! If you are comfortable doing so, it is most appropriate to deal with your thoughts and questions on the spot.

In Luke 11, one of Jesus' disciples requested, "Lord, teach us to pray..." Jesus responded with the words we now call the Lord's Prayer. He continued with this reassurance, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Luke 11:9).

It is true that human beings yearn to pray. We long for a connection with God, whether we can voice who that God is or not. At its most basic, prayer is our response to this yearning. The New Testament witness preserves the words of the Lord's Prayer, which, because it covers so many issues, captures for us the breadth of prayer's concerns.

The church through the centuries has made quite a bit of prayer. It is one of the premier spiritual disciplines, along with fasting and giving alms. The misfortune of this is that many believers have come to understand that prayer requires certain prerequisites, like ordination, or a particular holiness, or a gift with language or memory. Paul reminds us in Romans 8:26-27 that we don't have to worry about praying "as we ought" because the Spirit intercedes for us beyond what we even know.

The gift of the church's long attention is that many strategies for prayer have developed over the centuries, many of which are finding audiences today:

- *Lectio divina*: a slow, contemplative reading of scripture
- Reverential listening
- Meditation
- Centering prayer: repeating one word or a phrase from scripture

- Intercessory prayer: praying for others
- Lament
- Walking a labyrinth
- Praise and/or thanks

If we understand prayer to be our connection with God, it certainly is not restricted to a set of words or postures. For some, the deepest yearnings of the heart may be best carried by music, dance, or sculpture. For some, journaling can be prayer, as can a solitary walk in the woods. The question "How to pray?" can be answered in many, many ways.

Some also struggle with what to pray for or about. We have learned to pray for things such as health, wealth, wisdom, or luck. We may even pray for these things on behalf of others. New to some might be the idea of listening for God, waiting for the "still, small voice" that might lead us to new insight or awareness. Many of the old forms of prayer seek this kind of outcome.

Are any prayers more holy than others? None seem to be. Many Psalms, for example, are laments where the psalmist complains to God about the circumstances besetting him or her. Even demands to show up or answer are a part of lament. Few of us would imagine that our communication with God could include complaint as well as praise.

Luther would be careful to say that the pray-er is not the one who makes prayers effective. It is the receiver of the prayers, God, who discerns without effort what it is we need or long for. We would also confess that God reliably answers prayer, though Luther would say that God answers in God's own way and time. Luther was frustrated by many of the prayers he heard in his day, "not one of them asking for the least thing" (*Book of Concord*, Tappert, Large Catechism, Part Three: The Lord's Prayer, section 25).

Luther's real irritation is revealed in these words: "They only thought, at best, of doing a good work as a payment to God, not willing to receive anything from him, but only to give him something." Here is the danger in prayer. It is not about trying to butter up God, earn points in heaven, or any other such thing. We pray because we need to be connected to God, and because God has invited us to do so.

So, how to pray? Simply begin. If the routine of praying before meals helps to draw attention back to the source of our sustenance, there are many useful prayers already written that will do well. Some offer prayer before sleep, and some offer prayer as the first or early act of a new day. Luther himself wrote an evening and morning prayer that continue to be used in Lutheran liturgies.

Whether it is a matter of routine or a spontaneous appeal, prayer is God's gift to us. Whether it is oral or not, God will hear. And whether we know what we need or whether we simply come before God with an open heart and open mind, God will respond with love and attention.

## My Faith Story

Describe your own experience with prayer. Share circumstances when you felt thankful, in need, energized in a community, or alone and reflective. Is there a particular example of when you asked God for something, and the answer came in an unexpected way? Are there songs, gestures,

or times of worship that help you in your relationship with God? Was there a time when you were helped by others who prayed for you? For many, the Psalms are a treasury for daily prayer. Do you have a favorite Psalm you can share with the learners?

## Handbook Connection

Invite learners to open *The Lutheran Handbook* to pages 91-92, "How to Pray." Ask learners to highlight important concepts.

Try out the various types of prayers and the various positions for prayer presented in the handbook. Talk about them. Which are particularly helpful? Which are common in church? When would some of these seem inappropriate? How can other things in the environment (silence, dimmed light, candles) also help prayer?

## Bible Connection: Pray All Ways

- Have the learners find the Psalms in the middle of the Bible. It's the longest book in the Bible, with 150 Psalms in all! They are mostly prayers from a wide range of human experience. Find Psalm 23. Suggest that learners consider why this psalm has provided comfort for more people than perhaps any other psalm. Read Psalm 51. Find passages, such as verse 10, that are commonly used for songs in worship. Tell learners that many think this is a composition by King David after his sin with Bathsheba. What makes this a good prayer for confessing sins? Read Psalm 150, using percussion instruments as they are named. Remind learners that much of prayer is simply praise.
- Have learners read Luke 11:1-13, read aloud verses 1-4, 5-8, and 9-13. Jesus gave us an example of prayer that is said by Christians throughout the world. As you read verses 5-13, what does it say about God's willingness and desire to listen?

## More Bible Connections

Read Romans 8:26-27. In writing this letter, Paul encourages those in Rome to live "by the Spirit of Christ." In our own praying, it's not the right words that count, or the time we spend in prayer that's important, but that we come as we are to God. And sometimes being aware of God's presence, silently seeking God, is all that matters.

## Closing Questions

- How does prayer deepen our relationship to God?
- What new ways to pray have you thought about?
- What one new way of praying will you try this week?

## Key Words

INTERCESSION is a prayer for someone.

CONFESSION means admitting wrong or sin; a prayer of repentance.

BLESSING means asking God's gracious gifts for someone.

SUPPLICATION means a prayer that asks for something.

ADORATION is an expression of love or praise; a prayer of praise.

## Discussion Time

- Use recipe cards and invite youth to write out one-sentence prayers, asking God to help someone in need.
- When are times you'd like to ask God's blessing throughout the year and throughout the day? (Share your own thoughts about this question and affirm all responses.)
- Set out four candles, and light each in turn as you pray using the acronym ACTS: ADORATION (prayers of praise), CONFESSION, THANKSGIVING, SUPPLICATION (prayers asking for help). Invite one-line prayers that complete the sentences: "We adore you for...." "We confess to you...." "We thank you for...." "We ask you for...." (*Check your church's and city's fire policies before lighting candles.*)
- What is one need in the world that you'd like to bring to God? What can you, with others, also do to bring awareness of that need to others? (Share your own thoughts about this question and affirm all responses.)