

[A MARVELLOUS SERMON ON TRULY CHRISTIAN PRAYER.]

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter; John 16:23-30

1. We are accustomed to read today's Gospel on this Sunday because it treats of prayer and this week is called Rogation (Supplication) week, in which we give ourselves to prayer and to processions with crosses. Those who first instituted it, no doubt, meant it well, but it has proven to work harm. For, in the processions heretofore, many unchristian things have been practised, and there has been no praying at all or very little; so that the processions were rightly abolished and discontinued. Often have I admonished that we should persevere in prayer, for there is great need of it. Since the outward prating and muttering of prayer is done away with, we no longer pray in any way. This is a good indication that we heretofore, notwithstanding our many prayers, never prayed.

2. The Lord points out here five things necessary to constitute true prayer. The first is God's promise, which is the chief thing and is the foundation and power of all prayers. For he promises here that it shall be given us if we ask; and besides he swears: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, if ye shall ask anything of the Father, he will give it you in my name." He promises that we might be sure of being heard in prayer; yea, he censures the disciples for the reason that they are lazy and have not therefore been praying. As if he would say: God is ready to give more quickly, and to give more than you ask; yea, he offers his treasures if we only take them. It is truly a great shame and a severe chastisement for us Christians that God should still upbraid us for our slothfulness in prayer, and that we fail to let such a rich and excellent promise incite us to pray. We let this precious treasure lie there, and seek it not, nor exercise ourselves to receive the power in such a promise.

3. So God himself now founds our prayer upon his promise and thereby encourages us to pray. If it were not for this promise, who would have the courage to pray? We have hitherto resorted to many ways of preparing ourselves to pray--ways with which the books are filled; but if you wish to be well prepared, take the promise and lay hold of God with it. Then your courage and desire to pray will soon grow, which courage you will never otherwise get. For those who pray without God's promise, imagine in themselves how angry God is, whom they wish to propitiate by means of their prayers. Without faith in the promise, there is then, neither courage nor desire to pray, but mere uncertain delusion and a melancholy spirit; there is, therefore, no hearing of prayers, and both prayer and labour are lost.

4. By these words Christ now chastises the unbelief of those who, by reason of their foolish worship, consider themselves unworthy to pray, and gauge the worthiness of their prayer according to themselves and their own ability, and not according to the promise of God. There is then, to be sure, nothing but unworthiness. However, you should, by all means, be conscious of your own unworthiness, taking confidence not from your own doings, but from the promise of God, and be so completely conscious, that if you were all alone, and no one else in the world prayed, you would nevertheless pray, because of this promise. For you can point me to no true saint who prayed, depending upon his own worthiness, and who did not rely only upon God's promises, be he Peter, Paul, Mary, Elijah, or any one else. All of them have been unworthy. I would not give a nickel for all the prayers of a saint if he prayed because of his own worthiness.

5. The second requisite of true prayer, following that of God's promise, is faith--that we believe the

promise is true, and do not doubt that God will give what he promises. For the words of the promise require faith. But faith is a firm, undoubting confidence in God's promise that it is true; as James says: "But if any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting: for he that doubteth is like the surge of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." James 1, 5-7. Moreover, he who doubts and yet prays, tempts God; for he doubts in respect to God's will and grace. Therefore, his prayer is nothing and he gropes after God like the blind for the wall. John also speaks of this assurance of faith in I John 5, 14-15: "And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth: and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him." John describes with these words how a truly believing heart is disposed in prayer, namely, that it is concerned about nothing else than that its prayer be heard, knowing that it has even then obtained its petition. That is also true. Such faith and definite assurance, however, the Holy Spirit must impart; therefore, without the Holy Spirit, surely no prayer will be offered.

6 Try it, now, and pray thus. Then you will taste the sweetness of God's promise. What courage and consolation of heart it awakens to pray for all things! It matters not how great and high the petitions may be. Elijah was a man of like passions with ourselves; yet when he prayed, it did not rain for three years and six months, and when he again prayed it rained. I Kings, 17, 1; 18, 45. Notice, here you see a single man prays and by his prayer he is lord of the clouds, of heaven and earth. So God lets us see what power and influence a true prayer has, namely, that nothing is impossible for it to do.

7. Let everyone now ask his heart how often he has prayed during his whole life. Singing Psalms and saying the Lord's Prayer is not called praying. These are instituted for children and untutored people, as exercises, to make them athletes in the Scriptures. Your prayer, however, no one but yourself sees and feels in your heart, and you will truly know it, when it hits the mark.

8. The third requisite of true prayer is, that one must name definitely something that he brings to God or for which he prays; as for strong faith, for love, for peace, and for the comfort of his neighbour. One must actually set forth the petitions; just as the Lord's Prayer presents seven petitions. This is what Christ means by the words: "If ye shall ask anything of the Father." "Anything," that is, whatever you are in need of. Besides, he himself interprets this "anything" and says: "That your joy may be made full." That is, pray for all things you need, until you have acquired even all and your joy is made full; and his prayer will first be fully answered on the day of judgment.

9. The fourth element in true prayer is that we must desire, or wish that the petition be granted, which is nothing but asking; as Christ says, "Ask." Others have called this "Ascensum mentis in Deum," when the soul ascends to God and desires something from him, and sighs from its depths, saying: Oh, that I had this or that! Such sighing St. Paul praises in Rom 8, 26. It is an intercession of the Spirit that cannot be uttered. That is, the mouth wants to, but cannot speak as rapidly and strongly as the heart desires; the yearning is greater than any words and thoughts. Hence it is, also, that man himself does not feel how deep his sighing or desire is. When Zacchaeus sought to see the Lord, he himself did not feel how strongly his heart wished that Christ might speak with him and come into his house. However, when his desire was fulfilled, he was very happy, for he had succeeded according to all his wishes and prayers; he had received more than he had dared to ask by word of mouth, or desire. Lk 19, 2ff. Moses, likewise, cried so that God spoke to him: "Wherefore criest thou unto me?" Ex 14, 15, and yet his mouth kept silence; but his heart, in its extremity, sighed deeply and that was called crying unto God. In like manner St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: "God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." Eph 3, 20. Now, temptation, anxiety and trouble induce this sighing; they teach us what true sighing is.

10. The fifth requisite of true prayer is, that we ask in the name of Christ, This is nothing more than that

we come before God in the faith of Christ and comfort ourselves with the sure confidence that he is our Mediator, through whom all things are given to us, without whom we merit nothing but wrath and disgrace. As Paul says to the Romans: "Through whom also we have had our access by faith into this grace wherein we stand; and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Rom 5, 2. It is praying aright in Christ's name, when we thus trust in him that we will be received and heard for his sake, and not for our own sake. Those, however, who pray in their own name, who presume that God will hear or regard them, because they say so many, such long, such devout, such godly prayers, will merit and obtain nothing but wrath and disgrace; for they wish to be people whom God should regard without a mediator. To them, Christ here is of no consideration, nor is he of any service.

11. We observe that all five requisites of prayer may be complied with in the heart, without any utterance of the mouth. The oral part of prayer is really not to be despised, but it is necessary to kindle and encourage prayer inwardly, in the heart. The additional conditions, however, of which I have written enough elsewhere, should and must be omitted that we specify to God the time, person, place, and measure. We must leave all that to his own free will, and cling only to asking; we must not doubt that the prayer is heard, and that what we petitioned is already ordered--that it will be given--as certainly as if we already had it. This is pleasing to God and he will do as he here promises: "Ask, and ye shall receive." Those, however, who set the time, place and measure, tempt God, and believe not that they are heard or that they have obtained what they asked; therefore, they also receive nothing. The Gospel lesson continues: "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name."

12. It may be that they knew, as yet nothing of such prayer, and of this name; besides they felt no need that urged them to pray in this name. They imagined that so long as Christ was with them they needed nothing and had enough of everything. But, now that he is to separate from them and leave them, trouble immediately comes and they will have reason enough to move them to pray. "These things have I spoken unto you in parables (dark sayings)."

13. When he says, "these things," he means that which he had just before spoken: "A little while, and ye behold me not; and again a little while, and ye shall see me;" and, "Because I go to the Father;" also, the parable of the woman in travail. For these were nothing but parables, that is, dark-obscure sayings, which they did not understand. John calls these dark, hidden sayings "parables," although the German language does not designate them so, but calls them enigmas or veiled sayings. We are accustomed to say of one who has uttered an enigmatical saying: "That is a covered dish or a covered meal," when the words have a meaning not on the surface. In parables, the meaning to be conveyed is expressed in a way that not everyone understands. Of this nature were all the sayings of Christ, which he spoke to his disciples on the night of his farewell and his going to the Father; they could understand nothing of them. They thought his going would not be dying and coming into another existence; they thought of it as a pleasure walk and that Christ should return in the body, as one journeys to another country and returns. Therefore, although he spoke plainly and clearly, yet going and parting were a "covered meal" to them. Hence, he adds: "The hour cometh when I shall no more speak unto you in dark sayings (parables), but shall tell you plainly of the Father."

14. That is, what I now speak to you, while in the body, and my parables ye understand not, which I will thoroughly explain to you through the Holy Spirit. I will plainly speak of my Father, that you may then understand who the Father is and what my going to the Father means. You will clearly see how I ascend through suffering into the Father's life and into his kingdom; that I sit at his right hand and represent you and am your mediator; that all this is done for your sake, that you may likewise come to the Father. "I shall tell you plainly of the Father" is not to be understood to mean that he will tell us much about God's divine nature, as the sophists fancy; for that is unnecessary and the divine nature of God is incomprehensible. But Christ will tell us how he goes to the Father, how he takes upon himself the kingdom and government of the Father; as a king's son returns to his father and assumes the government

of the kingdom. Christ says further: "In that day ye shall ask in my name."

15. For then, in your many tribulations, you will have not only reason to pray, but will also know and perceive what my name is and how you should esteem me. Then will you be taught by praying itself what you now do not at all understand, and that hitherto you have never prayed. Therefore, he adds: "And I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: for the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father."

16. How, then? Will Christ not be our mediator? Shall we not pray in his name? How lovingly and sweetly the Lord can speak, and woo us to himself, and, through himself, to the Father! Here he, himself, explains how it will be when we pray in his name: "Ye," he says, "have loved me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father." That is, ye love me and know me; have me and my name and are in me as I in you. For Christ dwells in us, not because we can think, speak, sing or write so much about him; but because we love him and believe in him. We know that he is come from the Father and returns to the Father; that is, how he emptied himself, in his passion, of all his divine glory and returned again to the Father in his kingdom, for our sake. This faith brings us to the Father, and thus all then is done in his name.

17. So we are sure that Christ needs not to pray for us, for he has already prayed for us. We, ourselves, may now approach through Christ, and pray. We no longer need a Christ who prays for us. This one Christ is enough, he who has prayed for us and accomplished this work. Therefore, he says: "The Father himself loveth you." It is not your merit, but his love. He loves you, but for my sake, because you believe on me and love me; that is, he has regard for my name in you. Hence, thereby have I fulfilled my office, and you are now brought, through me, to where you may yourselves, in my place, appear in his presence and pray. It is not necessary that I still pray for you. These are marvellous words, that we, through Christ, become like Christ and are his brethren, and may glory in being children of his Father, who loves us for Christ's sake. He says in John 1 16, 'Grace for Grace," that is, God is gracious unto us, because he is gracious to Christ, who is in us and we in him.

18. And here we also see that to "believe in Christ" does not mean to believe that Christ is a person who is both God and man; that does not help any one. But that this same person is the Christ; that is, that he went forth from the Father and came into the world, and again leaves the world and goes to the Father. The words mean no less than that this is Christ, that he became man and died for us, rose again and ascended to heaven. Because of this office of his, he is called Jesus Christ, and to believe this concerning him, that it is true, means to be and to abide in his name. There follows further in this Gospel: "His disciples say, Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no dark sayings."

19. Here you see that to speak "plainly" ("frei heraus"), or to speak in clear terms, means to speak without parables, or without dark and covered words. And the good disciples think they understand very well what he tells them, that Christ comes from the Father and goes to the Father; but they do this as good, pious children of Christ. They are easily able to understand it, and in love they tell him so. In ordinary conversation, people sometimes say to one another Yes or No, or give assent, saying, It is so, and in a sense one understands, even though he is still far from the meaning of another's words. In such case the conversation is without hypocrisy and in true simplicity. The Evangelist hereby shows what a beautiful, plain, friendly and loving life Christ led with his disciples, since they were so very able to understand him. Then the disciples say further: "Now know we that thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask thee."

20. That is, you anticipate and explain yourself and speak no more in parables, concerning which we must question you; for you know in advance where we are lacking in understanding. All this reverts to the fact that they wished to ask what the "little while" meant, and he noticed it and explains by saying that he

must go to the Father; which they still did not understand, and yet it was clearer than his words: "A little while and ye will not see me." Now, because he saw their thoughts--that they wished to question him--they confessed that he comes from God and knows all things, so that we need not to ask him, for he himself sees very well where the trouble is.

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