

God's pattern for theologians begins with prayer

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. [Amen].

Everyone is a theologian. Being a theologian simply means thinking or speaking about God. So, even if the atheist goes for days or months without pondering a higher being, eventually things happen. Accidents, tragedies, natural disasters, mass shootings, illness and suffering. Or, on the flip side, maybe unexpected happiness and success, love, and even an escape from what should have been death.

The point is that even the least godly people in the world are confronted with situations that eventually leave them saying "God isn't real," or if He is then they say, "Bless Him" or "Curse Him." Sooner or later the changes and chances of this life leave everyone wondering if there's some greater plan to it all or it's just some random happenstance. Sooner or later people start thinking about God and before they know it, they've become a theologian.¹ Just ask the guys who walk around all day in collars and they'll tell you that everybody has some thoughts about God.

But even though the title of theologian is fundamental to every human, the fact of the matter is that theology – that is the word about God – is not something to be taken lightly. The Scriptures are very clear that there are both orthodox and heterodox theologians – that is, both good and bad, literally both right and wrong. In the end, as we heard a few weeks ago, there are sheep and then there are goats. The importance of right theology becomes apparent in the Scriptures when Jesus says to the sheep,

*"Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom" and to the goats, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire."*²

Theology has eternal consequences – heaven belongs to those who get it right and hell to those who get it wrong. And because of the seriousness of this endeavor, the question automatically becomes, what exactly makes someone a good theologian? Or rather, how does one become a good theologian?

¹ See G. Forde, *On Being A Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 10-11.

² Matthew 25:34, 41.

Our midweek Advent series for this year, will explore the threefold pattern presented by King David in Psalm 119 – a pattern God uses to make us into right theologians. This historic and more importantly biblical way of studying theology can be summed with the three Latin words *oratio, meditatio and tentatio* – that is, prayer, meditation and temptation.³

In Psalm 119 King David repeatedly prays

*“teach me Lord, instruct me, lead me, and show me.”*⁴

And after praying to receive the Holy Spirit, the psalmist meditates on the Word of God:

*Oh how I love your law, he says, It is my meditation all the day.*⁵

Then, his faith is attacked by the trials of this life and the devil who seeks to pry the Word out of his hands and away from his heart. So, in the midst of temptation, David cries –

*O Lord, look on my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget your law.*⁶

All through Psalm 119 you will see the pattern of prayer, meditation and temptation. This is the pattern that God uses to turn self-righteous hypocrites into self-forsaking beggars. It is the way that God makes right theologians. And understanding who is doing the verbs here really is the heart of theology. Only God knows the way to eternal life, and only He can give it. The Holy Spirit alone makes true theologians, not us.

So, this prayer, meditation and temptation as found in Psalm 119 is not the three easy steps to your best life now and it’s not a guidebook to spiritual success. It’s not even, properly speaking, something that we as Christians do or pursue. It is the receptive life of faith. Just like salvation, justification and sanctification, God does the work in us and through us. To use the words of the apostle Paul from our reading,

*He who began a good work in you all, will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*⁷

When it comes to right theology, God begins the work and He ends it.

From our current context in the Church year then, we know that even though the season of Advent is one of preparation, this shouldn’t be understood as the process through which

³ See Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings (1539),” in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960) p. 283-88.

⁴ Psalm 119.

⁵ Psalm 119:97.

⁶ Psalm 119:153.

⁷ Philippians 1:6.

sinner's prepare to come into the presence of the Divine. Advent literally means a "coming." And in this coming it is God who comes to us, not the other way around. And like Advent, theology is not about ascending to the heavens in some out of body spiritual experience. In fact, if we try to use human reason or harness the power of our own spirituality to ascend into heaven, just like Satan, we will plunge ourselves into hell.⁸ Theology, like Advent, is not about you ascending to God, it's about God descending to you – God descending in the flesh to seek and save the lost and God giving you the Holy Spirit that you might believe in Christ and trust in His righteousness.

Keeping in mind God's work, this evening we take a closer look at prayer, the first component of this passive way of becoming a right theologian. In our text from Luke's Gospel we hear that true prayer lives and breathes only within the Word of God. As one of my professors put it, "Prayer does not begin in the human heart but in the hearing of God's gracious words of life and salvation spoken to us in the Gospel of His Son."⁹ Prayer begins with God. That is why when one of Jesus' disciples wanted to know how to pray he came to the Living Word first and asked,

*"Lord, teach us to pray."*¹⁰

Prayer is often described as conversation with God. And while this is true, our text from Luke reminds us that in Christian prayer God always gets the first word. Our petitions, thanksgivings and intercessions are shaped by the Word of God itself. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us that in prayer we are asking God our Father to give us those things that He has already promised to give us. And really that is where the confidence to speak to God in prayer in the first place comes from. Our confidence comes not from ourselves but from the promise that God will hear us. As Jesus says,

*"Ask and it will be given to all of you."*¹¹

And really, it's not that sinners don't know how to ask for things; parents of young children probably know that the best. But the truth is that sinners, the terrible theologians that they are, apart from God telling them what they need, they not only ask for things that could be

⁸ See, J. Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes A theologian?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 66/3 (2002) p 255-67.

⁹ See, J. Pless, "Prayer: The Voice of Faith," *For the Life of the World*, Vol. 3, N.2 (April 1999), p. 10.

¹⁰ Luke 11:1.

¹¹ Luke 11:9.

harmful to them, but they often ask for too little. The famous example from Scripture of a misguided prayer is when the sons of Zebedee unknowingly ask for their own death:

“Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask... Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory...” And so, Jesus says, “You do not know what you are asking.”¹²

The struggle in prayer is the same as the struggle in faith. The Old Adam wants to get his way over and against the New Man. And because of this reality, when prayer is divorced from God’s Word it’s transformed into a weapon that sinners would use against God in a sad attempt to get their own way. Hence the common question: “Is it wrong pray for a new Cadillac?”

Prayer is not some tool we use to get things from God nor is it even a means of grace. Rather, prayer flows from the means of grace and points us back to them. In the holy conversation of prayer God directs us to His Word, where He Himself tells us what He gives, and therefore what we should ask to receive. This means that prayer by itself has no great value to us spiritually, but prayer derives its benefits from its source – the Word of God.

So, prayer, like the study of theology, begins with looking to something outside of ourselves. And that’s why the Lord’s Prayer begins the way it does:

“Our Father who art in heaven.”¹³

In Luke’s recording of the Lord’s Prayer he even gets to the point quicker with the single word, “Father.”¹⁴ In this one-word address, our eyes are directed away from ourselves and to the very Source of all goodness Himself – God the Father.

The petitions that follow the introduction of “Father” show us what it means to be in the Father-Son relationship delivered to us in our baptism. This relationship is one were God gives and we receive. And more than that, the Lord’s Prayer emphasizes not just gifts and the One who gives them, but also where these gifts are found.

“Hallowed be your name,”¹⁵

God’s Name is holy on its own and it is kept holy among us when God causes the Word to be taught in truth and purity and we live holy lives according to it.

“Your kingdom come.”¹⁶

¹² Mark 10:35-38.

¹³ Matthew 6:9.

¹⁴ Luke 11:2a.

¹⁵ Luke 11:2b.

¹⁶ Luke 11:2c.

God's Kingdom comes when He gives us His Holy Spirit through the Word.

"Give us each day our daily bread."¹⁷

As the Word promises, God gives daily bread to all people.

"Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who us indebted to us."¹⁸

God offers the forgiveness of sins to all people in the Word.

"Lead us not into temptation."¹⁹

God doesn't lead us into temptation, but through baptism, absolution, and the Lord's Supper – that is the Word attached to visible elements – He delivers us from evil.

The Lord's Prayer shows us that Christian prayers should be spoken in the confidence that God's Word actually is a means of grace. And so, when it comes to right theology and becoming a good theologian, a task accomplished only through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is teaching us in the Lord's Prayer that the Word of God is the only channel through which He wants to give us the Spirit. Ultimately then the Lord's Prayer is inviting us to ask God to make us true theologians.

And, when we pray for the Holy Spirit to make us right theologians we are not praying for special extra biblical insight or direct mental guidance. We are praying to receive the Spirit where He comes to us – in the external Word – the Word outside of ourselves – the Word read from the lectern, preached from the pulpit, spoken and sung in unison by the congregation – the Word of the Scriptures.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer we are praying to receive the things that God wants to give us where He has promised to give them. And that means that in the end, like Paul's prayer for the Church in Philippi, we are praying for God's greatest gift – the gift that goes hand in hand with right theology, the gift of eternal life in Christ. You'll recall that Paul says,

It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of His righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.²⁰

¹⁷ Luke 11:3.

¹⁸ Luke 11:4a.

¹⁹ Luke 11:4b.

²⁰ Philippians 1:9-10.

Paul prays that God would make His people into right theologians. And how does one become a right theologian? For this evening, we hear that first, one must recognize that God alone gives eternal life. He alone, through the Holy Spirit, by the power of His Word, makes true theologians. He alone prepares us to receive the Advent of His Son. The correct way to study theology – to think and talk about God, to know Him rightly– begins with God giving His Holy Spirit through the Word. And so, Jesus invites us to pray saying,

“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.”²¹

Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all human understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. [Amen.]

December 6, 2017

Catalina Lutheran Church

Midweek Advent 1 [*Oratio*]

Luke 11:1-13, Philippians 1:1-11

Vicar Jesse Schlie

²¹ Luke 11:13.