

## **The Heidelberg Catechism on Prayer**

### **Introductory Comment on The Heidelberg Catechism**

The Heidelberg Catechism is no museum piece. In fact, of all the texts from the Reformation era, it is one of the most accessible to today's readers. Why so? Because it expresses Christian faith and hope in an instructive way, with simple, straightforward questions and answers.

This catechism has always been appreciated for its practicality by readers aspiring to lead a holy life in the service of the Lord. Its authors have taken care to speak directly of the biblical faith, as evidenced, for example, by the first question: « What is our only assurance in life and in death? » Such a fundamental question calls for a straightforward answer: « I belong, body and soul, not to myself, but to Jesus Christ, my faithful Saviour. » So Jesus Christ offers "total coverage", complete security whatever happens in life. Thanks to Jesus' faithfulness and sure promises, we need not fear being left to our own devices. This assurance underpins all the answers in the Catechism which also includes numerous biblical texts to clarify the meaning of the answers given.

It was at the request of Frederick III, the Elector of the Palatinate in Germany, that the Catechism was written by a young team of two theologians working in Heidelberg: Gaspar Olivetan, then aged 26, and Zachary Ursinus, who was 29.

Published in 1563, the Catechism was used by a growing number of churches and Christians around the world. It is still used today on every continent.

The Catechism is divided into 52 "Sundays". A large part (Sundays 5 to 31) presents a commentary on the Apostles' Creed (God the Father and our creation, the Son and our redemption, the Holy Spirit and our sanctification); Sundays 32 to 52 focus on how to express gratitude in the Christian life. The central idea is that the Christian is united to Jesus Christ, his Lord and Savior, and is thus called to behave in such a way that the Lord's presence shines out visibly in his life. Questions 120 to 127 provide teaching on prayer, through the lens of the Lord's prayer.

In many churches today, the Catechism is still used as a guide not only for instruction given on Sundays in sermons or Bible studies, but also for

personal meditation on faith, hope and love, the central elements of the believer's life.

### **Introductory Comment on The Lord's Prayer**

People think prayer is some kind of vague meditation, or perhaps what you do in a fix.

Not so. In the Bible it is asking God for what He has promised to be and to do. This is why the Lord's prayer begins with Father. That means two things.

Firstly, God is a loving father. He really hears and answers. Secondly, prayer thanks God for all He is and does. Praise blossoms in our hearts when we feel God's fatherly presence.

There is no real prayer without these two things. If we don't know God personally, we won't ask him for anything, even less be thankful.

The prayer Jesus gave his disciples shows this concretely. Firstly, Jesus tells us to acknowledge God for who He is. In the first three requests we pray that:

- God's name may be made holy in everything
- his kingdom may come everywhere
- his will may be done by everyone.

There is an order in this. If we recognise who God is, our hearts will be inclined to serve him and we will want to please him. Glorify God and enjoy it!

Secondly, given that we can petition God about our three big problems. In the second part of Jesus' prayer we pray for:

- daily needs, both ours and those of others
- forgiveness of sin and peace, personal and social
- freedom from evil and its destructive consequences.

There is an order here too: we pray for God's care in the physical, psychological and spiritual aspects of our lives. Jesus tells us to ask and trust!

God rules. We learn this through experience, even if learning is difficult when we do it our way. Prayer reminds us to depend on God. Just do it!

## Commentary

### LORD'S DAY 46

120 Q. Why did Christ command us to call God “our Father”?

A. To awaken in us  
at the very beginning of our prayer what should be basic to our  
prayer—  
a childlike reverence and trust  
that through Christ God has become our Father, and that just as our  
parents do not refuse us the things of this life,  
even less will God our Father refuse to give us  
what we ask in faith.<sup>1</sup>

1. Matt. 7:9-11; Luke 11:11-13

Prayer is essentially asking God for what he has promised to give us. Christians know and address God as their Father in prayer. This means two things.

Firstly, because God is our heavenly Father, he is well disposed toward us, to listen and to answer our requests. His heart is full of love toward us, and whatever happens in our lives, he never wishes our ill. « All things God works together for good for those who love him » (Rm 8.28). When God does not answer David's earnest requests for the life of his son, conceived in adultery, it is according to God's wisdom, and for David's good that the answer « No » is given (2 Sam 12.16,22,23). Even then, when we have been sinful, God's Fatherly attitude does not cease !

Secondly, in the HC, prayer takes its place in the Christian life as an attitude of thanks for all God has done for us. It is because we really know God as our Father, that we can express praise to him. We know him in way different from the theoretical knowledge of god the philosophers seek. We know him as the covenant God, who spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and who speaks and saves us in Jesus the Son.

There is no real prayer without the reality of these two factors in our lives. If we do not know God as Father in a personal way, we will not be inclined to ask anything of him, except perhaps in desperation, when need

swells up in a despairing human heart, leading people to call on God, in whom they otherwise do not believe or trust and who they would not seek if they were not in need. This often happens in cases when people feel helpless, such as when it is known an airplane is going to crash. Or when unbelievers are angry against God and are inclined to « curse him and die » (Jb 2.9) or just shout « Why ?».

So « reverence » and « trust » are essential to prayer, as its « grounds ». The structure of the Lord's prayer for his disciples itself illustrates this. Because we acknowledge God for who he really is, we are free to make requests for the concrete aspects of daily life. These attitudes show that we accept the Lordship of God over our lives. God is sovereign, and he can do, according to his holy will, what we request. But he is also a loving God and as such, we can fully place our confidence in him for all things. This « childlike » relation to God is not something which is automatic, it is learned in our daily lives. Sometimes the learning is a difficult experience for us, if we are disobedient children who want their own way.

However, learning is possible, as God is our Father « through Christ », who himself « learned obedience through the things he suffered » (Hb 5.8). So it is the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, who is also the Spirit of prayer, who unites us to the Lord Jesus and helps us to conform our lives to his model.

That is why prayer is also in the name of Jesus. In fact, when God the Father looks at his children, he looks at them in and through Jesus Christ. Because as believers we are united to the Son through faith, God can no more be indifferent to us and our needs than he can be indifferent to his own Son. This is a source of great assurance, blessing and boldness, as we come into God's presence and pray day by day.

Jesus himself made the same point in his teaching about prayer (Mt 7.7-11). Jesus encourages us to « ask, seek and knock », because asking will be answered, seeking will mean finding and knocking will mean an open door. This repetition means that we are to persist, to persevere, in prayer with the conviction that God is well disposed to us, even when the answer does not come right away.

Jesus adds an illustration to this command. If a son asks for bread, will a father give him a stone, or if he asks for fish, will a snake be given ? Jesus intentionally exaggerates. If human fathers do not act like this, no

more will the divine Father : « How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask of him ! »

This shows how silly it is for us as children not to believe and trust concretely in God as the answer to all our needs and problems. God is the Father who not only hears but also answers prayers ! The big thing that we must learn as Christians is that when we try to make things happen for ourselves by going down the road of independence and unbelief, we always make matters worse, but when we bring things to the Cross and leave them there, God always takes care of them. He is able to do way beyond what we can imagine from our limited point of view.

121 Q. Why the words “in heaven”?

A. These words teach us

not to think of God’s heavenly majesty as something earthly,<sup>1</sup>  
and to expect everything needed for body and soul from God’s  
almighty power.<sup>2</sup>

1. Jer. 23:23-24; Acts 17:24-25

2 Matt. 6:25-34; Rom. 8:31-32)

We already know that God is our Father. However, now it is added that God is in heaven. This is a wonderful way of informing us in a few words that if God is near to us, as the Lord he is also above all things in his power, wisdom and eternity. As Paul says in his famous doxology : “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rm 11.36). All things come from God as their origin, but he is also present by his nearness in and through all things, which also have their goal and are directed to him.

When we pray it is all too easy to forget that. The words we use when addressing God are not like any other words, because of the person we are talking to. A great danger is to forget that God in heaven is not like anything or anybody else. This means that prayer is a unique privilege and experience. We cannot talk to God as we would to an earthly dignitary, like a king or the pope with all the formulas of respect, or even as we would talk to our friends in a familiar and trivial way.

A good illustration of this attitude is what happened when Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was leading his congregation in prayer in London in 1943. A German flying bomb passed just overhead with a terrific noise and exploded nearby, covering the people with plaster. But the preacher continued his prayer as though nothing had happened! Talking to God was at that point the only thing that mattered in the world, so important that it could not be interrupted for any reason, not even an enemy bomb.

So when you pray, switch off the mobile phone and guard against all interruption! This is why Jesus exhorts: “when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen.” (Mt 6.6) To truly pray, we must be very careful of what we say and concentrate all our

attention in an undivided way on God. In prayer we must always guard against triviality, fixed formulas, frivolity. In public prayer, we must avoid using prayer as a means of spreading gossip, which means that we are talking to others not to God.

For this reason, Jesus adds: “when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Mt 6.7)

A life of prayer has fixed times and places. It is also a discipline which is necessary because, at these moments, we must really be alone with the Father and consecrate ourselves totally to him. This is also why we close our eyes and fold our hands, not a meaningless act, but a sign that now earthly concerns and activities cease, because we are with God who is “unseen”. It is the responsibility of each Christian to create and guard these special times of communion with God in our life.

What motivates these attitudes ? It is the *majesty* of the God of the Bible. Calvin says that we can have perfect confidence in him not only because of his “paternal love toward us, but also because of his *infinite power*... When Scripture says God is in heaven, it means that everything is under his dominion and that all things are maintained by his action, since his power works everywhere by his providence...So when we think of him, we can imagine nothing small, low or earthly, because God surpasses everything that is in the world.”

Knowledge of this astounding fact encourages us; we have direct access through Christ, to the eternal and all-powerful God! Too often we forget that the God to whom we pray is the one who is over all things, which includes also the problems of daily life which continue to get us down. He is able to hear and answer – “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we have asked of him”. (1 Jn 5.14,15)

Martin Luther knew many trials in his life, and perhaps for this reason, he made his own prayer from the beginning of Jesus’ prayer: “Alas, my

Father, you are in heaven; and I, your miserable child am on earth, in exile, far from you, amidst dangers, in desolations and distress...” This perspective, that God listens and helps us in our abandonment, lights a new flame in our hearts and gives an ardor in prayer, in situations where God alone can help.



## LORD'S DAY 47

122 Q. What does the first petition mean?

A. "Hallowed be your name" means:

Help us to truly know you,

to honor, glorify, and praise you

for all your works

and for all that shines forth from them:

your almighty power, wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and truth.<sup>2</sup>

And it means,

Help us to direct all our living — what we think, say, and do —

so that your name will never be blasphemed because of us but

always honored and praised.<sup>3</sup>

1 Jer. 9:23-24; 31:33-34; Matt. 16:17; John 17:3

2 Ex. 34:5-8; Ps. 145; Jer. 32:16-20; Luke 1:46-55, 68-75; Rom.  
11:33-36

3 Ps. 115:1; Matt. 5:16

Prayer begins with thought of who God is, and what first comes to mind about God is his holiness. "Be holy as I am holy" is the message for the covenant people that runs through all of the Bible. And so it is quite natural that Jesus recommends us to begin at this point. Thought of the *holiness* of God will lead to his *reign*, and this will lead in turn to desire to do his *will*. The first three petitions of the Lord's prayer concerning God fit like a hand in a glove.

Jesus was not telling his disciples anything they did not know. The *Quaddisch*, a traditional Jewish prayer at the time of death, is amazingly like the first part of Jesus' prayer: "Glorified and *sanctified* be your great Name – Amen – in the world created according to his *will*, and may the *reign* be established during our life over all the house of Israel, promptly and soon, Amen." However, Jesus gives his prayer not for the dead, but for the living and their lives!

The sanctification of God's name may seem paradoxical. How can we ever add to God's own holiness? Perhaps not any more than we can add

water to a bucket that is already full! However, if we are told to pray for this, it is for a very good reason. What exactly are we praying for?

Sanctifying God's name is not adding to his glory, which is impossible. We pray that *God himself*, which is what his name means, might be sanctified to ourselves, *in us* and in our lives. The first way we do this is by placing the knowledge of God above all else in our thoughts as the most precious thing we have in life, by "knowing God aright". Our thoughts about God must correspond to who he really is. We cannot reduce him to the level of a cosmic Father Christmas, or worse, to that of an idol, by thinking that he is like other gods and not unique. Not knowing God in this way lands us in an illusion, just as any form of erring is straying from the right track.

We also sanctify God when we appreciate his glory in all his works of creation and redemption, which reveal just how powerful and wise he is. Meditation on these realities leads us to *worship*, as we praise God for his own "wisdom, goodness righteousness, mercy and truth". In these attributes we really recognise how well disposed God is toward us and to all his creatures. This is really fundamental to being a Christian. For believers, these characteristics of God are *a priori*, in the sense that to think that God is unwise, unmerciful or untrue is to make God a liar.

The more truth we can have about God, the better it is for us. Calvin knew that the knowledge of God and ourselves go together, and for the Reformer, who started his *Institutes* with this statement, true knowledge of God is piety and reverence expressed in all of life. There can be no compartmentalising God to the "spiritual" realm.

Many well-meaning people today have an anti-intellectual approach to God and reduce him to what they can feel or experience as individuals. We hear people speaking about "truth for me" or singing, as Frank Sinatra did, "I did it my way". But if our truth is not God's truth, it invariably is error masquerading as truth. This is "the emperor's new clothes" of our day, but really it is nakedness! This way is not the Bible way of sanctifying God's name.

Christians must always guard against a deadly danger, which easily overtakes us all, however good we may think we are. That is the risk of dishonoring the Lord we confess in the way we think of him, in what we say about him and by acting in a way that is in contradiction to our confession. This brings shame upon the name of God, as it is a denial in practice of what we maintain in theory. We can do this every time we compromise with the world, the flesh or the devil. Our calling is to guard ourselves from idols, which involves turning away from the living and true God. If we turn away, then others will be misled and can even mock God because of how we behave. How much we would like *not* to have to say sometimes to those weak in the faith, or to outsiders, “don’t look at the church or at me, look at the Lord”!

Luther made another fine prayer on this subject: “Loving Father, I confess that I have often dishonored your name, so help me, by your grace, that my name might be reduced to *nothing* in me, so that you alone, your name and your honor might reign in me.”

## LORD'S DAY 48

123 Q. What does the second petition mean?

A. "Your kingdom come" means:

Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way

that more and more we submit to you.<sup>1</sup> Preserve your church and make it grow.<sup>2</sup>

Destroy the devil's work;

destroy every force which revolts against you and every conspiracy against your holy Word.<sup>3</sup>

Do this until your kingdom fully comes, when you will be all in all.<sup>4</sup>

1 Ps. 119:5, 105; 143:10; Matt. 6:33

2 Ps. 122:6-9; Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:42-47

3 Rom. 16:20; 1 John 3:8

4 Rom. 8:22-23; 1 Cor. 15:28; Rev. 22:17, 20

There is a great deal of confusion about the kingdom of God. This subject is made so complicated and abstract that its power and reality disappear in a multitude of distinctions.

The good news of the kingdom is much more transparent and direct in the teaching of Jesus. God's kingdom is wherever God himself is present in his power, particularly where Jesus is : "the kingdom of God is within you", where the Holy Spirit dwells (Lc 17.21) ; the kingdom will be finalised when Jesus returns in glory : "every knee will bow and every tongue confess" Christ as Lord (Ph 2.11). When Jesus returns he will "hand over the kingdom to God" who will be "all in all". (1 Co 15.24-28)

The kingdom concerns us too. The teacher who questions Jesus was "not far from the kingdom of God" (Lc 12.34). Nicodemus is told that one must "see the kingdom" and enter it by being born again (Jn 3.5). When we pray for the coming of the kingdom all these aspects are in view – its presence and future, but also the fact that we are subjects of the kingdom because we have entered it by faith and are called to serve the King.

However, just as God is an unseen Spirit , so his kingdom is a spiritual mystery, discerned by faith, because the “kingdom is not of the world.”(Jn 18.36)

So the kingdom of God is a dynamic reality. This means that those who recognise and confess the Lordship of Jesus can play a part in the coming of the kingdom. They do so by submission to the Word of God and the work of the Spirit, by humble obedience and service. The Word and Spirit are the instruments through which Jesus, who is not present now, exercises his kingly authority from heaven. They are the only means by which the kingdom advances until his return in glory.

This means that we must avoid a mistake that has dogged Christianity throughout its history. The kingdom does not advance by political power and the projects of human authorities. We cannot say the church *is* the kingdom of God, it is only ever a sign of its presence through faithful witness. Nor can we think that “Christian nations” advance the work of the kingdom by territorial conquests or inquisitions that oblige mass conversions.

One of the greatest criticisms against the Christian faith comes from the abuse of power in the name of the gospel. This does not “preserve and increase” the church, but can only be a hindrance to the advance of the gospel. A church can do the work of antichrist, as Luther and Calvin claimed the pope was doing at the time of the reformation. Today in western Europe we have a unique opportunity for witness to the kingdom, since after centuries of “Christendom” we are again in the situation of the early church, surrounded by a pagan culture. The Lord is providentially giving us the possibility of witness to the true nature of Christ’s Lordship.

How can this be done? Just as the workers in rebuilding Jerusalem under Nehemiah, after the exile, labored with trowel and sword, in construction and defense, so we are called positively to practice the truth and negatively to defend it from attacks of error. This means that true and faithful preaching and witness, according to the inspired Word of Scripture is capital, because it alone will be blessed by the Spirit. A church which is obsessed by tradition, property or structures will not do

the work of the Word in a kingdom way. Human ambitions will soon enter, and with them divisions.

Faithfulness also requires a clear distinction between truth and error, a line of demarcation, as Satan is subtle in spreading “wicked counsels against the Holy Word”. False doctrine, which denies the Word of the Lord and the integrity of its teaching, constantly harms the cause of truth. As the Chinese proverb says, the fish rots from the head; in the church, error invariably comes from teachers and leaders, not from the congregation. The sad history of modern theology from the Enlightenment to postmodernism only goes to prove it.

J. Gresham Machen, in his book *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) wrote: “The church today has been unfaithful to her Lord in admitting in her midst numbers of non-Christians, not only to be members, but also to be teachers. They dominate councils and fix the teaching of the church... A separation of parties is the great need of the hour...” Is anything more true of our day than this, one hundred years later, when homosexuals are being admitted into leading positions in many churches in the West? Are not unbelievers scandalised by this? Church members certainly ought to be, as the honor of Christ and his kingdom is at stake.

What can be done? All of us are called to live according to the laws of the kingdom. Practically, day by day, we must consecrate ourselves, in faith, obedience and love, so that the kingdom may be manifest in us and around us. In the family, school, work, leisure, in all of life, through witness in word and deed, we can show that we are members of the kingdom.

This will keep the blessed hope of the appearing of Christ alive, because he will be present now.

## LORD'S DAY 49

124 Q. What does the third petition mean?

A. “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” means:

Help us and all people to reject our own wills

and to obey your will without any back talk. Your will alone is good.<sup>1</sup>

Help us one and all to carry out the work we are called to,<sup>2</sup> as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 7:21; 16:24-26; Luke 22:42; Rom. 12:1-2; Tit. 2:11-12

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 7:17-24; Eph. 6:5-9

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 103:20-21

How do the angels serve God in heaven? Willingly, promptly, totally and according to their calling, which is for the glory of God. So also Christians are called to do likewise where they are, on earth.

The Westminster shorter catechism says “the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.” (q.1) When a Christian does God’s will, he is accomplishing the end for which he was given a life. God is glorified in the recognition of his creatures. This brings enjoyment of life and blessing. The opposite leads to what Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones called *spiritual depression*. Disobedience to the will of God invariably brings misery and suffering in its wake.

When Jesus tells us to pray “thy will be done”, he indicates two things. Firstly, we need to have a willingness of spirit to pray this prayer. We cannot pronounce these words if we know we are living in a way which is not in harmony with God, cherishing and nurturing one particular sin or other in our lives. Secondly, by praying for God’s will to be done, we are recognising our need. Without the help of God, we are incapable of pleasing him or of even desiring to do his will, so deeply is sin rooted in our human nature. After all, the gospel is not for the self-sufficient and self-important fat cats of this world, but for poor and needy sinners like

us, who know they cannot live a day without the miracle of grace in their lives.

We have some good examples to instruct us about what this means in the Bible. Take the case of Adam and Eve. They thought they were “getting a life” when they followed their own desires in the garden. But instead of being holy and happy they became sinful and miserable. They inherited death for them and us because of their act. Not doing God’s will by following our own way always leads to death, both physical and spiritual. When they were excluded from the tree of life – a symbol of Jesus Christ! – they were the most miserable people ever. They literally had nothing.

This is the opposite of what people tell us in the world – “do your thing, you’ll be king”. But lives are ruined by people doing their thing. The divorce and suicide rates and the prevalence of all kinds of addiction in our society only goes to prove it.

Look at Jesus on the other hand, who also found himself in the garden, this time Gethsemane, a garden of anguish and despair. Everything must have appeared to him to be going wrong as he suffered increasing rejection – even his disciples were asleep when he prayed “Father, not what I will, but what you will” be done. (Mc 14.36) In spite of everything, Jesus knew that he was called to put aside his will for God’s, and that the one asking this of him was still his loving Father.

Jesus is truly a model for us and his Spirit can help us have the same consecration to our Father. We must *choose* the will of God, even when it seems to mean problems and difficulties. Our loving Father never abandon us. In fact, because Jesus was forsaken on the cross (Mt 27.46), God can never abandon us and we will never walk alone. He will bless us in unexpected ways, if we pray “not my will, but thine”.

How can we possibly do this? As Jesus did, in “renouncing our own will” for God’s. Martin Luther wrote wonderful and hard words about this in his Exposition of the Lord’s prayer. “God commands us to pray *against* ourselves... because we have no greater enemy than ourselves. Our will is the most stubborn thing in us and we must implore God against it: Father! do not let me fall so low that I act according to my will.



Break my will, put obstacles against it, whatever happens, so that I may only act according to your will. For just as there is no free will in heaven, let there be no free will on earth.”

Luther hits the nail on the head. Our problem with doing the will of God, is always in our will and desires, in the false idea of *free will*. If we want to be free from God, we will be, but we will be slaves to ourselves, and never really free. To be a slave to self, is to be a slave to sin, because that is our nature. This is why Jesus taught his disciples divine wisdom: “whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Mt 10.39)

This is totally against the human wisdom, expressed in the anthem of our day by the Rolling Stones “I can’t get no satisfaction”, which is what happens when you act out of self-service, or from “Sympathy for the devil”, another of their songs. The truth is that we won’t get anything if we want satisfaction in this world. To do so is to follow the broad path that leads to destruction, not the narrow way that leads to life. (Mt 7.13)

Practically, this means accepting our life situation for what it is, and determining to serve God where he has placed us. We don’t need to be rich, powerful or famous to obey God’s calling. They can be hindrances as not many of the fabulously rich or famous hounded by the media enter into life. Sadly their lives are often catastrophes. On the other hand, we can be happy when we do the even most menial tasks, like Luther said: if our job is to sweep the floor and we do it for God’s glory we have really found the meaning of life in serving God and our neighbours.

## LORD'S DAY 50

Q. 125

*What is the fourth petition?*

Praying for our daily bread is asking God to provide the most basic of our needs. Jesus' prayer for his disciples instructs them to start on the ground floor. What we need is the means to live for today. This is in line with what Jesus taught elsewhere: "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink... your heavenly Father knows that you need them." (Mt 6.25, 32)

We are called here to recognise two basic truths. That ultimately we depend not on the economy or the supermarket to supply the wherewithal for daily life but on God himself, who is the real provider. To him belong "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Ps 50.10). Also that we should be content with what we have and not have a grasping attitude which is never satisfied. "If we have food and drink, let us be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation..." (1 Tm 6.8).

We live in a materialistic society where people's status is defined by what they own. But the Bible warns us not to lay up treasure on earth where things rot, and also that we cannot take anything with us when we die. (1 Tm 6.7) Real values lie elsewhere, not in what we have but in what we *are* as people; godliness with happiness is real gain. (1 Tm 6.6)

The true intention of Jesus is to make us realise how ephemeral the things of the world are and to teach us generosity. In a sense, it is impossible to enter the spirit of this prayer if we are not affected by the needs of others. Many children in the world are starving, many people are constantly ill because of the lack of drinking water and we are thinking about a better car or another holiday. We have been mesmerised by the illusion that life would be better if only we had more money in our pockets, or if our country were more affluent. But the Psalm says "when your riches increase, do not set your heart on them." (Ps 62.10-12)

So we cannot really pray the Lord's prayer with sincerity if we are not actively involved in trying to alleviate the misery of our fellow men.

Moreover, riches should not be used to oppress the poor, and even though it is difficult, because of the heritage of colonialism and the growing system of globalisation, we should try to use our money wisely, to the point of not purchasing goods we know are cheap because of the exploitation of others. Can we purchase luxury goods when people are starving, or own shares in breweries when alcohol is an affliction for countless people?

Nor are people suffering from poverty, or the unemployed, excluded from praying the prayer of Jesus because of their poverty. They can feel their need more than the affluent, as they scrape a living together day by day, while those who have a nice bank account may feel that such a prayer is just a pious wish, which is little more than an accessory for their daily existence. In this case the roles are reversed. The Bible says that God has special compassion for the prayers of the poor. “God has not despised the suffering of the afflicted, he has not hidden his face from him, but has listened to their cry for help... the poor will eat and be satisfied”. (Ps 22.24,26)

When we pray this prayer, we are expressing our feeling of genuine *dependence* on God to supply our needs. This is a very difficult lesson to learn for people who have all they need, who are tempted to think that, as self-made people, they can do without divine help. Perhaps this is why many citizens of the first world have grown indifferent to God and live in the illusion that their own riches or state social security will take care of them from cradle to grave.

However, the simplicity of this request for daily bread hides another meaning, the text within the text, which goes even deeper. From Augustine onward, commentators have discerned a spiritual meaning in these material words. Calvin says, “Christ begins with daily bread and the needs of present life in order to lift us onto a higher plane.” In John 6 Jesus affirms “my Father gives you the true bread from heaven... I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” (Jn 6.32-35)

The woman at the well in Samaria was one thirsty lady, so thirsty for something unattainable , she had gone through a brochette of husbands.

Jesus told her: “whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst... The water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (Jn 4.14)

Augustin said our hearts are troubled and find no rest until we rest in God. It is to Jesus we must come, in faith, to find that peace of mind in the midst of our daily trials.

## LORD'S DAY 51

126 Q. What does the fifth petition mean?

A. "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"

means:

Because of Christ's blood,

do not hold against us, poor sinners that we are,

any of the sins we do

or the evil that constantly clings to us.<sup>1</sup>

Forgive us just as we are fully determined, as evidence of your

<sup>1</sup>grace in us,

to forgive our neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

1 Ps. 51:1-7; 143:2; Rom. 8:1; 1 John 2:1-2

2 Matt. 6:14-15; 18:21-3

If daily bread is our immediate material need, our fundamental spiritual need is to be able to have healthy human relations, as far as possible, with those who have wronged us. After all, it is easier to receive forgiveness when we admit wrong, than to forgive someone who has done wrong to us.

This is because to forgive involves a complex of feelings against wrongdoers – fear they will continue to harm us, jealousy of their position, anger for having been hurt and pride, as we consider ourselves superior to others when they humble themselves. The "I am better than you are" mentality dogs us all.

However what really makes it difficult to forgive is resentment toward others. Lack of forgiveness always escalates: resentment becomes anger, anger becomes hatred and finally we are drawn into a vicious circle of violence, in thought, word or deed, which then triggers revenge. As René Girard, the French anthropologist, points out, violence against others arises from feeling threatened in some way by them, even by their

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emotions, and when this is the case, the possibility of forgiveness is out of sight.

It is not by chance that this is the only petition of the Lord's prayer that Jesus commented on at the end: "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins". (Mt 6.14,15) Jesus knew just how difficult it is to exercise forgiveness! The bigger the prejudice experienced, the harder it is to accept others and exercise forgiveness. People find it almost impossible to forgive a murderer, a rapist or a child abuser, who have deeply injured the human integrity of loved ones. But sometimes we find it almost as difficult to accept the little things that are almost insignificant.

But Jesus knew what he was talking about. He himself was "despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering"(Is 53.3). It is surely wonderful that at the very moment Jesus was being nailed to the cross by his enemies, he was able to forgive them, in spite of excruciating pain. In the first word from the cross, Jesus prays his own prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Lc 23.34)

Jesus' prayer and action reveal the mechanism of forgiveness. Strange though it may seem, we need to be forgiven by God in order to really forgive others. "Forgive us our transgressions, as we forgive also..." Only when we know how great is the mercy of God in forgiving us, do we realize how small our forgiveness is toward our fellows. If we have a profound sense of the grace of God who accepts us, prodigal children that we are, the more we will be able to see that the offenses of others against us can be, in many cases, quite trifling compared to the way we rejected God.

God has surprisingly made the way to forgiveness open by acting himself. He forgives us at great personal cost, removing our sin by accepting his own Son in our place: "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Is 53.5) Genuine forgiveness implies repair of wrong done. This is one condition of healing in relationships. God provided the means of healing

our sins when Jesus took our place in suffering the condemnation and death of a wrongdoer.

Finding the “witness to this grace in us”, personal forgiveness and mercy that is so great and at such cost, is it not abnormal *not* to forgive others? If God has heartily forgiven us and accepted us in and through Christ, can’t we do the same at a lower level?

Those most difficult to accept are often our “neighbours”, those nearest to us. Close friends who betray us, members of the family or the church who bear grudges, colleagues at work who rat on us, the husband or wife who holds us at arm’s length... These are the people we should begin with in exercising forgiveness. After all, there is not much we can do to express our feeling against the board of an international company if we lose our job. We should think concretely, “who do I need to forgive today?”.

Two difficult problems remain. What to do when we have been wronged and there is no recognition of it on the part of the offender? When forgiveness is not requested we often feel in a cleft stick. The only answer is to have a *heartfelt spirit* of pardon toward the other party, even where wrong is not confessed, and to fight against the desire to get equal by revenge. Didn’t God demonstrate his love for us “while we were still sinners” and Christ died for us? (Rm 5.8) Shouldn’t we exercise the same attitude?

The second question is, when we look at ourselves, how do we forgive *ourselves* for all the wrong we have caused others, to say nothing of the self-degradation? Sometimes we drag a burden of guilt for years that only increases with time. In this case, we must consider the greatness of God’s love and mercy for us and confess *all* our sins, one by one, to him. Didn’t the father receive the prodigal son without any conditions and make a great feast for him? Surely our heavenly Father will not do less for us, however great, and whatever our level of degradation has been... And if God accepts us lovingly, is it not being “holier than thou” to foster self-rejection and false guilt?

## LORD'S DAY 52

127 Q. What does the sixth petition mean?

A. “And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one” means:  
By ourselves we are too weak  
to hold our own even for a moment.<sup>1</sup>  
And our sworn enemies — the devil,<sup>2</sup>  
— the world,<sup>3</sup>  
— and our own flesh<sup>4</sup>  
never stop attacking us.  
And so, Lord,  
uphold us and make us strong with the strength of your Holy  
Spirit,  
so that we may not go down to defeat in this spiritual struggle,<sup>5</sup>  
but may firmly resist our enemies  
until we finally win the complete victory.<sup>6</sup>

1 Ps. 103:14-16; John 15:1-5

2 2 Cor. 11:14; Eph. 6:10-13; 1 Pet. 5:8

3 John 15:18-21

4 Rom. 7:23; Gal. 5:17

5 Matt. 10:19-20; 26:41; Mark 13:33; Rom. 5:3-5 6 1 Cor. 10:13; 1  
Thess. 3:13; 5:23

This seems very enigmatic at first. How could God ever lead us into the temptation to do wrong? Doesn't James say “God is not tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”? (Ja 1.13-15)

When Jesus invites us to pray this, he is not indicating an *efficient* action on the part of God, who might really lead us to be tempted. We have to understand this request in this way: “Father, you know I am so weak that I don't want even to be allowed to find myself in a situation where I might be tempted and fall into sin. So please deliver me from evil.” That is how Luther understands it.



What is temptation? We all know in a practical sense because our lives are full of it. Not a moment passes when we avoid it, because there is constant pressure on us to do what is wrong in God's sight, or against our fellows, even in the realm of our thoughts. Every time we speak, there is the possibility of doing harm by what we say. Temptation seems unavoidable because it is so pervasive and because we are still "natural sinners".

Everyone has particular temptations that assail her, that do not necessarily trouble others. It might be greed, pride, self-indulgence, impure desires, lying, or slavery to sex or alcohol. Our tendency is to see other people's problems very clearly, and glibly condemn them, while remaining ignorant of our own weaknesses. The first rule for dealing with temptation is to be lucid about oneself by self-examination. Only then can we see what our real problem is and begin to deal with it.

But what really is temptation? Temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted, many times, from the start to the end of his life and even when the mockers said, "If you are the Son of God come down from the cross... You saved others and you cannot save yourself!" How difficult it must have been for the Lord not to call out legions of angels and demonstrate his power! But even if he experienced it down to the dregs of his cup of suffering, he remained holy, harmless and undefiled.

Temptation is giving in to the desire to sin. The apostle says that "after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death". (Ja 1.15) What is born of desire, grows and becomes lively as a life-controlling principle, leading to the inevitable end... Unless it is uprooted and cut out at the beginning of the process. This is the only positive way of handling temptation.

The New Testament word for temptation can also be interpreted as a trial or a testing. It is true that when we are tempted we are being tested. Then we see what we are worth spiritually. We are not always lucid about this aspect of the problem. The reason is quite simple. It is because temptation, like sin itself, never seems to be disagreeable to us. No-one sins because sin is horrible, but because on the spur of the moment it

seems very agreeable. A sex-maniac enjoys his perversion and it satisfies him.

Temptation, like sin, is enticing. It begins like this: “It would be great to... I would be so satisfied if... I would feel better for...” Time becomes an ocean of endless tears when we give in to temptation, which no amount of remorse can wipe away. But look beyond the agreeable appearances to the reality! Ultimately, the consequences are dire – life or death, we have to choose, and only we can do it!

But how can we resist, in the state of weakness that characterises us? There is one way and only one. We must recognize our total incapacity to handle temptation and sin by our own will power. We just cannot make it by ourselves. What we need is deliverance and that can only come from outside, from God. A concrete decision is needed on our part: we cannot help ourselves and only the Saviour can liberate us. Prayer must be made, to confess our helplessness, to place ourselves in his loving hands and trust him *alone* for help. The attitude of giving our problem over to God must be radical. Otherwise we are doomed!

“Dad, why have you lost it, you of all people?” one of my girls was honest enough to ask me one day. She could see all too well the problem I was busy denying. I was embarrassed, but the question was salutary and the answer was clear – I was trusting in myself and not bringing and leaving my problem with the Lord for deliverance. It was a profound form of sinfulness that needing dealing with.

There are three reasons why God will hear and answer this prayer. God always hears and answers the prayer of the distressed when they are at the end of the tether. Not only that, but Jesus who knows all about suffering is moved to compassion when we struggle with sin – “Because he suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” (Hb 2.18) Finally, Jesus gives us his own Holy Spirit, the Spirit in which he was victorious, “so that we will not succumb in the spiritual conflict” – “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand under it.” (1 Co 10.13)

The Christian life is far from being free from trouble. The three great enemies are always on hand in this vale of tears – the world and its seductions, the flesh and our weakness and the devil, the old seducer, our adversary. But if we look to God in faith, we will find “mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hb 4.16)

God never did us any ill. The Achilles heel of sin is so often our downfall.

128 Q. What does your conclusion to this prayer mean?

A. “For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever” means:

We have made all these petitions of you because, as our all-powerful king,  
you are both willing and able  
to give us all that is good;1  
and because your holy name,  
and not we ourselves,  
should receive all the praise, forever.2

1 Rom. 10:11-13; 2 Pet. 2:9 2 Ps. 115:1; John 14:13

129 Q. What does that little word “Amen” express?

A. “Amen” means:

This shall truly and surely be!  
It is even more sure  
that God listens to my prayer  
than that I really desire what I pray for.1

1 Isa. 65:24; 2 Cor. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:13

