**Introduction**

Upon entrance in any Christian bookstore, and many secular stores, the visitor is overwhelmed by the quantity of books on prayer. What is a Christian to make of all this data on prayer? Do all these books say essentially the same thing? In fact, do all Christians, or even all religions, agree on what prayer is? Is there a particularly “Lutheran” understanding of prayer?

Hopefully many of you pray so often that you’ve never stopped to think about what you’re doing. In the words of convicted criminal Martha Stewart, that’s a good thing, mostly. There’s nothing wrong with doing the right thing without understanding all the details. However, there are often times when something you start asking questions about what you’ve been doing for years. Questions like,

- If God knows everything, why am I praying to him?
- Does God really answer our prayers, and how?
- If God doesn’t answer my prayer, is it somehow my fault?
- Do I really need to pray, and for what should I pray?

These are all questions that ran circles in my brain while I was in seminary. It didn’t surprise me too much to find out that lots of other people have been asking the same questions. So I spent a good portion of my last year, as my wife can attest, writing a 50 page dissertation on prayer. I’d like to share some of what I discovered Jesus and the Scriptures taught about prayer as compared to what some of these books teach.

1) *If God knows everything, why pray?*

Excellent question. Tony Campolo, the Philadelphia born evangelist and sociologist, once talked about the craziness of some views on prayer. He asked, hypothetically, what are we thinking when we pray “Dear Lord, please visit Margaret, who’s in the hospital.” Sometimes we say it like we’re simply giving God information. As if God is in heaven saying, “Oh my gosh – Margaret? *Which* hospital?” So if God already knows Margaret’s in the hospital, what are we doing by telling him? Is there any point in praying for these things at all?

I hate to kind of delve into deep theology for fear of losing folks. But at this point, I need to do it. I’ll try and make it simple. When Luther was asked about preserving his writings, there were only two he thought were worth keeping: the Small Catechism, and a book called *The Bondage of the Will*. In *the Bondage of the Will* Luther proposed that the Scriptures reveal two sides to God’s will. The first is God’s will toward us – that God desires to give us everything he has.

The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all its creatures…The Son gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that… we might also have the Father and his gifts…The Holy Spirit comes and give himself to us also, wholly and completely.

This is the will of God that everyone be saved. This is the will of God that cries out, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem…how I have longed to gather you together as a hen gathers her chicks, and you would not.” Only the Christian, however, can understand this will of God toward us.
Everyone else sees God through his second will, his hidden will. This is God as he causes governments to rise and fall, sovereignty calls some to faith, and knows every event and moment of our lives. This is the God who permits disease, earthquakes and even knows the time of our death. Of this hidden will, Luther writes,

All who are outside the Christian church, whether unbelievers, Muslims, Jews or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing.

Muslims and Jews by their own admission are never sure of God’s love or forgiveness. They look around them, and they can’t be sure God is really on their side. If all WE had to look at was the world around us, we couldn’t be sure either. But we have Christ. And because we seen in Christ’s passion the Lord’s compassion, we know God is really on our side.

ILLUS: If you’re married or in a relationship, you know how important it is to you’re your significant other that you love them. I’m reminded of the husband who’s wife asked if he still loved her, and he replied, “I’m still here, ain’t I?” That’s not showing much love.

CONC: The bottom line is this. When you pray, you are not praying to an all-knowing, all seeing God who may or may not care about your situation. You are praying to a God who “tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father.” That’s the explanation of the 1st petition of the Lord’s prayer.

2) Does God answer our prayers? The “yes/no/not yet” conundrum

Another great question. If we answer yes, then someone will ask why they haven’t gotten that new Ferrari they’ve been asking for for months. If we say no, then someone will say what’s the point of asking at all. And if I say God sometimes says yes, and sometimes says no, a sceptic will ask how you can tell if praying made any difference at all.

The problem with this question is that we too often see prayer as a means of getting our wish list to the Lord. “I need this, I need that, I need the other thing.” Sometimes those wishes are very legitimate. Sometimes we want help with an addiction, or abuse, or some other terrible situation. So why doesn’t God answer? Too many people, including Christians, say the reason your prayers are not answered are because you are not good enough, or have too much sin, or need to get your life together before your prayers will “get through to the almighty.” Hogwash. Justification by works went out with the Reformation. The answer to your prayers is not dependent on your character, but on God’s mercy.

Consider Luther’s explanation of the petition, “forgive us our trespasses, or our sins:”

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace.

God’s answer to all of our prayers is always the same. “I see what you need, and I ask you to keep trusting me.” That’s all. What does that make our prayers? It makes them an expression of our trust in the Lord. Our prayers are a way of saying to God, “I trust you. You are my God, and I am your child. Since you have already given me the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, I trust you
to give me whatever else I need.” That’s why Luther, in his explanation of the word “Amen,” wrote:

You must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say ‘yes’ to your prayers. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, ‘Very well, God has heard my prayer. This I know as a certainty and a truth. That is what Amen means.

Consider our Lord. Did he pray? You bet. At every opportunity, he withdrew by himself to pray. You who have seen the Passion of Christ – you know how fervently Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Why? Did God answer his prayer? No, but Jesus expressed his trust that his Father could do anything by praying.

To pray to the Lord means to express your faith that he alone can provide what you need. Every time you pray you are reaffirming, “You are my God, and I believe in you.” A Christian who doesn’t pray is saying, “I may believe in some abstract way that you are God, but I don’t trust you.”

ILLUS: One of my pastors growing up used to tell this story all the time. A man is sued for divorce by his wife after 25 years of marriage. The man pleads before the judge: “But I don’t understand – I still love her!” The judge answers, “You do? Then why have you been living in France, and haven’t even gone to visit her for 25 years?” “But Judge,” the man pleads, “She knows my heart – what I really believe.”

Our worship services are the chief prayer service of the church. People who come to worship two, three times a year with no good excuse or reason beyond not wanting to go out on a Wednesday or get up on a Sunday are sending a message loud and clear to me and to you: “I don’t believe in God.” It’s the same as not praying. Don’t believe me? Listen to the Epistle to the Hebrews:

(Hebrews 10:25-27) Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

3) Will Prayer Change my Circumstances?

In other words, will anything be different in my life if I do or do no pray? The answer is...absolutely. Your relationship with the Lord will grow and strengthen. You will find yourself staring more and more in wonder at what God has done for you. You will find yourself trusting more and more that God is for you, even if everything around you says otherwise. God will be there for you, because he has promised

You need help, as a Christian. I need help, as a Christian. No minute passes by when our own sinful flesh and the Devil aren’t hounding and pestering us like they pestered Judas in the Passion movie. What you need to ask for in prayer, then, isn’t so much new Ferrari’s, a new TV or even solutions to the problems of daily life. You need to pray for rescue and forgiveness and a strengthened faith.

Look at the Lord’s Prayer:
Six petitions asking for help in our life, that God’s will might be done, and that we might be kept in faith. That leaves one petition asking for help with daily necessities: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

What we learn about these petitions too, is that were asking for things to be done in our life that are already being done anyway, but only in general. Look at Luther’s explanations of the petitions:

- God's name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be kept holy among us also….The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also…The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also…God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people.

God’s going to do all this in general. We pray a) that God would do it for us and b) as an expression of our trust that God will do it for us.

**Conclusion**

That’s what prayer is all about. I hope you’ve picked it up. Prayer is an expression of our trust that God will give us our daily bread, will forgive our sins, and will deliver us from evil. If faith is the breathing in of the Holy Spirit, then prayer is our exhaling our trust. That’s why you can’t find a Christian without prayer. I conclude with some final words from Martin Luther:

Our petitions – peace in the world, wisdom for governors – are far inferior to a prayer for eternal life and the remission of sins. Let everyone expand his heart and pray not to a simple little God but to the God of the heaven and the earth He created. So he will give great things to those who ask for great things. Christians who understand that these are the gifts of God pray. Let this be the first fruit of love: that you pray.

Amen.