THE PROPER WAY TO PRAY

1. Persistently
2. Confidently

Some people hold their hands up to heaven when engaged in this activity. Others get down on their knees. Most fold their hands and close their eyes. Yes, I am talking about prayer. While prayer has many postures, there is only one proper way to pray. Let's find out from Jesus what THE PROPER WAY TO PRAY is.

In the verses before our text Jesus told his disciples how life will be tough for believers before the coming of Judgment Day. To encourage us not to give up hope, Jesus told a parable about a widow who persistently went before an unjust judge until she received the treatment she deserved.

The widow is the picture of what a believer's prayer-life should be. We are first of all reminded that genuine prayers - those prayers heard by God - are only those prayers addressed to the Triune God of the Bible. Think in terms of the widow in parable. She never would have gotten justice had she gone to the town baker instead of to the magistrate every day to plead her case. The baker certainly could have listened to the widow's complaint but since he was not the judge, he would have been powerless to give the widow justice.

And so it is only the God of the Bible who hears prayers and has the power to answer them. If you want to speak with God, be sure you are dialing the right number. We can only connect to God through faith in his Son, Jesus. You will not be able to connect with God by praying through the Virgin Mary, Mohammad, or any other religious figure. Only Jesus has won access to God's throne room through his life, death, and resurrection.

But perhaps you have been praying to the Triune God your whole life and it does not seem as if he is really ever answered your prayers. Accordingly Russian communist Lenin once mocked: Electricity will replace God. The peasants should pray to it. In any case they will feel its effects long before they feel any effect from on high. The widow in our text seemed to be the kind of person Lenin had in mind. Indeed, I wonder if the widow's own family and neighbors did not think she was a bit nuts to keep going before that judge. Everybody knew that judge did not care about anyone except himself. The widow was not going to get help from him. She might as well be speaking to a brick wall!

What are we to think when we pray to God and do not receive an answer - especially when Jesus said at the end of the parable: And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. That last verse is a tough one for earth-bound, sinful nature-toting people like you and me to believe. God's answer to our prayers most often seems to be anything but quick.

Let's start at the beginning. First of all does God really answer all of our prayers? Of course he does. That is what he's promised to do. Sometimes God's answer is Yes, other times it is Wait, and still other times the answer is No. Unfortunately we are like a child who will not take no for an answer and so when God says No to our request for a raise, better looks, better health, we accuse him of not listening to us.

A No from God, however, does not mean that we should give up presenting that
request to him. With this parable Jesus urges us to be persistent in our prayers just as the widow was persistent in going before that judge. Being persistent, however, is not the same thing as being stubborn. When we bring our requests before God, we do so trusting that he knows what is best for us. God is not a used car salesman whom we are trying to win over to our asking price; he is the wiser partner in the relationship and we want to come in line with his will.

So go ahead, pray boldly and specifically, but also pray humbly remembering that nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which is outside the will of God. And trust that God’s will is for our best. In fact if God always answered our prayers the way we wanted him to, he would in effect be handing over the running of the world to us. The sad thing is we often think that we can do better than God. After all everyone believes: There is a god and I am it. Don’t think that, brothers and sisters. God knows what is best for us and will answer our prayers accordingly.

So God answers every genuine prayer but does he really do so quickly, as Jesus promised? He must because Jesus does not lie. What we have to understand, of course, is that God’s quickly is not the same as our quickly. And thank God for it! The Apostle Peter wrote: But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

God is not quick to bring about judgment because he is a patient and loving God. Think of how he gave the people of Noah’s day 120 years to repent before he sent the flood. How long was he patient with you and me before we were brought to the faith or brought back to it? Still, it is tough when God’s plan for us unfolds like a leisurely opera and not a quick Top 40 pop song. Those mournful phases can drag on but know this: the opera of your life is not a tragedy! It will keep plodding along to happy conclusion. Christ's resurrection and ascension guarantee it! Christ will return in glory to give believers eternal relief from all their problems and worries.

Another reason it may seem that God does not answer our prayers quickly is that we are waiting for a voice from heaven in response to our requests. I have never received such a response in spite of a lifetime of prayer. Does that mean that prayer is more of a monologue than a dialogue? Not necessarily. While God has not promised to whisper into our ears, he has spoken to us through his Word. Look at this way: in New Testament, people approached Jesus with questions 183 times. Only 3 times did Jesus reply directly. Otherwise he replied with a parable or another question.

Does God continue to do the same thing today? Does he want us to figure it out based on the principles he has given to us in his Word? It would seem so. Anyway many of the choices we ask God about in prayer are both good choices. Should I have a sandwich for lunch or a taco? Should we build a church here, or should we sell our land and move? None of those choices are sinful, unless our motivation is somehow tainted, and to insist that God must want us to choose one over the other is claiming that we can determine the hidden will of God. We cannot do that. God does not want us to do that. Instead he wants us to use our Christian freedom to make a choice to his glory and ask him to bless it.
So pray, dear Christian. Pray persistently and confidently. Your heavenly Father is listening to all of your prayers offered through faith in Christ Jesus. Pray lest you see your day as a series of disconnected incidents and accidents, not realizing that coincidence is God's way of protecting his anonymity. Pray to heighten your awareness of God's constant presence.

It is one thing to know that God wants us to pray persistently and confidently, but it is quite another thing to actually do it. Let's turn again to the widow in our parable to see if we cannot learn anything helpful in this regard. As I studied this text it struck me that in order for the widow to be persistent in her requests to the judge, she had to have had some organization in her life. Her day must have been prioritized so that she could get in that daily appearance. It never would have happened had she said: Oh, I'll see the judge today if I have time.

No, she made time for what she felt was important. Did she go see him after she dropped the kids off at school? Did she go during her lunch break? The details do not matter but the point is important; if we do not make time for our prayer-life, it is not going to happen. Sure praying before and after meals is a good habit, but do you have the time then to pray for your governing officials? Your enemies? Your children? Those to whom you want to witness Christ? Or do you reserve those kind of petitions for before bedtime? That might seem like a good time of the day to pray, but if you are like me, you probably fall asleep before you get in the final Amen. Like the widow made going to the judge a priority, make prayer-life a priority in your life. Pick a time to pray when you are alert and bring your requests, your thanksgivings, and your sins to him.

No, your prayer posture really does not matter. Fold your hands. Hold up your hands. Get down on your knees. Whatever! Just pray - persistently and confidently because you have a God who is always ready to listen and answer your prayers in the way that is best for you. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill