

Pray Without Ceasing – Part One

“Pray without ceasing.” That’s what Paul tells us to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, but how do we do that? Does it mean we’re to spend the entire day on our knees in prayer? If that were the case, none of us could ever carry out our vocations (including St Paul, who often worked as a tentmaker to support himself as he preached).

In the Middle Ages, monasteries tried to create an environment where monks and nuns could literally spend their days in prayer. Following a daily schedule of ‘canonical hours,’ they returned over and over again to the chapel where they would engage in praying the Psalms and other prayers. A ‘noble effort,’ perhaps, but hardly practical for the farmer, craftsman, or tradesman whose work supported the lives of others.

Among his many other reforms, Martin Luther also provided a re-formation of the daily prayer life of the church. In his *Small Catechism*, Luther published instructions on “How the head of the family should teach his household to pray morning and evening,” and “How the head of the family should teach his household to ask a blessing and return thanks.”

What Luther did here was pure genius. Rather than forcing people to conform to some man-made schedule (that had little or nothing to do with the Bible’s teaching on prayer), Luther began with the schedule of daily life that God had created and into which God had placed man.

Consider Luther’s patterns for morning and evening prayer.* “In the morning when you get up” and “in the evening when you go to bed,” “make the sign of the holy cross and say: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” With that remembrance of your Baptism, confess your faith by repeating the Apostles’ Creed. Then, bring your requests to God with the Lord’s Prayer. After that, Luther provides prayers for the beginning and for the end of each day, each ending, “For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.”

Even if your ‘morning and evening’ are not determined by the sun (thanks to the invention of electric lights), you still begin and end your ‘day’ at your bedside. As it was pointed out to me last month and the Symposium by Rev Weedon, there’s more to it than that. The “altar of your bed” where you pray is also a reminder of your grave.

At night, we commit ourselves into the hands of the Lord, whether our sleep be in the beds in our homes or the bed of our graves. But we do so with calm confidence, not fear, for in the morning we celebrate our rising, not just to the dawning of a new day, but in the promise of the Resurrection of our bodies at the Last Day.

As Thomas Ken put it in his hymn: “Teach me to live that I may dread The grave as little as my bed. Teach me to die that so I may Rise glorious at the awefull day.” (“All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night,” *Lutheran Service Book* #883:3)

Yes, the discipline of beginning and ending of each day is a discipline. It takes practice to get used to it and to keep doing it. But knowing we will begin and end each day remembering our Baptism, confessing our faith, and coming before our Father in prayer, is the first step in learning how to “pray without ceasing.” For in these two minutes each morning and evening, we also remind ourselves that we can and should commend everything in our lives to the Lord, and freely and constantly “ask Him as dear children ask their dear father” for everything they want and need.

More next month!

*Luther’s *Small Catechism*? There’s now an app for that!

Concordia Publishing House has recently released an app that lets you take the official 1986 version of Luther’s *Small Catechism* wherever you go. The *Small Catechism* text is free, and there is an option for an in-app purchase of the full Synodical *Explanation* as well. Available for Apple or Android.