

A Simple Way to Pray

How One Should Pray,
For Peter, the Master Barber

1535

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INTRODUCTION

During the Lenten season of 1517, only a few months before the posting of the *95 Theses*, Martin Luther preached a series of sermons in Wittenberg on the Lord's Prayer. These were published in April 1519 as *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen*.^a Sixteen years later, Luther returned to the same topic after being asked by his barber for advice about how to pray. Peter Besken-dorf, also known as Peter Balbierer (the Barber), was a close friend of Luther. Luther already knew him in 1517, the year of the Lord's Prayer sermons, because he is mentioned then in a letter written to Christoph Scheurl, a jurist in Nuremberg.¹ Luther greeted him in several other letters and also made a reference to him in a sermon for the eighth Sunday after Trinity, which was published in the House Postil.^b Peter had a reputation for being "a pious, God-fearing man who gladly listened to and discussed the word

1. Christoph Scheurl (1481–1542) taught canon law and human letters at the University of Wittenberg from 1507 to 1512. He then moved to Nuremberg where he served as legal advisor for the city until his death. He facilitated the publication of Luther's *95 Theses* in Nuremberg. A friend of both Luther and Luther's opponent Johann Eck (1486–1543) of Ingolstadt, he forwarded Luther's writings to the Catholic theologian, which stimulated their later debates.

^a *Auflegung deutsch des Vater unnser fuer dye einfeltigen leyen*; WA 2:74–130.

^b Eugene F. A. Klug, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, trans. Erwin W. Koehlinger, James Lanning, and Everette W. Meier (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:345; J. G. Walch, *Dr. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften* (Jena, 1740–1753; reprint: St. Louis: Concordia, 1893), 21a:74; WA Br 1:108; WA Br 7:347; WA Br 8:200; WA 37:125.

of God.”^c In response to his barber’s request, Luther described how he himself prayed in *A Simple Way to Pray*.^d As he had done in his sermons of 1517, Luther organized his comments around the seven petitions of the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples (Matt. 6:5-14; Luke 11:1-4).

Luther acknowledges at the start that it is not easy to sustain prayer meaningfully as a daily practice. People become lazy or listless and often get distracted by other mundane tasks that

seem more urgent than prayer. Luther notes how Christ commanded prayer and taught both how and what to pray. In *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther recommends his personal practice of beginning and ending the day with prayer and explicates a method of prayer based on the Lord’s Prayer that is both elaborate and flexible. He humbly invites Peter and the readers of the pamphlet to adapt his approach to their own needs or even to improve on it if they can.

Several times in the years between 1517 and 1535, Luther also offered a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer in conjunction with an analysis of the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed. All three are treated as devotional texts in his *Little Prayer Book* published in 1522.^e In that work and in the *Small Catechism*

and *Large Catechism*^f of 1529, Luther focuses first on the law (as summarized in the Ten Commandments), then on the gospel (as revealed in the Creed), and speaks of the Lord’s Prayer as medi-



Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer (Matthew 6).

^c Walch, *Dr. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften*, 9:1822.

^d LW 43:193-211; WA 38:358-75.

^e See pages 159-99 in this volume.

^f *Small Catechism*, see pp. 201-51 in this volume; *Large Catechism*, see TAL 2:279-416.

cine one might turn to after learning of the human predicament and the way to salvation. In *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther also uses the Ten Commandments and the Creed as resources for prayer, but this time adds them as supplements to his initial focus on the Lord's Prayer. Luther's own practice is to combine prayer and meditation.² By focusing his mind, in succession, on each of the commandments and the three sections of the Creed, he sets out to "kindle a fire in the heart" and increase his eagerness for prayer. Considering what the Ten Commandments and the Creed reveal about God's will prompts him to offer thanks to God, confess his shortcomings, and finally ask for strength to incorporate what they teach into his life.

Within months of the writing of this piece, the life of Peter Beskendorf took a tragic turn. On the day before Easter, the barber was eating at the home of his daughter, Anna. His son-in-law, Dietrich, who had been a soldier, was apparently reporting on battles he had survived and boasting of his invulnerability to death. Peter, perhaps inebriated, put this to the test and stabbed Dietrich with his own sword at the dinner table. In the *Table Talk*, Luther once mentioned this shocking death and commented that the work of the devil must be behind it.^g Luther intervened on behalf of his friend and managed to persuade the elector to banish him from Wittenberg instead of executing him. Peter relocated to Dessau, twenty-one miles away, where he had served earlier as barber/surgeon for Prince Joachim I of Anhalt-Dessau (1509–1561). He died in 1538.

A Simple Way to Pray was immediately popular and was printed four times during 1535, in Wittenberg, Nuremberg, and Augsburg. Altogether there were thirteen editions published during Luther's lifetime, including one in Low German and one in Latin.^h



2. Luther's method bears traces of the *lectio divina* method that was used for the study of Scripture in a monastic setting. In the twelfth century a four-part practice became standardized as: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Luther later modified this practice and described the proper sequence for the study of theology, in the *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings*, as: prayer, meditation, and testing (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*); see pp. 477–78 and 482–88 in this volume; WA 50:657–61; LW 34:283–88. See John Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart: Luther on Meditation," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 20, nos. 2–3 (1986): 142–54; Martin Nicol, *Meditation bei Luther*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984).

^g WA TR 3:70 (#4004)

^h See *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des 16. Jahrhunderts* (VD 16), at www.gateway-bayern.de/index_vd16.html.

3. The translation offered here is based on the German text in WA 38:358–75 (*Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund*) and the English translation by Carl J. Schindler found in LW 43:193–211.

4. Peter the Barber is addressed as “Master” because of his senior guild status. A guild member started as an apprentice, became a journeyman, and then a “master.”

5. Luther also refers to this state of mind in his *Large Catechism* (1529) when commenting on the Third Commandment. There he associates laziness or weariness with one of the traditional seven deadly sins, namely *acedia* (or *acedia*). He calls this “a malignant plague with which the devil bewitches and deceives many hearts so that he may take us by surprise and stealthily take the Word of God away again” (BC, 400; TAL 2:314). A long tradition of monastic reflection on the danger of this condition goes back to Evagrius Ponticus in the late fourth century.

6. A psalter is a book containing the Psalms and sometimes additional devotional material. Psalters were used in the Latin West from the early eighth century onward, especially by monastic communities, who chanted the Psalms daily. Luther first published a German edition of the book of Psalms in 1524. Over a hundred separate German psalter editions were printed in the sixteenth century. In his 1534 preface to the psalter Luther said the book “might well be called a Little Bible in which the whole Bible is beautifully and briefly collected, and compacted into an enchiridion or Manual” (LW 35:254, WA DB 10/1:100).



The Barber
by Lucas
van Leyden
(1494–1533)

A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY³

HOW ONE SHOULD PRAY, FOR PETER, THE MASTER BARBER⁴

DEAR MASTER PETER: I will tell you as best I can what I do personally when I pray. May our dear Lord grant to you and to everybody to do it better than I! Amen.

First, when I feel that I have become cold and listless⁵ in prayer because of other tasks or thoughts (for the flesh and the devil always impede and obstruct prayer), I take my little psalter,⁶ hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, out loud to myself just as a child might do.