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Pray without ceasing
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**Evangelical Lutheran
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God's work. Our hands.

Study guide

Pray without ceasing

By Robert C. Blezard

Among the building blocks of our faith lives—prayer, worship, the sacraments, Scripture and sacred community—prayer is arguably most vital. After all, prayer is an essential ingredient of all the others, connecting us with God and helping us draw closer together as God's children. As both individual disciples of Jesus and as disciples joined in sacred community, we find that prayer aligns us with God's purposes and gives us strength, courage, wisdom and direction.

Exercise 1: Prayer? What's that?

As a study group, pair up. Have each person take turns explaining to the other what prayer is—how it works and what it does.

Here are the rules:

- Each partner has five minutes to explain what prayer is (have someone keep time).
- The one who is listening plays the role of an unchurched, nonreligious, non-Lutheran person who is unfamiliar with the concepts of God and church. This person may ask questions for clarification.
- When it's time to switch, the conversation begins anew, from the beginning, now with the other partner playing the role of an unchurched person.

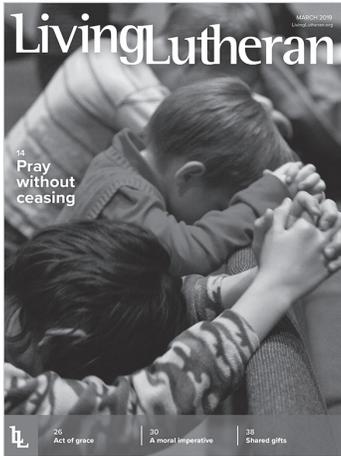
When done, debrief:

- What was hard? Why? What was easy? Why?
- What did you learn? What will you do with that knowledge?

Exercise 2: Prayer to me

For many, writing, rather than speaking, helps them access the deeper thoughts of heart and mind. For this exercise, supply pens and paper for each member of your study group and ask them to write in response to two prompts. Time them for three minutes for each prompt. Ask participants to follow the simple rule that they keep their pen moving at all times for the entire three minutes. This rule encourages people to not “censor” or excessively refine their thoughts before they write them. Here are the prompts:

- For me, prayer is
- I feel most prayerful when I



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When done, invite people to share all or part of their responses. Discuss the various ways that we all pray, and how that enlivens our faith.

Exercise 3: Pray without ceasing

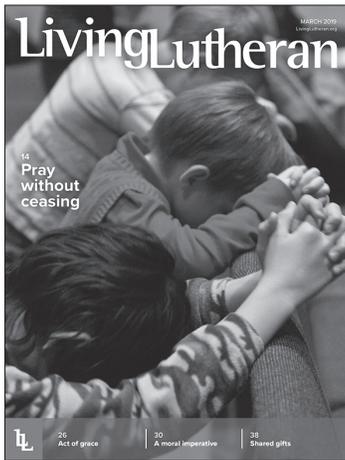
We learn from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that we are to pray without ceasing, but that advice is sandwiched between two other salient points. Here it is in context: “Rejoice always (16) ... pray without ceasing (17) ... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (18).” Discuss:

- First, how do you (or anyone) pray without ceasing? What does it mean to you?
- How do verses 16 and 18 help us better understand Paul’s advice to “pray without ceasing”?
- What does it mean to rejoice always?
- What does it mean to rejoice always in the context of praying without ceasing?
- What does it mean to give thanks in all circumstances?
- What does it mean to give thanks in all circumstances in the context of our unceasing prayer?
- How do the three commands—“rejoice, pray and give thanks”—interrelate? Seen together rather than individually, how are they stronger?
- What do these three verses mean to you? What does it mean for your prayer life? How and why is this a recipe pattern for discipleship?

Exercise 4: Intercessory prayer

Jesus teaches us that “whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22), but for many of us, if we’re not careful, prayer can become simply a laundry list of wants and desires for ourselves, our friends, and our world—situations where we want God to intercede with holy power. But isn’t prayer more than that? Discuss:

- Should we ask God to intercede to help people who are sick or in trouble, or to resolve dire situations where solutions seem impossible? Why or why not?
- Should our prayers consist exclusively of asking God to pour holy light on people and situations? Why or why not?
- If our prayers do become just a list of petitions for God’s help, however worthy, what are we missing?



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- In your experience of faith and prayer, what kind of communication does God want with God's children? How have you found ways to broaden your experience of prayer?
- What can we learn from each other?

Exercise 5: "We don't talk anymore"

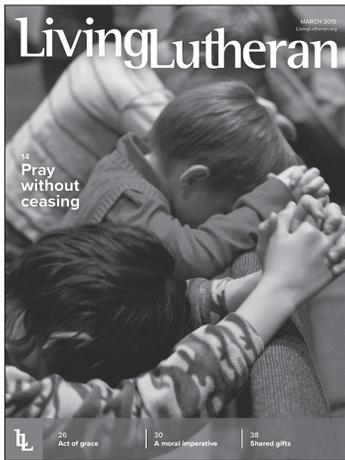
Marriage counselors observe that a breakdown of communication between spouses is both a sign of problems and a cause of problems in a relationship.

- How have you seen or experienced this?
- What does healthy and frequent communication contribute to a relationship? Why is healthy communication necessary?
- How does the principle apply to our relationship with God, both as individuals and community?
- How do we communicate with God besides prayer? Is prayer the best and most efficient way to communicate with God?
- How would you rate your personal prayer life: great, good, OK, needs work?
- How would you rate your personal relationship with God: great, good, OK, needs work?
- Is there a correlation between your prayer life and your relationship with God? What can/should you do about it?
- How would you rate your congregation's prayer life: great, good, OK, needs work?
- How would you rate your congregation's relationship with God: great, good, OK, needs work?
- Is there a correlation between your congregation's prayer life and its relationship with God? What can/should your church do about it?

Exercise 6: How do you pray?

There are lots of ways to pray, and the practices that bring one person into a prayerful state may leave another person feeling cold. How do you pray?

- Share with one another techniques, practices, strategies and disciplines that enable you to pray with meaning and joy.
- How does that kind of prayer make you feel? Why?
- How did you discover or settle on that kind of prayer?
- What advice would you give to someone who wanted to try that kind of prayer?



About the study guide author:

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Exercise 7: A prayer sampler platter

The Christian tradition has developed many prayer forms and disciplines for entering into God's holy space. Here are some of the most common. As a study group or individually, investigate (an internet search engine can certainly help) and sample the prayer form and discover which ones nourish your heart and soul. Many people who pray use a variety of prayer forms to enrich and deepen their connection with the divine. What others might you try?

- **Silent prayer.** The Quaker tradition, among others, uses silent prayer to quiet the mind and soul and enable people to discern the Spirit's stirrings and communication. In recent years, centering prayer has grown in popularity as a method of entering into prayerful silence.
- **Prayer beads.** Our Catholic brothers and sisters are known for their use of the rosary, but prayer beads are common across the Christian world (some ELCA members have even adapted "The Lutheran Rosary"). Repetitive prayer and beads help people enter into sacred space.
- **Moving prayer.** Many Christians have discovered a powerful connection between body and spirit that prayer accompanied by movement (such as tai chi or yoga) can help develop. *Stretch and Pray* (Augsburg Fortress, 2005; augsburgfortress.org), a book and DVD by Murray Finck, bishop emeritus of the Pacifica Synod, has helped many Lutherans enter into prayerful space with yoga techniques.
- **Prayer with Scripture.** Over the years, Christians have found it helpful not simply to read Scripture, but actually pray it. The psalms are especially suited to prayerful reading. Benedictine monks perfected a technique for praying Scripture called *lectio divina*, Latin for "divine reading," that involves four steps: read, meditate, pray, contemplate.
- **Prayer journaling.** Keeping a diary of prayerful thoughts on faith and life helps some people connect with God in a special way. A prayer journal might be a continuing "conversation" with God or a daily letter to Jesus.

PRAY



without ceasing

A Lutheran approach to prayer

By Kurt Lammi and John Potter



“Thoughts and prayers.” We’ve all heard this phrase in the wake of recent national tragedies, particularly in regard to gun violence, in what has become the routine offering of condolences from public figures to victims and their families.

Critics suggest that citing only “thoughts and prayers,” without committing to tangible plans, is an insufficient way to address complex issues. If our prayers aren’t accompanied by action, goes the argument, offering them becomes merely a platitude.

That raises the question of how we are to offer our prayers—and why we even do so to begin with.

For Lutherans, prayer isn’t only an individual discipline we practice daily on our own, but a communal one we return to weekly in Sunday assembly; not a passive gesture, but an embodied one, engaged as a way of participating in the work God is already doing.

Importance of prayer

Lutherans understand the importance of prayer. Martin Luther’s written prayers suggest someone in continual conversation with God. We know

well passages like “pray without ceasing,” which Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Prayer is a meaningful ongoing practice for us—and, data may suggest, for most Americans.

According to a Barna Group study from August 2017, 79 percent of American adults say they have prayed at least once in the last three months. The content of their prayers is wide-ranging (see chart on page 17).

Aside from “gratitude and thanksgiving” at the top and “reciting scripture passages, meditation or liturgies” and “other” at the bottom, all other prayer topics are asking for help in some way.

This makes sense, to a certain extent. In prayer, we admit that we are in need and we ask God to help us with those needs. If we, however, become too focused on our own needs, Luther said—or if we begin to feel that God isn’t “granting” our desires—we miss the point of prayer.

Making prayer solely about what’s happening to us, and subsequently feeling our prayers are not immediately “answered,” allows us to fall into the trap of asking, “Who knows whether God will hear and regard my prayer?” We then run the risk of entering “into the habit of never praying,” Luther wrote in the Large Catechism (*Book of Concord*, page 441).

Rather than getting stuck in the notion that whether or not we pray makes no difference in our lives, Luther emphasized God’s command for us to pray and God’s promise that our prayers are heard.

“The first thing to know is this: It is our duty to pray because of God’s command,” Luther wrote. “For we heard in the Second Commandment, ‘You are not to take God’s name in vain.’ Thereby we are required to praise the holy name and to pray

Our praying does not change God. Instead, it is a way for God to change us.



or call upon it in every need. For calling upon it is nothing else than praying.”

Praying like this, within the context of a continuous relationship between us and God, requires a shift in thinking of prayer as a way to mold God to our needs to, instead, a practice focused on being shaped by God. A Lutheran approach to prayer is less about what we understand God to be revealing to us, and more about shaping our expectations for encountering and reflecting God’s grace in our lives and in the world.

Prayer changes us

If Lutheran prayer is a way of both sharing our concerns with God and enacting our baptismal calling to respond to the needs of the world, it is also a means of changing our mindset from one focused on ourselves to one centered on God and each other.

“Prayer is reorientation away from the preoccupations of this life toward the large, beautiful and trustworthy realm of the Eternal One,” said ELCA liturgical and homiletical scholar Melinda Quivik, who serves as president of the North American Academy of Liturgy and general editor of the journal *Liturgy*. “Prayer is a form of *metanoia* (a change in one’s way of life), of turning to God, recognizing that daily life is ennobled and made gracious when we place ourselves in God’s hands.”

Our praying does not change God. Instead, it is a way for God to change us. Luther said as much in his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer from his Small Catechism (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 1163). If, as Luther said, God is going to do what God is going to do, even without prayer, then the only one being changed when we pray is us—and that’s a very good thing.

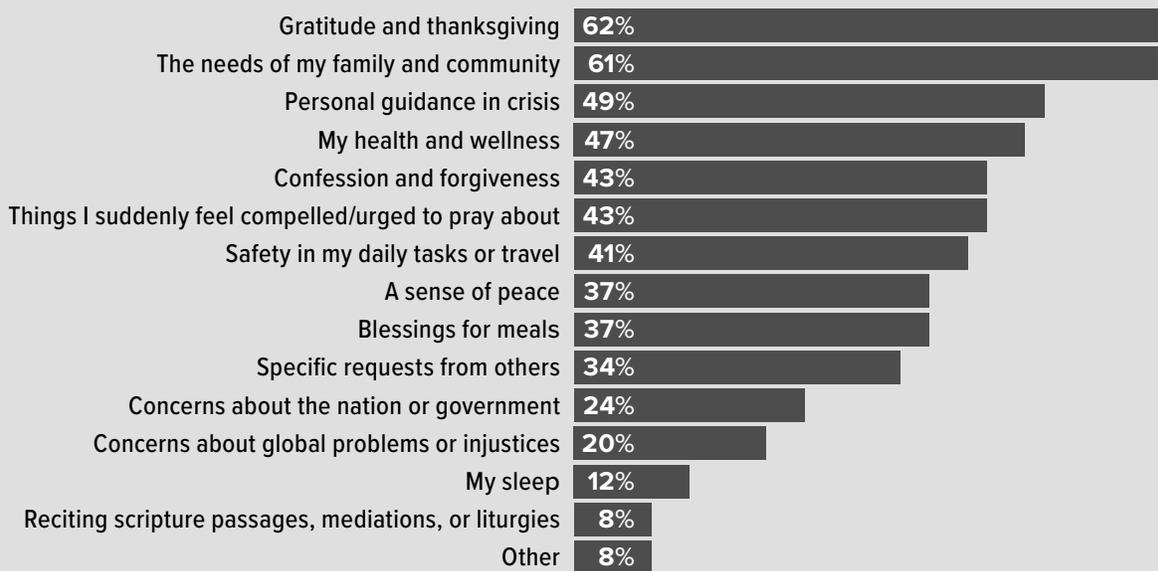
The ELCA resource “EveryWhere and EveryWay: Calling One Another to Prayer” (search for this title at elca.org) notes: “We don’t just seek God; God seeks us. Even the inclination to pray is a gift from God. When the disciples met after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Jesus moved through closed doors to reach them. This image also exemplifies the way Christ can move into our hearts—open or closed—and abide in us. . . . God uses prayer to change us and change the world.”

Prayer isn’t about us getting God to see things from our perspective. It’s about God getting us to see things from God’s perspective, and about moving us from a place of self-focus to one of outward focus and community.

Focus on God

God hears all our prayers, even when we can’t find the words to say them. Paul reminds us of this in

What does the content of your prayers most often pertain to? (*% prayed at least once in the past three months*)



August 2017 Barna Group study



Romans 8:26: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” But, as Scripture tells us, the spirit with which we offer prayers matters.

Immediately before Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord’s Prayer, he says: “But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:6-8).

When we pray, we should do so with a focus on God and a desire to strengthen one’s relationship with God, Jesus says. The “reward” we receive from God in prayer is the change God works within us.

If we share our needs through prayer in the context of our relationship with God, we do so “in order that you may kindle your heart to stronger and greater desires and open and spread your apron wide to receive many things,” Luther wrote (*Book of Concord*, page 443). Our hearts—and, subsequently, our actions—are changed when we pray.

We find evidence for this throughout Scripture. Consider the prayers in the book of Psalms (which Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the prayer book of the Bible”). “Fundamentally, worship in Israel was about the praise of God,” wrote Fred Gaiser, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., in the school’s *Enter the Bible* resource on Psalms (enterthebible.org). “Just as particular lament psalms often move finally to praise, so also does the entire Psalter.”

Jennifer Baker-Trinity, an ELCA deacon, agrees: “The psalms embrace the spectrum of human emotion, from deep lament to ecstatic praise. As a basis for prayer, they help us find the words we need when we are not sure what to say.”

“The psalms form the basis of our communal song together, which has been, for me, a primary way to pray in community,” said Baker-Trinity, who also serves as program director for resource development (a shared position between the ELCA and Augsburg Fortress). “Praise and prayer intermingle. Yet expressing our need before God in song is one way we pray together as community.”



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about us
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perspective.
It's about God
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Embodiment of prayer

In the ELCA, our worship is formed by *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*, including prayers for individual and communal use. Gail Ramshaw, a scholar of liturgical language, suggested that a Lutheran approach to prayer is best understood by knowing the *ELW* well.

“To discover what Lutheran prayer is, read and sing through the entire *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* book—every prayer, all the psalms, each hymn,” said Ramshaw, who served on the Revised Common Lectionary design committee and on the Church’s Year task force for the ELCA’s Renewing Worship project.

Ramshaw holds up the *ELW*’s tradition and role in communal worship as being especially vital to how ELCA Lutherans are to pray. “And even if you are praying and singing your way through the *ELW* all by yourself, remember that your voice and heart are joined with those of ancient Israelites chanting the psalms, first-century believers singing Lucan canticles, medieval nuns and monks keeping the hours, African Americans singing spirituals, with Asian carolers, pilgrims at Taizé, hymn writers from Ambrose to Luther to Susan Palo Cherwien, and countless Lutheran congregations worshipping every Sunday of the year across the land.”

Prayer allows God to change us into the people God wants us to be: those who praise and trust God, regardless of what happens in life, in our daily practice and when we come together in worship, bound together by our church.

Baker-Trinity understands Lutheran prayer to be “embodied,” she said, adding, “It can be easy to think of prayer as just words, as something ‘in the head.’ For Luther, prayer involved the whole self. When we sing, stand, kneel, fold our hands or stretch out our arms, we embrace the God who became flesh in Jesus and in us.”

Lutherans pray not because God is there to grant our wishes or do what we want—or as a way to

offer platitudes in times of tragedy. We pray because we want to see what God is doing in the world. We pray because we want to join with God and with others in living out God’s love.

We pray because we want to be involved in how God works in people’s lives. We pray because we want God to be the center of our lives instead of ourselves. And these changes take place in us throughout our lives, in seasons of joy and struggle—“without ceasing.” **L**

Resources

Available from Augsburg Fortress (augsburgfortress.org):

- *Bread for the Day 2019: Daily Bible Readings and Prayers*.
- *Luther’s Prayers* by Herbert Brokering (2004).
- *The Disciples’ Prayer: The Prayer Jesus Taught in Its Historical Setting* by Jeffrey B. Gibson (2015).
- *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* by Roberta C. Bondi (1991).
- *Prayer: A Primer* by Henry F. French (2009).
- *Martin Luther’s Catechisms: Forming the Faith* by Timothy J. Wengert (2009).
- *Praying for the Whole World: A Handbook for Intercessors* by Gail Ramshaw (2016).
- *Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* by Martin Marty (2007).

Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Kurt Lammi (left) is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church on Dog Leg Road in Dayton, Ohio. **John Potter** is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.