



GOSPEL FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

John 16:23-30

"In that day you will ask nothing of Me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father." His disciples said, "Ah, now You are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that You know all things and do not need anyone to question You; this is why we believe that You came from God."

1. We are accustomed to use this Gospel reading on this Sunday because it teaches about prayer, and this week is called Cross Week, in which people are accustomed to pray and to go about with crosses.¹ Those who first instituted it perhaps meant well, but it turned out poorly. In the processions many unchristian things took place up until now, while nothing at all or very little was prayed, so that they were rightly abolished and discontinued. I have often admonished that we should continue praying, for there is great need of it. However, now that the outward babbling and muttering of prayers have ended, we no longer pray at all. From that we can also become conscious that previously, among so many prayers, we prayed nothing at all.

¹ The three Rogation days (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday) after the Fifth Sunday after Easter and before Ascension Day on Thursday were called "Cross Days," and the week as a whole was called "Cross Week." Prior to the Reformation, it was customary for ecclesiastical processions and blessings of cultivated fields to take place on these three days. As early as 1519 Luther criticized the practice and wanted the days to be dedicated to true prayer. See *On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession* (1519), LW 42:85-93; Brecht 1:353.

2. The Lord points out five things here that are necessary for true prayer.² The first is God's promise, which is the basis, power, and chief thing in every prayer. He promises here that what we pray for will be given to us. He takes an oath on that and says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for something in My name, He will give it to you" [John 16:23], so that we should be certain that we are heard in prayer. He even reprimands them for being lazy and not having prayed at all. It is as if He wanted to say, "God is ready to give more quickly and much more than you ask; He even offers His benefits if we will only take them." It is truly a great shame and a harsh punishment among us Christians that He should still reproach us for our laziness in prayer and that we do not let such rich and excellent promises incite us to pray. We leave this precious treasure lying there and do not attempt or use it to experience the power in such promises.

3. So God Himself now bases our prayer on His promise and so entices us to pray, for if there were no promise, who would dare to pray? We have in the past used various ways of preparing ourselves for prayer, of which the books are full. But if you want to be well prepared, then take for yourself this promise and hold God to it, for then your courage and desire to pray will quickly grow—courage you could never get in any other way. Those who pray without God's promise devise for themselves the idea of how angry God is and hope to appease Him with their prayer. In that situation there is neither courage nor desire to pray, but only uncertain opinion and a depressed spirit. Then the prayer is unheard, and both prayer and labor are lost.

4. With these words He is now rebuking the unbelief of those who have a foolish idea about their own unworthiness to pray. They are gauging the worthiness of their prayer according to themselves and their own ability, and not according to the promise of God. That must result in nothing but unworthiness. However, you should be utterly certain of your worthiness, not from what you do but from the promise of God, so that even if you were alone and no one in the world was praying, yet you would pray because of this promise. You cannot point out to me any saint who has prayed depending on his own worthiness and not only on God's promise, whether it is Peter, Paul, Mary, Elijah, or whoever else—they were altogether unworthy. I would not give one penny for all the prayers of a saint who prayed because of his worthiness.

5. The second point which belongs to this promise is faith, namely, that we believe that the promise is true and do not doubt that God will give what He promises, for the words of the promise require faith. However, faith is a firm, undoubting confidence that God's promise is true, as James says: "If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives in simplicity and

² The sermon On Prayer on John 16:23–30 also mentions five things that are necessary for Prayer. Although the lists overlap, they are not the same.

reproaches no one, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith and not doubt, for whoever doubts is like the waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. Such a person should not think that he will receive anything from God" (James [1:5-7]). Whoever doubts in his heart and yet prays tempts God, for he doubts God's will and grace. Therefore, his prayer is nothing, and he gropes for God like a blind man gropes for the wall [Isa. 59:10].

John also speaks about this certainty of faith in his Epistle: "This is the boldness that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, then we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him" [1 John 5:14-15]. With these words St. John is describing how a right-believing heart is prepared for prayer, namely, that nothing else is on its mind except that its prayer is heard and that it has already obtained its requests, which is also true. Since the Holy Spirit must give this faith and sure certainty, no prayers are really prayed without the Holy Spirit.

6. Try it now and pray in this way, and you will experience the sweetness of God's promise, that is, what courage and cheerful heart it produces for praying for all kinds of things, no matter how great and high the request may be. "Elijah was a man, weak like us; yet when he prayed, it did not rain for three years and six months, and when he again prayed it rained" [James 5:17-18]. Here you see the prayer of one man, and with his prayer he rules over clouds, heaven, and earth. So God lets us see what might and power one true prayer has, namely, nothing is impossible for Him.

7. Let each one now ask his heart how often he has prayed during his life. Singing psalms and reading the Lord's Prayer is not praying.³ These were instituted for the sake of children and uneducated people, in order to train them and give them experience in the Scriptures. No one, however, sees and feels your prayer except you alone in your heart, and you will certainly know when it hits the mark.

8. The third point is that we must name something for which we are asking God, such as when you ask for strong faith, love, peace, and consolation for your neighbor. We must point out the needs, just as the Lord's Prayer presents seven needs. This is what Christ means with the words "if you

³ Luther rejects the view that the act of prayer, performed without attention and considered apart from faith, is truly prayer. Yet elsewhere Luther approves of using written, prescribed prayers, especially the Lord's Prayer, the Commandments, and the Creed. See *Exposition of the Lord's Prayer* (1519), LW 42:21-22; *Sermon on Worthy Reception of the Sacrament* (1521), LW 42:173-74; *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), LW 43:12-13; *Sermon on Prayer* (1528), LW 51:169-71; *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), LW 14:8; *Table Talk* no. 122 (1531), LW 54:17; *Simple Way to Pray* (1535), LW 43:200; the *Church Postil*, sermon for Epiphany 2 on Rom. 12:6-16, paragraph 45 (LW 76:225). See also the prayers that Luther provides in the *Small Catechism* (1529) (Kolb-Wengert, pp. 363-64; *Concordia*, pp. 344-45).

ask for something" [John 16:23]—"something," that is, something you need. Likewise, He Himself explains this "something" and says "that your joy may be perfect" [John 16:24]. That is, pray for all kinds of necessities, until you have obtained everything and have full joy. This prayer will first be fulfilled completely on the Last Day.

9. The fourth point is that we must desire or wish that it happen, which is nothing other than asking as Christ says, "Ask." Others have called this *ascensus mentis in Deum*, that is, the heart rises and soars up to God, and desires something from Him, and for that reason sighs and says, "If only I had this or that!" St. Paul highly praises this sighing and says that it is "an inexpressible sighing" of the Spirit (Romans 8 [:26]); that is, the mouth cannot speak as sincerely and mightily as the heart wishes. The yearning exceeds all words and thoughts. Therefore, it also happens that a person does not himself feel how deep is his sighing or desire. When Zacchaeus desired to see the Lord, he himself did not feel that his heart wished that Christ would speak with him and come to his house. However, when it happened, he was very happy, for he had succeeded according to all his wishes and requests, more than he had dared to ask or desire with his mouth [Luke 19:2-6]. Moses cried out so that God said to him: "Why do you cry to Me?" (Exodus 14 [:15])—he was silent with his mouth, yet his heart sighed deeply in its need, and that is what God then called "a cry." So St. Paul also says, "God is powerful to do more and higher than we ask or understand" (Ephesians 3 [:20]). Now this sighing is assisted by temptations, anxiety, and danger, which teach us true sighing.

10. The fifth point is that we ask in Christ's name, which is nothing other than that we come before God with faith in Christ and confidently take comfort that He is our Mediator, through whom all things are given to us and without whom we deserve nothing but wrath and enmity. Paul says, "Through Him we have access into this grace in which we stand, and we boast in the hope of the coming glory which God will give" (Romans 5 [:2]). We truly ask in Christ's name when we rely on Him that we are being received and heard for His sake, and not for our sake. Those, however, who ask in their own name—such as those who think that God will hear or regard them because they say so many, so long, so devout, and so holy prayers—will deserve and obtain only wrath and enmity. They want to be the people for whom God should have regard without any means, so that Christ is of no value or use.

11. Here we see that all five points in prayer can certainly happen in the heart, without any oral babbling, though what the mouth says is certainly not to be despised but is necessary to kindle and incite inner prayer in the heart. However, the additions [to prayer], of which I have written enough elsewhere, should and must be set aside; namely, we are not to specify for

God the time, speed, person, place, and limit, but confidently leave all of that to His will. We are only to cling to asking, and not doubt that the prayer is heard and that it is already arranged that what we asked for will be given, as certainly as if we already had it. This is pleasing to God, and He wants to do as He here promises: "Ask, and you will receive" [John 16:24]. Those, however, who set the time, speed, place, and limit tempt God and do not believe that they are heard or that they have obtained that for which they asked. Therefore, nothing will be given to them. The Gospel reading continues further:

"Until now you have asked nothing in My name," etc. [John 16:24]

12. That amounts to saying that they as yet knew nothing about this prayer and name. Besides, they felt no need which would urge them to ask. They imagined that because Christ was with them, they needed nothing and had enough of everything. But now that He is to go away and leave them, the needs begin. These will give them sufficient reason to pray.

"I have said this through a proverb," etc. [John 16:25]

13. When He says "this," He means what He said before: "A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me, for I am going to the Father" [John 16:16]. Likewise, [He means what He said] about the anguish of a woman giving birth [John 16:21]. These were nothing but proverbs, that is, dark, obscure sayings which they did not understand. John calls these dark, hidden words "proverbs," even though in German they are not called that, but rather "riddles" or "hidden words." We are accustomed to say about someone who speaks garbled words: "That is a covered dish," since there is something else behind the way the words sound; it is nimble and clever speech which not everyone understands. All the words that Christ spoke on the evening of His departure and going to the Father were like that, for they could understand nothing of them. They did not think about His dying and coming into another existence, but going for a physical walk and returning, as we travel to another country and return. Even though He spoke out bright and clear, yet His going and departure were "a covered dish" to them. Therefore, He further says:

"But the time is coming when I will no longer speak with you in proverbs but will tell you plainly about My Father." [John 16:25]

14. That is, what I now physically speak with you—and you do not understand My proverbs—I will certainly explain to you through the Holy Spirit. I will plainly tell about My Father, so that you will certainly understand what

“the Father” is and what “My going to the Father” means. That is, you will see clearly that I am ascending through suffering into the Father’s kingdom and kind of existence, and that I am sitting at His right hand, representing you and being your Mediator. You will see that I have done all of this for your sake, so that you also can come to the Father. This “telling about His Father” is not to be understood to mean that He will tell us much about the divine nature, as the sophists invent, for that is pointless and incomprehensible. Rather, [He will tell us] how He goes to the Father, that is, how He receives the kingdom and government of the Father, just as a king’s son comes to his father to receive the kingdom. He further says:

“On the same day you will ask in My name.” [John 16:26]

15. Then you will not only have reasons to ask in various difficulties, but you also will know and recognize what My name is and how you should regard Me. Then the asking itself will teach you what you now do not at all understand and for which you have so far never prayed. Therefore, He further says:

“And I do not say to you that I will ask the Father for you; for He Himself, the Father, loves you, because you love Me and believe that I came from God.” [John 16:26-27]

16. How is that? Does He not want to be a Mediator? Are we not to ask in His name? Are we to come to the Father through ourselves? How delightfully and sweetly the Lord can speak and entice us to Himself and through Him to the Father! Here He Himself explains what must happen when we want to ask in His name. “You have loved Me,” He says, “and believe that I came from God,” etc. That is, “You know Me and love Me. Thus you have Me and My name and are in Me as I am in you.” Christ dwells in us, not because we can think, speak, sing, or write much about Him, but because we love Him and believe in Him, that He has come from God and returns to God, that is, that in His suffering He emptied Himself of all divine glory and again went to the Father in His kingdom for our sake [cf. Phil. 2:5-11]. This faith brings us to the Father, and thus everything happens in His name.

17. Here we are certain that Christ does not need to ask for us, for He has already prayed for us. We ourselves can now come through Christ and ask. We no longer need another Christ who asks for us, but this one Christ who has prayed for us and brought us [to the Father] is enough. That is why He says, “The Father loves you” [John 16:27]. “It is not your merit, but His love. However, He loves you for My sake, because you believe and love Me; that is, He looks at My name in you. Therefore, I have carried out My office, and you

have been brought through Me [to the Father]. Just like Me, you yourselves can now come before Him and ask. There is no need for Me to ask for you again." Those are strikingly great words, that through Christ we have become like Him as His brothers and can boast of being His Father's children, and that His Father loves us for Christ's sake. He says above: "From His fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (John 1 [:16]); that is, God is gracious to us because He is gracious in Christ, who is in us and we in Him.

18. Here we also see that "believing in Christ" does not mean believing that Christ is one person who is God and man, for that helps no one.⁴ Rather, it means believing that this same person is Christ, that is, that He came from God for our sake and came into the world, and again leaves the world and goes to the Father [John 16:28]. That is as much as to say, "Here is Christ, who became man for us and died, rose again, and ascended into heaven." Because of this office, He is called Jesus Christ, and believing that this is true means being and remaining in His name. There follows further in the Gospel reading:

His disciples said to Him: "Now You are speaking plainly, and not speaking proverbs." [John 16:29]

19. Here you see that "speaking plainly" or "speaking clearly" is the same as speaking without proverbs or without dark and hidden words. The good disciples think that they understand very well what it means that Christ comes from the Father and goes to the Father. However, they do this as good children of Christ, as if they could easily understand, and they tell Him this to please Him. Good, simple people sometimes tell each other yes or no, and one will speak up and tell another that it is true and he understands it when he is still far from understanding it. That can happen without any hypocrisy, in true simplicity. The evangelist points out here what a beautiful, simple, pleasant, and delightful life Christ led with His disciples, that they could understand Him so easily. Therefore, they further say:

⁴ Luther accepted the ancient dogma of the person of Christ and often emphasized its importance, but he also wanted it to be connected with faith in Christ's saving work. On the connection of Christology with soteriology as the "chief article" of the Christian faith, see *Sermons on John 17* (1528/1530), LW 69:69-70; *Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:351-52; *Smalcald Articles* (1537/1538) II I (Kolb-Wengert, p. 301; *Concordia*, p. 263); and the *Church Postil*, sermon for Third Day of Christmas on Heb. 1:1-12, paragraphs 11-140 (LW 75:259-316), and sermon for Sunday after Christmas on Gal. 4:1-7, paragraphs 56-61 (LW 75:382-83).

"Now we know that You know all things and do not need anyone to question You; this is why we believe that You came from God." [John 16:30]

20. That is, "You anticipate and explain Yourself and no longer speak in proverbs, about which we would have to question You. You already know where we are lacking in understanding." All of this refers to their question about what the "little while" meant [John 16:16]. He notices this and says that He must go to the Father. They still did not understand it, but it was clearer than when He said, "A little while, and you will not see Me" [John 16:16]. Now, when He saw from their thoughts that they wanted to question Him, they then confessed that He came from God and knows all things, so that they do not need to question Him, for He Himself sees very well where the trouble is.