

All Ralphie Parker wanted for Christmas was a Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model BB rifle. That’s all he wanted, and he wanted it so badly! But if you’ve ever seen the movie “A Christmas Story,” you know how much opposition he faced. “No! You’ll shoot your eye out!” said his Mom. “No! You’ll shoot your eye out!” said his teacher. “No! You’ll shoot your eye out!” said Santa Claus. Yes, even Santa Claus! That didn’t mean Ralphie gave up, of course. He hinted, begged, and plotted every way he knew how. And it paid off! His dad caved in. Christmas morning, there it was under the tree: a Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model BB rifle! He was so excited! He could hardly wait to try it! And what happened next? He shot his eye out, of course – or would have if he hadn’t been wearing the world’s thickest glasses!

Now, the first time I saw this movie, I just thought it was funny. I didn’t see any deeper implications, certainly no implications for prayer! But actually, there are some, aren’t there? Because in each one of us there is a little bit of Ralphie Parker that can really set our hearts on certain things. To us, they seem so good so right, so important, even necessary, that like Ralphie Parker, we can pursue them relentlessly. And pray for them relentlessly. But here’s where reality and Hollywood part company. God is not going to give us something He knows is not good for us. No matter how intensely we pray or how long. We may find other means of getting what we want. That is possible. After all, we live in a world set up so that free will can operate freely. But God is not going to give us something He knows is not good for us.

And in our better moments, we would not want Him to. For in our better moments, we recognize how partial our perspective is compared to God’s. We recognize how misguided our desires can be. And more to the point, we want to want what God wants. We want to honor God. We want Him rule our lives. And we want to devote ourselves to His will so that it truly is “*done on earth as it is in heaven.*” Yes, that’s what we want in our better moments.

But of course, we don’t automatically think that way. So this is why Jesus has given us a model prayer that helps us get into right frame of mind first before we start asking for things. He teaches us to remember who we are praying to – a divine Father who wants nothing but the best for His children. He teaches us to remember how we are to pray to God – in a way that honors Him and “hallows” His name. Last but not least, He teaches us to remember why we are to pray to God – not to have our will be done, but to have God’s will be done. Yes, first we need to get the who, the how, and the why clearly in focus, and only then does Jesus teach us what to pray for. That begins with the fourth petition, and that is our topic for this evening: “**Give us this day our daily bread.**”

Diving right in, then, let’s first be clear what “**daily bread**” means. In the original Greek, the term is *arton epiousion*, which literally means “*our needful bread,*” but

it would be better to translate it as “*whatever we need to live*” – which, of course, includes a lot more than just bread! As Luther says in the Small Catechism, “*Daily bread includes everything we need for our bodily welfare, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, cattle, money, goods, a godly spouse, godly children, godly workers, godly and faithful leaders, good government, good weather, peace and order, good health, a good name, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.*” Whew! That’s a pretty complete list, isn’t it? All of that falls under the heading of “**daily bread.**”

Still, as complete as it may sound, we can’t help noticing that certain things are missing from the list. Specifically, there’s no fluff! No luxuries. No trendy stuff. No gadgets. No toys. No super-duper thingamajigs that advertisers try make us want so badly. There’s not even a Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model BB rifle! In short, there’s nothing we couldn’t just as easily do without. Only necessary things. That doesn’t mean we can’t ask for *unnecessary* things, too, but it does mean we should focus first and foremost on our needs, not our wants. Jesus teaches to pray for “**our daily bread,**” not champagne and caviar!

And if I may go off on a little tangent here, this is a good rule of thumb for life in general. Living in such an affluent society, it is easy to take the things we need for granted. Instead of seeing them as blessings, instead of appreciating them, instead of being content with them, it’s tempting to overlook them and think: “*Yeah, yeah, the basic stuff is nice, but Lord – honestly! – why haven’t I gotten that new iPod I’ve been asking for, or the new car, or the big promotion, or the latest...whatever?*” Yes, that is so easy, so tempting! But it is also a recipe for unhappiness! For where does it end? No sooner do we get whatever cool, exciting new toy we’ve set our hearts on than we see one that’s even cooler and more exciting, so we have to have it, too! It just never ends! And even if it did somewhere way down the line, that’s not what life is supposed to be about! “*Whoever dies with the most toys wins!*” Actually, that gets in the way of what life is supposed to be about – which is not catering to our desires, but breaking out of all that and focusing on God, loving others, and doing something worthwhile with our time here on earth. So there is a good reason why fluff is missing from the list. That is not to be our focus. When we ask for things, we’re to focus first and foremost on our needs – our “**daily bread.**”

That said, though, there are also things present on the list we might not have considered “**daily bread**” – things that we might not have thought to pray for, but we ought to pray for and not take for granted.

For instance, good health is on the list. And isn’t that easy to take for granted...until it’s gone! Ah, for the good old days when I worried about being too skinny, and high blood pressure was something I caused, not something I had!

Also on the list are faithful neighbors. Have you ever had neighbors who were practically like family? They looked out for you, you looked out for them – and

then they moved, and you got neighbors who weren't quite so neighborly. It's easy to take faithful neighbors for granted, too!

Likewise, a good name. These days, people don't think so much about reputation. They figure, "*I am who I am; take me or leave me.*" But ask anyone who's been innocently accused of something what it can be like even after they're acquitted. They'll tell you how much a good name is worth! Years ago in my former community, some teachers at our most prestigious preschool – the McMartin Preschool – were accused of doing all kinds of vile stuff. There was a huge uproar, a big trial took place, and in the end, the teachers were completely acquitted. But did that keep the school from closing? No. Did it keep the teachers' careers from being ruined? No. And it didn't keep the teachers and their families from being shunned, either. To this day, there's still a whiff of suspicion around anyone associated with the McMartin Preschool. So a good name is also something we need.

And let's not forget good government! With all that we're dealing with at home and abroad, only a fool would think that things will be just fine whether or not we pray. Our country needs our prayers. Our leaders need our prayers. And that goes for all our leaders, I might add – regardless of party. Here especially we must not let partisanship creep in. If we voted someone into office, we should pray for them. And if we didn't vote for them, that's a good reason to pray twice as hard! Remember, whatever our politics, we are still "*one nation under God,*" and we need to take that seriously by lifting up our leaders before God.

Yes, many things are included in this prayer for "**daily bread.**" But now let's look at another part of the petition: "**Give us this day our daily bread.**" What is Jesus teaching us here? In the original Greek, Matthew's version is a little different from Luke's, but there's no contradiction between the two, just a difference in flavor. Luke is more general: "*Keep giving us according to the day whatever we need to live.*" Matthew is more specific: "*Give us this day whatever we need to live.*" But the point is the same. As always, Jesus teaches day-by-day dependence on God. In general, that's how we're to live out our faith. Specifically, that's to be our focus in prayer. Don't fret over the future. Deal with the present – by depending on God day by day for whatever we need to live.

One thing this does for us, by the way, is help keep our faith fresh. Just to illustrate, I hope you'll forgive me telling yet another story about the bakery in Germany. When I was there last summer, I stayed in a room right above the store, and every morning I would wake up to the smell of fresh baked bread wafting up from below. Believe me, that's a wonderful way to wake up! Then, a little bit later, I would head downstairs and grab a few fresh *Brötchen* for my breakfast. *Brötchen* are those amazing German rolls – so nice and crusty on the outside, soft and tender on the inside, and, of course, these were still warm! I'd spread on some butter, some jam, or Bauernmettwurst, I'd pour myself a cup of coffee, and I was pretty well set to face the day! It was nothing fancy, but what a

treat! And what a contrast to the mass-produced bread at the market. Granted, that bread at the market might last a lot longer. Some of it is pumped so full of preservatives it could probably last for years! But there is a lot to be said for getting your bread fresh each day – fresh, still warm, and so good!

Well, that's also true of the **“daily bread”** we ask for in the Lord's Prayer. Turning to God each day for what we need helps keeps our faith fresh, our relationship with God warm and good! Which is important! The last thing we need is to go on spiritual auto-pilot! By that, I mean just kind of expecting God to provide whatever we need, maybe perfunctorily praying for it, but only really praying when something is missing. We all know what a difference there is between perfunctory praying and the real thing. On the one hand, there's “Bless my mom, my dad, my spouse, my children, and our goldfish, Nemo...” Then there's the kind of praying you do when it's 3:00 a.m., your teenager isn't home, and they're not answering their cell phone. “*God, please bring my child home safely!*” That kind of prayer is from the heart! That kind of prayer is depending on God! And ideally, all prayer should be just as real and fresh. Learning to ask God **“this day”** for **“our daily bread”** helps keep it fresh. It keeps us mindful of God's goodness, thankful for every blessing, and conscious of our need for God every step of the way. So that is the strategy here. Coming to God **“this day”** for **“our daily bread”** helps keep our faith fresh!

Of course, some might question: *Does this mean then that we can't we plan for the future at all?* Certainly not. We can plan for the future. And should. To some degree. But the longer we live, don't we also learn how unpredictable life can be? The longer we live, don't we learn how fast plans can go down the tubes? That's certainly been my experience! So yes, we can plan for the future, and should, but only provisionally, and always with our main focus on **“this day.”** Trusting in God **“this day.”** Depending on God **“this day.”** After all, life is what is happening right now – **“this day”** – not tomorrow, next week, or next year. So faith must be lived right now – **“this day”** – not in some theoretical future. First and foremost, faith must focus on **“this day.”** And that goes for our prayers, too, which is why Jesus teaches us to pray, **“Give us this day our daily bread.”**

P. J. Wingate once said, *“Give us this day our daily bread’ is probably the most perfectly constructed and useful sentence ever set down in the English language!”* Now that we have looked at this petition more closely, we can see why he felt that way! Jesus not only invites us to ask God for things, but also teaches us the best way to go about it. First, He teaches us to focus on our needs, not our wants. Then, too, He teaches us to focus on all our needs, not just the obvious ones. Also, He teaches us to focus on present needs, not what may or may not happen in the future. And to keep our faith fresh, He teaches us to ask for what we need day by day. There is deep wisdom in this fourth petition. Jesus teaches us a lot when He says, **“Pray then in this way...Give us this day our daily bread.”** Amen.

