

“Anything I Ask?”

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[Luke 11:1-13](#)

A 3-year-old boy once went with his mother to the grocery store. This particular little boy, like most others, really loved chocolate chip cookies and so his mother told him before they even entered the store, “Now you’re not going to get any chocolate chip cookies today, so don’t even ask.” They went about their shopping and all was going well until they went past the cookies and the little boy stood up in the shopping cart and said, “Mom, can I have some chocolate chip cookies?” She said, “I told you not even to ask. You’re not going to get any chocolate chip cookies today.” So he sat back down. They continued their shopping, but they ended up backtracking and passing the cookies again, at which point the little boy asked “Mom, can I please have some chocolate chip cookies?” She said, “I told you that you can’t have any. Now sit down and be quiet.” Finally, they were through shopping and started approaching the checkout lines. Now, this little boy had been shopping before. He knew that once they got to the register, it was all over. So, in the checkout line, he stood up on the seat of the shopping cart and shouted in his loudest voice, “In the name of Jesus, may I have some chocolate chip cookies?” Everyone around, of course, broke out into laughter and, due to the generosity of the other shoppers, the little boy and his mother left with 23 boxes of chocolate chip cookies.

Jesus said “ask, and it will be given you.” Jesus told us in John 14 to pray in His name. It seems this little boy was just following the instructions of Jesus. He asked, in the name of Jesus, and it was given him. And, it seems, that’s exactly what Jesus is saying to us.

It sounds like something of a blank check. John 14:14 says “If in my name you ask me for anything I will do it.” Anything at all that we want? But we know that it doesn’t exactly work that way. If it really worked that way, then every eight year old child in America would be eating chocolate cake for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. If we will receive *anything* we ask for, then there would be a lot more famous people and a lot more fancy cars. More seriously, if Jesus will do whatever we ask in His name, there would be an end to war, all of us would live in harmony, there’d be no poverty, no one would die from terrible diseases, and no child would go to bed hungry. How can Jesus tell us that if we just ask for something, we will receive it? I hope you don’t need a solid answer today because, honestly, I don’t have a completely satisfying answer for that. That is one of the biggest questions of the faith. It goes along with the question of why bad things happen to good people. There are partial answers and some insights, but this is one subject I don’t believe we’ll have a full answer to this side of heaven.

Some Biblical scholars point out that the quote from Jesus was not really along the lines of “Ask and you will get what you ask for,” but rather along the lines of “Ask and you will receive something good.” The last verse of this passage indicates in large part what we will receive if we ask and that is the Holy Spirit. And I do know that to be true. In the times of my life when I have prayed and prayed for something which did not come to pass, I do know that God has sent the Holy Spirit to comfort me. Sometimes that is easier to see in hindsight than in the moment, but the Comforter is there in the midst of our dark times. And Jesus also knew of a prayer not being answered the way that He asked when He cried out in the garden of Gethsemane for God to stop the crucifixion from taking place. The next prayer he made was one of lament – “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Even Jesus

knew a time of despair – despair beyond what we can imagine – and yet he was still able to pray to God just before he died, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Prayers of lament are part of the conversation with God. They are part of what God wants from us – real, honest prayer. And then we are able to move into prayers of trust, as Jesus did – “into your hands I commit my spirit.”

There’s also an aspect to this passage that is lost in translation. Scholars point out that this passage really should be interpreted more like *ask, and ask, and keep on asking, seek and seek, and keep on seeking, knock and knock, and keep on knocking*. Ongoing action and persistence are implied here, much like the neighbor who finally opens his door at midnight because his friend has been persistent. Does this mean that God is stubborn, but will eventually do what we want if we just ask often enough? No, I believe this is more about having an ongoing conversation with God. Prayer is about communing with God, and Jesus wants to encourage us to keep up that communion all the time. We tend to think that the content of the prayer is the only thing that matters, but Jesus seems to always teach us about the continual nature of prayer and the need to remain connected with God, creator of all good things.

Jesus teaches us a few things about prayer when the disciples ask. He gives us what we pray here every week as The Lord’s Prayer. Luke records one version of it; the version we pray is closer to the version in Matthew. *The Message* paraphrase is also helpful in understanding this prayer. It goes like this:

Father,

Reveal who you are.

Set the world right.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

In any of these versions, we should notice that we never say the words “I” or “my” or “mine.” We start out by praying that God’s name be hallowed, or holy, sacred, sanctified. First things first, we seek to honor the name of our God. We want the name of God to be spoken with reverence. Then, we ask that God’s kingdom would come to be here on earth. The kingdom of God reigns fully in heaven, but not yet fully here on earth, and so we pray for a time when the whole earth will worship God and all will be united in Christ. Similarly, we ask that God’s will be done on earth. We are really asking that we do what God would have us to do and all others would do what God would have them to do. Next, we ask for our daily bread, but notice again that it is not for “my” daily bread, but rather “our.” We are a community. We are interconnected. We are praying for each other as much as for ourselves, and we are praying just for the necessities of life. We are not asking for a fancy car or even for fancy food, but just for our *daily* bread, just like the Israelites learned with the manna in the desert. We ask only for enough for today. Then, we ask God to forgive our sins, or debts as we usually say, but we ask that God forgive us, *as we forgive others*. From this text and others we know that it is important that we seek to forgive others first and then ask God to forgive us in the same way. If we are unwilling to forgive others, how can we ask God to forgive us? Then, we ask God to help keep us from the things that tempt us and away from evil. We ask that God help us to do what is right, together.

Again, all of these things are said in plural pronouns, emphasizing the unity of the Christian community. I found a poem which states this clearly:

You cannot say the Lord's Prayer, and even once say "I".
 You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer, and even once say "my".
 Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for another.
 For to ask for "*our*" daily bread, you include your sister and brother!
 All God's children are included in each and every plea.
 From the beginning to the end of it, it does not once say "me".

So, when we pray, we are to pray for others, as well as for ourselves, as well. But what exactly should we pray for? We should pray that we become more in tune with the will of God, together.

E. Stanley Jones, the prolific author wrote this: "Prayer is surrender – surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God."

When we so regularly, so often, and so persistently pray to God that we become as familiar with God as we are our neighbors and friends, then the content of our prayers will change. When we develop such a close relationship with God, our hearts will be attuned to the heart of God, to the good things that God wants for us. A close relationship with God will have us praying, not for chocolate chip cookies or for fancy cars, but for God's will to be done. It will have us seeking to help bring about God's kingdom here on earth. Others will see God at work through us. They will see a different set of priorities, a different attitude

on life. When we develop such a close relationship with God, we won't see prayer as a way of trying to get things from God, but rather as a way of aligning our will to the will of God and communing with our Creator.

And prayers don't have to have fancy words. Mark Trotter wrote the following in his book "Grace All the Way Home":

"Throw anything up there. Stumble, use bad grammar, have long embarrassing pauses, split your infinitives and even dangle your participles. It doesn't matter. Just groan or sigh if that's all you can do, because God's hearing your prayer does not depend on your eloquence but on God's grace, which is already at work in your life."

So pray to God. Trust God with all of your thoughts – for God knows them already. Groan or sigh or cry out, if that's what you feel like doing. Just continue talking to God, and let prayer become not just you praying *to* God, but instead communing *with* God. And communing with God is always better than a box of chocolate chip cookies, or even 23 boxes. Amen.