

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

July 24, 2016

## **“You Get What You Ask For”**

*Love to Pray, part 3*

I John 5:14-15

I love being the pastor at this church. It doesn't matter what has happened during the week, when I enter this place on Sunday morning and worship with all of you, I am given a beautiful reminder of just how blessed I am. It's because of the community God has placed us all in. We are not here because we are perfect. We are here because we are forgiven. We can support, encourage, and admonish each other. We can remind each other that God has truly blessed us.

Would you pray with me? O God, you never sleep, you never slumber, and you always know what is best for us. Please open our minds in this moment now, so that we can receive your Word and respond. Teach us how to pray. Teach us how to love. Teach us how to ask for your blessings. We pray this in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The last few weeks we have been focusing on prayer. Prayer is the conversational part of our relationship with God. If we can improve our prayer habits, we can strengthen our love relationship with God. It's just like any other friendship you have. The more time you spend together talking, the healthier that relationship can be. We have also been honest about the difficulties in prayer. It's hard to hear God. Our sin blocks our prayer. We have to learn to tell God we are sorry if we want to have power in prayer.

Today I want to tackle another difficulty in prayer: this idea of getting what we ask for. Let me start with an illustration.

Al VanderGriend tells a story about a man crossing the Atlantic on a ferry. In order to save money, he packed enough cheese and crackers so that he wouldn't have to buy food while on board. The last day of the trip, however, he decided to treat himself and went to the ship's dining room. He was surprised to see that the menu didn't list any prices. Upon asking, he learned to his dismay that the meals had been included in the original price of his ticket. He had missed out on wonderful food during the whole trip, simply because he didn't believe it was his for the taking.

I have a hard question this morning: in our walk with Jesus, how often are we like the man in this story? How often do we not receive what God wants for us because we haven't asked?

I want us to consider today how we pray for ourselves and what we ask for. The verses we read in I John 5:14-15 tell us to approach God with confidence. John reminds us that when we ask according to God's will, he hears us, and we know we have what we ask for. That's amazing.

But this is a really difficult message for me today, because there are several dangerous assumptions we can make from this verse. And I want to be perfectly honest this morning: I don't fully agree with pastors who say, "The reason God doesn't bless you financially is because you haven't asked." This is not the "prosperity" gospel. I have never believed that God wishes for us all to be millionaires.

The key in praying for ourselves is that we are supposed to ask according to God's will. When I think about the things God wants us to have, I recall Galatians 5:22-23, the Fruit of the Spirit. God wants us to have "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." I don't see a new

car in that list. I don't see a new house, new job, or any other creature comfort we might desire. I don't even see good health in that list. But I see a whole bunch of things that are really hard for me to obtain, and yet, deep down, I really want them. Patience. Kindness. Self-control. Those are blessings that God wants to give us, but how often are we asking for them?

The reason I struggle to pray in God's will is that too often I pray for my own comfort. There is no verse in the bible that says God wants us to be comfortable. In fact, praying for God's blessing should make us uncomfortable because God's will is different from the world. If we are in God's will, there's a good chance we will stick out. Romans 12:2 tell us, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." The very proof of knowing we have what God wants for us may very well be how uncomfortable we are. Doing God's will goes against the grain of this world. It's hard to find an example in the Bible of someone who was receiving God's blessings and abiding in God's will that wasn't at the same time experiencing persecution, ridicule, or worse.

So what does this prayer for ourselves come down to? Discernment, determination and persistence. First we must discern that we are indeed asking for what is according to God's will. Parents, how often has your child asked for something that you didn't want to give them? "Please, Daddy, may I have ice cream for breakfast?" True confession: on vacation, my children did have ice cream for breakfast, but that was after they ate toast and juice! God wants to give us spiritual health food, not junk food. And we can know we are asking in God's will by reading scripture, spending time in conversation with God, doing

mediation, and asking our Christian friends. And if, by the Holy Spirit, we are convinced that we are asking according to God's will, then our prayers must not cease. We must pray in confidence as if we have it already.

This is where the parable of the persistent widow comes in handy. Let me read it to you. (Luke 18:2-18)

Jesus said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

I initially learned that the purpose of this parable was to convince us to never stop praying, no matter what we were asking. And to some extent, that is true. But let me ask you, what did the widow want? Justice. What that in accordance with God's will? Yes, I would absolutely agree, God is just and would want to give the widow justice. Now, if she was asking God to keep the neighborhood kids off her lawn or to lower her taxes, then I'd say, not so much.

I can't stress this enough. We must ask, we must have confidence, and we must pray in accordance with God's will. There is so much God wants us to give us, and we miss out because we don't ask.

Please understand, God is not some sort of cosmic vending machine. You don't put your prayer token in the slot, and wait for the answer to pop out. Brian

McLaren once wrote (in Naked Spirituality), “Immature petition tries to convince God to remake the world in our image for our convenience and ease, but mature petition asks God to remake us in God’s own image, so that we can expand our capacity to respond to the world as it is.”

It’s hard to ask for the things God wants to really give us. Maybe you’ve had a time when you’ve asked for something really difficult, but something you really needed. For me, it’s patience with my family. For others, it’s wisdom, or peace in troubled times. Maybe you really do need a miracle. I asked God for a job several years ago, and it took months before I found something. But what I discovered in the end of that difficult time was that God could use my experiences in ministry, because through the adversity, I had learned some of that fruit that God wanted to give me. Hope. Understanding that tough times don’t last forever. Empathy to sit beside someone and listen to their pain, and be able in some way to understand.

Those things are a lot different than asking for material blessings. It’s not that God can’t or won’t give us financial blessings, but they should never be at the top of our list of things we ask. Instead, we should pray according to God’s will. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all these things will be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33)

Hebrews 4:14-16 has the best encouragement for us. “Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace

with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Do you hear what this scripture tells us? Jesus understands us. He knows what we need. When we approach God’s throne, we receive God’s blessings for us: mercy and grace in times of need. That’s God’s will for our lives. Those are answers we can have, we do have, immediately, when we pray. Once we understand that, we will have great confidence in our prayers for ourselves. And truly, we will receive what we ask for, because God truly wants to give his blessings to us.

### Memory verse

Romans 8:32 - "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

### Reflection questions

1. What is the most difficult thing you've ever asked someone for? Did you receive it?
2. How confident do you feel approaching God in prayer?
3. When we "approach God's throne" (Heb 4:16), what do we receive?
4. How closely do your prayers follow God's will?
5. How does the parable of the widow and judge (Luke 18:1-8) challenge you to be persistent in prayer?