

A man traveling to America on a passenger ship decided to save money by not eating in the ship's dining hall. Instead he packed enough crackers and cheese in a trunk to hold him until he arrived. But on the last day of the voyage he decided to splurge and buy one good meal before disembarking. Noticing that prices were not listed for the meals, he inquired of a waitress and was informed that the cost of the meals was included in his ticket. All he'd had to do to receive his meals was to come to the dining hall and place his order. Misunderstanding the ship's ticketing system, he had failed to receive what was rightly his. There are many Christians today like that man—Christians who are spiritually impoverished because they do not realize that all they have to do is ask to receive what God intends for them.

*Confidence* is the key concept of John's first letter. It appears in verse 14: "This is the *confidence* we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." This letter was written by the apostle John to the churches of Asia Minor—known today as Turkey. The occasion was the emergence of a group of heretics who separated themselves from the church and upset everyone with their false teaching. They denied that Jesus was the Son of God. They denied that his death brought salvation from sin. Instead they taught that God had now enlightened them through the Holy Spirit and they could know and teach the truth apart from Jesus. They taught that there is no sin, people just lack the proper knowledge. All of this sounds curiously modern—like the New Age spirituality that gets promoted by Hollywood celebrities and self-help gurus.

John wants to reassure Christians. He wants them to be confident in the cardinal doctrines and ethics of Christianity. One of those is prayer. How can we pray confidently and be confident in the practice of prayer?

We are confident because the character of God is revealed in Jesus Christ. Romans 8:32 says, "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?" When we meditate on the Cross we get conviction that God will be quick to respond to our requests.

The story is told of a college fraternity that received a once-a-year inspection by a representative of the national committee. One of the requirements for the fraternity to keep its certification was to say grace before meals in the fraternity house. This of course

never happens except when the national rep. was visiting. So, before the evening meal the erstwhile student leader of said fraternity--who was completely irreverent--was put into the awkward position of needing to say grace. This is what he offered, "Dear God, if you exist, bless this food if you can." That's not very confident and while many Christians wouldn't be so bold as to use words like that, it's a fair description of the attitude that many church people have about prayer—no assurance.

Prayer is not mumbling wishes to God. It is bold and confident speech to the God who gave us his only Son.

Before we can claim this promise we must consider the conditions God places upon us before he will give us what we ask.

First of all we must ask. James 4:2 says, "You do not have because you do not ask." God has a boundless capacity to give and an immeasurable desire to give but here's the thing: we need to ask. Being a parent has helped me understand this. When my daughter got her driving permit that required a 100 hours of experience before she could call for a road test, Karen and I decided that we were not going to keep track of her hours and we were not going to set up the appointment until she asked us. Our thinking was that driving requires maturity and when she demonstrated the ability to log her own hours and make her own phone call to the examiner, then she would show her readiness to go to the next level. We knew what she wanted and needed but we were not going to help her until she asked. So it is with God and our prayers. We have to ask.

Second we have to ask in faith. God expects us to come to him with a trusting heart. James 1:6 says, "But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt..." Prayer is not to be treated like a lucky rabbit's foot, a four-leaf clover or a horse shoe over your door. Prayer is not wishing upon a star. To be effective it must spring out of a relationship of personal trust in the living God.

A third condition of answered prayer is that we ask with a clean heart and an obedient spirit. 1 John 3:21-22 says, "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him." God has already given us his moral law, if we neglect this gift, why would God trust us with any other gift? If I've already given my kid a tropical fish and he doesn't take care of it, why would I be inclined to buy him a puppy?

God will not be an accomplice to evil but he is eager to contribute to an obedient lifestyle.

A fourth condition of getting what we want is that we want the right things. John is very specific: *if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us*. It was Janis Joplin who famously sang, “Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz, my friends all drive Porsches and I must make amends...” God is not a vending machine who acts to fill our selfish desires whenever we punch buttons to make our selection. He wants to give us the things he knows we need: more love, more joy, more peace; things like patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. King Solomon is the most famous example of asking for the right things. At the beginning of his reign, Solomon did not ask for fame, wealth or an easy life. Instead he asked for wisdom to lead the nation. God filled that request and it became the reason Solomon’s life is celebrated in the Bible.

John wants his readers to know with certainty that if we meet the conditions of prayer God hears us and will give us what we have asked for. Verse 15 says “*And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*” That may strike you as audacious, even presumptuous. But it is a word that John recorded four times in the gospel as coming directly from Jesus himself:

John 14:13 “I will do whatever you ask in my name...”

John 15:7 “If you remain in me...ask whatever you wish and it will be given...”

John 15:16 “The father will give...whatever you ask...”

John 16:23 “The father will give...whatever you ask...”

Christians can be so certain of answered prayer that they can begin thanking God before he answers! But don’t be surprised if the answers to prayer come in a way you did not expect. For example if you pray for a more loving heart God may answer it by sending un-loveable people into your life so that you can practice unconditional love.

God has enormous spiritual riches he wants to give. He’s not interested in giving us worldly pleasures or fleshly blessings—Jesus never had those things and we shouldn’t ask for them either. If that’s what you are really interested in, prayer will be of no significance to you. But I assure you on the authority of the word of God that if you ask for spiritual fruit and blessings you can be absolutely certain you will get them. The rules of prayer in the Kingdom of God are simple: ask for nothing and you get nothing. Ask for a little and get little. Ask for much and you will receive abundantly.