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Hear Ye Him #122
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The Sermon: ASK, AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN

Scripture: Luke 11:9-13 (Verses 10-11, Inspired Version)

And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one who asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him who knocketh, it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you who is a father, will he give him a stone? or if a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give good gifts, through the Holy Spirit, to them who ask him.

If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. (John 15:7)

There is not a man on earth who has all he wants. Even the richest man, the man who can buy anything, always lacks something which money cannot buy, and often in a whole lifetime of seeking fails to find it. Although it is true that there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer, it is also true that many of us pray for things which we never receive. It is these hard, inescapable facts which make the saying of Jesus which we have chosen for consideration today such an interesting one. "Ask, and it shall be given you ... for every one who asketh, receiveth."

Because we recognize that we do not always receive what we ask for, it is necessary that we look for some restrictions, qualifications, or limitations to this promise. Common sense tells us that God is not a Santa Claus, waiting to hand out useless and foolish toys to frivolous and immature children who ask him. Neither is he a celestial bellhop, waiting to jump at the beck and call of narrow, self-centered, lazy, or demanding adults. Prayer is not an Aladdin's lamp which can summon a geni who will produce any foolish wish your heart desires. And many people who have tried to use prayer thus, or who have asked God for things as they would ask Santa Claus, or who have tried to order God around as one would give orders to a bellhop, have given up prayer in disgust and disappointment, when the things they asked for failed to materialize as expected.

The first restriction or limitation on this promise is that it was given to Jesus' disciples, and not to the world. There is no promise that a wicked man can ask God for that which will further his wicked designs, and receive it from a God who is the source of all good. The disciples had come to Jesus asking, "Lord, teach us to pray." He had taught them the Lord's prayer; then had told them the story of the man coming at midnight to borrow bread that he might feed his friend who had arrived unexpectedly on a journey. It is following that parable that Jesus makes the statement, "Ask, and it shall be given you." The promise is to disciples and followers of Jesus -- not to his enemies.

This principle is beautifully and clearly expressed in the parable of the vine and the branches, as found in the 15th chapter of John. Here Jesus counsels his disciples, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me... If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." In a vine there must be mutual consideration, regard, and concern of every part for every other part. The roots cannot say to the branches, nor can the branches say to the roots, "I have no need of thee." One branch does not demand more than its share of the sustenance of the vine, for to do so would eventually destroy the life and the unity of the whole vine. One branch does not ask for that

which would deprive or destroy another, for all depend on the life of the vine, and the vine depends on each branch. It is only those who abide in the vine who can ask for what they will, and receive it.

Some things, in God's wisdom and love, are reserved for those who have made sufficient growth and preparation to make them worthy to receive and appreciate and use them. Every boy wants a pocket knife. Every boy at some time in his youth wants a gun. But sensible parents do not give knives to babies for playthings, nor do they give real guns with live ammunition to a five year old for his game of cowboy and Indians. So God often finds it necessary and wise to defer the granting of our wishes until we have reached a mental, emotional, and spiritual maturity which will enable us to possess, to use, and to enjoy the gift we have asked for without doing harm to ourselves or to others. Sometimes, too, he must put us off until the time when we can fully understand and appreciate the priceless value of the gift we have so carelessly asked for. You would not give a child a diamond to use as frosting on his mud pies, nor would you give a baby his food on English wedgewood or Spode china.

Part of the preparation for receiving God's good gifts is that we must make some effort on our own part to achieve them. We must work as well as ask. We must seek diligently, in faith, with persistence, in humility, in expectation. We must knock if we expect the door to be opened; and sometimes we must continue to ask, and seek, and knock for year after year after year, until we have fully qualified ourselves to receive and use and appreciate that for which we ask.

Another qualification of our asking is that we must ask in Jesus' name. God delights to honor the prayers presented in his Son's name, for each prayer so honored gives an added testimony to the peculiar and unique divinity of Christ, through whom the Father always delights to bless the men of his creation.

Another qualification of the promise, "Ask, and it shall be given unto you," is that we must ask in the mind and in the Spirit of God -- or in terms of the parable previously referred to -- in the Spirit of the vine. In our human strength and wisdom, we have a natural tendency to pray carelessly, selfishly, thoughtlessly, demanding, with slight regard for the needs of others. But if we can receive of the Spirit of God, we see the needs and desires of others, and pray for our own needs in relationship to the needs of other individuals in whom we are specifically interested, in relationship to the needs of the church, the nation, the world in general, and in relationship to the mind and will and purposes of God. Only as we pray in the Spirit of God can we discern the will of God, and pray for that will to be done. "We know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered," wrote Paul to the Romans. (8:26)

Another requirement demanded of those who would ask and receive is that God's gifts should be received with gratitude, and used not for self alone, but for the blessing and strengthening of others who are equally precious and equally loved by the heavenly Father. Some of God's gifts, of course, come alike to good and evil, to both grateful and ungrateful. "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." But when a man has reached his extremity, when he needs God's special help or God's special gift, that help or that gift can be safely granted only on the basis of that man's past record -- on the basis of how he has used the gifts freely and impartially bestowed on all alike. It is often true, too, that we cannot come boldly to the throne of grace to make our petition, because we know in our own hearts that we are unworthy to ask anything; because we know that we have offended our brother, deprived him of his right to God's gifts, and acted selfishly. When our own heart condemns us, we cannot pray in faith, or ask with assurance that our petition will be granted.

God is more willing to give good gifts to his children than any earthly father. But he is more wise than any earthly Father. He never gives foolish gifts. Some of his gifts are scattered broadcast, and may be scattered broadcast, and may be selfishly, unwisely used by man. But he does not grant the special requests of selfish, sinful, spiritual immature men. The promise, "Ask, and it shall be given unto you," is given to those who love their Lord, and strive to use his gifts as he would have them used, in appreciation, in maturity, in unselfishness, in love.