

11. ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU

Yet, you do not always get what you ask for

In the Bible, Jesus promised, “Ask and it will be given to you”. For example, in Mark 11:24 Jesus said, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” and in John 14:14, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” However, we know that we do not get many things we ask for. Is this not contradictory to what Jesus has promised? Not really. The reason is that when Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you”, he presumed that we, having understood the meaning of prayer, would pray with the right attitude.

Prayers that are Not Answered

In his letters, James explained why certain prayers are not answered: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (Jm 4:3). If a thief successfully stole something, is it because his prayer before stealing has come true? No. What if he failed? Is it because God denied his prayer? Not so either. His prayer is simply meaningless. Confucius said, “If you offend Heaven, there is no one you can pray to,” meaning that if one’s prayer is against God’s will, his prayer is pointless.

If a student prayed that he could predict correctly the exam questions and obtain good grades, did God answer his prayers when his predictions came true? No but neither was God rejecting his prayer if he predicted

wrongly and did badly for the exam. Such prayers are simply meaningless. Hoping for a correct prediction is man's wish, and it has nothing to do with God. It is man's own doing, and the consequences are to be borne by man alone.

If a man prayed for success in his business, and he indeed made a fortune from a business deal a month later, was his prayer "effective"? What if his business failed? Is God "ineffective"? Well, whether he prayed or not, the state of his business is not related to God. His business acumen would determine his success or failure. He might succeed if he seized a suitable opportunity at a favourable time. Otherwise, he might fail. His prayer is irrelevant to the success or failure of his business.

We do not judge the meaningfulness of a prayer by the request being fulfilled. A prayer may appear good from its immediate outcome but may not be so in the long run. For example, a childless couple prayed fervently for a child, and eventually the wife became pregnant and gave birth to a healthy baby. Their wish came true but is it due to their fervent prayer? And is this outcome good? Will the child turn out to be a filial son? Will he become a hero or a villain? We simply cannot predict what he will become in the future.

Even if the wife remain barren after her prayers, it does not mean their prayer is meaningless. It simply means the answer is "no". Their prayers keep them close to God and to each other. There are more things to life than having a child. The fact that they will remain childless should not prevent them from living abundant life in the Lord.

Prayers that Require Actions

The relationship between man and God is interactive. Prayer of supplication is the act of man conveying his needs to God, acknowledging his own limitations, and expressing his trust in Him. Prayer cannot change reality, but it can change one's mentality and actions. A change in the latter can often influence the result of the prayers. Imagine a couple who is childless for many years asking for a baby, and the wife become pregnant a month later. Is this not the fruit of the prayers? Based on the timing of the two events – prayer and pregnancy – it appears to be so. From a subjective viewpoint, this must be the answer to their prayers. Objectively, it could be due to a lower level of stress in their lives, and an improvement in their health leading to a higher chance of conception; thus, her pregnancy was not a result of God's intervention.

The positive result of a prayer often demands actions on the part of the person who prays. For example, a man prayed for God's grace to quit his drinking habit, and he actively avoided the companions and places that could encourage him to drink. Eventually, he overcame his alcohol addiction. In another case, a person prayed that his aged mother would live well. Cooperating with his siblings to take good care of his mother, his prayer came true. St. James reminds us in his letter that prayers and actions must go hand in hand. (Jm 2:16)

When we pray, we do not make demands. We accept that things may not go our way. For example, a person encountered some difficulties and wished to overcome them. He was not discouraged even when the problems were not resolved immediately and pushed on with

patience and courage. His faith did not falter. This is the kind of faith mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, “If you have faith ... you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done” (Mt 21:21-22).

Supposing three people went for an interview for the same job, and every one of them prayed before the interview, whose prayer should God grant? If their prayers revolved around “getting the job”, two of them would eventually be disappointed. However, if one of them made ample preparation, studied the company profile, and had a good grasp of the job scope on top of praying to be calm and composed, he might perform better than the other two, thus securing the job.

What is then the most appropriate manner to pray? One key principle is not to insist on the outcome of our prayers but instead focus on the process. When we focus on God in our prayer, sincerely seeking His will without being obsessed with the outcome, our prayers will be authentic and joyful.

Prayers that will be Answered

If someone is lazy or irresponsible or has an addiction to smoking or alcohol, can we change him by our prayers? Impossible! Whoever the person is, we are doomed to fail when we try to change him. When we do that, we are treating prayers as a tool, and the emphasis is on our own effort. Prayers cannot change anyone unless the one who prays desires to change and is praying for the grace that he makes effort to change.

When we pray for someone, we pray for the grace to treat the person without prejudice and love him with God’s love.

This prayer will change us and help us to relate to the person with respect.

When a giver and a receiver have a good relationship, the one receiving the gift will treasure the giver more than the present itself. Similarly, a true believer seeks God and not just His blessings. Any grace that he receives is a spontaneous result of his encounter with God. For example, he becomes more just, righteous, caring, forgiving, and wise because he grows closer in his relationship with God.

A person who has an intimate relationship with God will not be self-centred. He does not seek to satisfy his own desires but obey God's will.

A prayerful person at times experience the absence of God. He does not panic and continue to pray. He trusts that God never leaves him, and the feeling of God's absence is temporary. Deep inside, he knows that God is with him.