

"OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN"

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Jesus taught his disciples to address God in prayer (Matt. 6:9). He looked forward to the time when he would serve as the one mediator between God and man (I Tim. 2:5). He said, "And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:23-24). Jesus wanted his disciples to know the joy of receiving God's blessings, and they were instructed to ask for them. The apostle Peter also wrote to encourage disciples to ask for God's blessings. He said, "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil" (I Pet. 3:12).

The apostle John gave the reason why the disciples of Christ could ask for whatever they wanted, and they would receive it. He wrote, "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (I John 3:22). Why do Christians receive requested blessings? "Because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight."

God does not promise to benefit those who have disdain for his commandments. In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament he said, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psa. 66:18). In addition, in Proverbs 28:9 the wise man wrote, "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination." God plainly identified the one to whom he would look with favor in Isaiah 66:1-2, "Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."

It would be difficult to overemphasize the attention that needs to be paid to this principle of prayer. Some expect God to hear and answer their prayers simply because they had enough interest to pray. One thing they see is that God sends his blessings on the evil and on the good (Matt. 5:45). The ones yet in their sins need to be reminded that the goodness of God is intended to lead them to repentance

(Rom. 2:4). Every good and perfect gift comes from God (Jas. 1:17). Faithful children of God are the ones invited to ask for what they want.

What then are the commandments that must be obeyed for God to grant requests? First, a person must have enough respect for God's word to allow him to humbly submit to its teaching (Isa. 66:1-2). Second, he or she must be a Christian. A Christian is one whom God considers righteous. The Bible says, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Cor. 5:21). The ones who are "made the righteousness of God" are "in him." The way to get into him involves five steps of faith: 1) hearing the gospel (Rom. 10:17), 2) believing the gospel (Heb. 11:6), 3) repenting of the love and practice of sin (Luke 13:3), 4) confessing that Jesus is the Christ of God (Rom. 10:9-10), and 5) being baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3; I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27). Once in Christ, the Christian must grow from a babe (I Pet. 2:2) to becoming full grown or mature (Heb. 5:13-14). Spiritual growth comes through reading and studying the scriptures (I Tim. 4:13; II Tim. 2:15). Spiritual growth is manifested in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and the Christian graces (II Pet. 1:5-8). The one who is in Christ is in his church (Acts 2:47; Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 1:22-23).

Third, God is seeking true worshipers who will worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). Those who forsake the assembly sin willfully and cannot expect God's favor to attend the concerns of their lives (Psa. 66:18; Heb. 10:25-26). Fourth, Christians are commanded to teach and preach the gospel (Acts 10:42; Matt. 28:19-20). The mission of the church of Christ is to take the good news of salvation in Christ to all who are lost (Mark 16:15-16; Luke 19:10). The historical book of Acts shows the extent to which Christians went in preaching and teaching the gospel (Acts 1:8; 8:1-4).

Fifth, the work of edification or building up the body of Christ or church of Christ must be taken very seriously if the Christian wants God to hear his prayers (Eph. 4:15-16). As Paul taught in the passage just given, edification is everyone's business that is a member of the body of Christ. Sixth, Jesus spoke of the value of showing love to neighbors (Luke 10:37; Matt. 22:39). Paul indicated that doing good to all men was a sacred duty (Gal. 6:10). James taught that assisting fatherless and widows is an expression of pure religion (Jas. 1:27).

The privilege of making requests to God and expecting him to answer them carries with it the responsibility to "keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight." From the very beginning of his personal ministry the Lord made the point of teaching his disciples to ask God to bless their lives. In the

Sermon on the Mount he said, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Matt. 7:7-11).