

"The Certainty of Prayer"

by
James H. McConkey

"Everyone . . . receives."
Matthew 7:7,9,11; Matt. 6:8

As we hear the call of God and enter into the closet of prayer, the first great truth with which He confronts us is that of the *Certainty of Prayer* as set forth in the words:--

"EVERY ONE THAT ASKS RECEIVES."

Notice at the very outset that *Christ does not say everyone that asks receives the very thing he asks for*. We read this into it, but Christ does not say it. For it is not true.

It is not true in our *experience*. Many a time we have asked for things which we have not received. And often have we been sorely puzzled and made to stumble by the seeming clash between this verse and our own failure to get everything for which we asked. Neither is it true in the *Word of God*. Notice how guarded our Lord is against saying, in this passage, that everyone who asks receives the very thing he asks for. He does say, "Everyone that asks *receives*"--but there He stops. And "He that seeks finds"--but again He pauses. And why does He, in His wisdom, stop short of saying that the asker receives the thing he asks for, and the seeker the very thing for which he seeks?

Let us note in answering, that our Lord is here instructing *beginners* in the prayer life. He is teaching the A B C of prayer. He is giving His first great lesson to those who sit upon the primary benches in this great school of prayer. And the worst thing which could happen to a beginner in the prayer life would be to teach him that he would receive everything he asked for.

How clear this is with the earthly child. Here comes the little one and asks papa for the knife, or the razor. He knows what he wants, but he does not know what is best. He does not know that these would mean mutilation and suffering for him. He asks all amiss when he asks for them; and his father, knowing this, does not give them. To give a boy all the money he wants, just the companions he wants, and as little education as he wants, would be the surest way possible to wreck his life. The most ruinous thing in the world is for a parent to give a son everything he desires. Some call that parental love, whereas it is only parental weakness mistaking indulgence for love. Real love, such as God's, gives not always what is wanted but what is best. We ought to be just as grateful to the God who does not give us everything according to *our* will as we are to the God who does give us everything according to *His* will.

Is not that true in the life of your child at the beginning? Is it not true in our life? What we want to have and what God wants to give meet in beautiful harmony when we come to live our lives in the will of God. For then we desire only what God wills, and then God can and does give gladly to us "all things whatsoever we desire." But at the beginning of our

Christian life we are not thus wholly in the will of God. There is much of self-will and selfish desire in us, and it would be ruinous for God to give us everything we asked while our life was under the mastership of self. Thus it is that our Lord in His first great teaching of the truth of the prayer-life, while He does say that "Everyone that asks *receives*," carefully guards Himself against saying that he always receives the thing he asks for.

Observe also that *Christ does not say anything about asking according to the will of God*. He does not mention the great promise of John's Gospel, that if we ask anything according to God's will we will get that very thing. Or that if we abide in Him, and He in us, we shall ask *whatsoever we will* and it shall be given. All this is true. But it is not what Christ is teaching here. It is not the truth for beginners in the life of supplication. And why? Because a child whose receiving was conditioned upon always asking according to the will of his father or mother would soon become discouraged thereat. He might well say, "If I can only receive from God when I know His will, then I cannot enter into the prayer-life. For often God's will is a mystery, and often I come to God not knowing that will. And therefore if prayer has blessing for me only when I am praying according to God's will, I am afraid it is not until I get to be a far more mature Christian that I can begin to pray."

What then is our Lord here teaching? Simply this, that

Every one that asks receives--SOMETHING.

He is teaching the certainty of all prayer. He is teaching that not only the man who is asking according to the will of God receives the thing he asks for, but that every child of God who prays receives something [while] in the place of prayer. He is teaching that all prayer brings blessing. In the profoundest sense there is no unanswered prayer. The closet of prayer is God's distributing station. He turns no one away empty-handed. Entirely apart from the question of receiving the thing we ask for, there are general blessings in prayer which God gives to everyone who comes into the place of prayer.

It is as though a little lad came to mamma and said, "Mamma, whenever I come to papa he does not always give me the thing I ask for, but he always gives me *something*. And he tells me to always come to him in my troubles and that he will always help." Now is not this just the lesson the beginner in the prayer-life needs? Our Father is saying: "Come, my child, into the closet of prayer. For *everyone* who comes there *shall receive*. Though you may not yet know how to ask according to My will, yet you *shall receive*. Though you may not yet have learned how to abide in Me, yet you *shall receive*. Though you may not yet know how to pray as you ought, you *shall receive--something*. Every time you come I am here to give."

What an encouragement this promise is to the child of God who, as a beginner in prayer, is weak, or timid, or ignorant. It is the very promise above all others that would encourage him to enter into the blessed school of prayer to which a loving Father is inviting him.

Everyone that asks receives--GOOD THINGS.

"How much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him?" (Matt. 7: 11.) That is, apart from the particular petition we may put up in prayer, God has a store of general blessings and gifts, of "good things" which He gives to all who pray, even where they may not get the special thing for which they ask. It is as though we come to

a store and ask the merchant for something. He refuses, saying he does not have it for us. But then and there he loads us up with the choicest silks and satins, gold and silver and jewels and precious stones, and sends us away with our hands full of richest gifts. Have we not received from him? Although he may not have given us the thing we asked for, he has given us good things, worth, perhaps, a great deal more than that for which we asked. So whether we get the thing we asked for or not--which we will do when we come to abide in Him--God always gives "good things." So used have we been to thinking that the only answer in prayer is to get the exact thing we ask, that we have overlooked the preciousness of these general blessings of all prayer.

Let us now note some of these "good things."

In prayer (2 Cor. 12:8, 9) God gives

Submission.

Sometimes we ask for something which is not according to God's will. Then as we pray, it is in the midst of our prayer that we are led to give up our own will and come into humble submission to God's better will. That was so with Paul. He prayed three times and God did not give the thing he asked for, but God gave submission to His will and abounding grace for the weakness which remained. We do not understand the mystery of Gethsemane, and dare hardly comment on it. But we do see this--that at the beginning there was a "Thy will" and "My will," for He said, "Not My will but Thine." At the end there was only "Thy will be done." What is the mystery of our Lord's struggle there? We do not know, but where its beginning was petition, its end was submission.

You and I have gone into the place of prayer with the life of some loved one trembling in the balance. How hard it was for us to ask anything else than that God might spare that loved one. We prayed on and on, and as we prayed we saw that this might not be His will. But as we saw that, instead of rebellion we found God pouring out upon us a conscious spirit of submission. Then and there we said "Thy will be done." If we had no other blessing in prayer, this alone would be enough, for there is no more precious blessing in all life than that of a will wholly yielded to God. And this comes in prayer, whether we receive the specific thing we are asking for or not.

Another one of the "good things" God gives in prayer is:

Peace.

Recall here the familiar passage of Philippians 4:6, 7: "In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God . . . shall guard your hearts." God does not say "Be anxious for nothing, but bring all things to Me with prayer and supplication and I will give you just what you ask." But what does He say? "The peace of God shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."

What is the Lord teaching us here? Simply this. Our anxious care about burdens is due to our bearing them ourselves. But if we take these burdens to God in prayer and lay them upon Him, He will give us peace. This then is one of the great general blessings, one of the

"good things" of prayer--that it brings us peace in our very habit of bringing to, and laying upon another, even God, the burdens and anxieties which have been robbing us of peace because we were carrying the load ourselves. The chamber of prayer is the birthplace of Peace.

Too often we think the peace of God some ecstatic blessing which falls out of heaven without any fulfilled condition on our part. And we wonder why it does not come to fill us all the time. But there is a human side to this, and it is that we are to take all things to God in prayer. As the little child's habit of running to mamma with every anxiety however trifling is what gives it peace, so the child of God finds the peace of God through coming to Him in the same way. If we are to have the peace of God at all times, we must come to Him in prayer with all things. And what then is the promise? The peace of God shall "garrison"--that is the word in the Greek--our hearts. How beautiful! The army in the field camps one night here and is gone the next day, miles away. It camps again and the next day flits to another spot, moving hither and thither. But a *garrison* settles down in a fort and *stays* there all the time. Now if we will bring to God everything in prayer, the peace of God will garrison our hearts; it will stay, it will *abide* there. The habit of prayer will bring abidingness of Peace.

Then again, and lastly, in prayer God gives :

The Holy Spirit.

"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him" (Lu. 11:13). Not that God's children have not received the Holy Spirit at regeneration. They surely have, for "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His." But it is not enough for a child to receive life at birth. There must also be daily food for the sustaining of that life. And so the fact that God here says "children" proves that He is talking of those who have already received His gift of life in the Spirit. And the words "fish," "bread" and "egg,"--food for the daily supply of needs--seem to plainly show that He is speaking of that daily refreshing and anointing by His Spirit which every child of His needs, as much as he needs the daily food to sustain his physical life. "One baptism, many anointings" is the dual truth here. It is one thing to have the Spirit in us. It is another thing for us to be daily and hourly "in the Spirit."

And this is just what prayer does for us. It brings the anointing, the unction, the daily touch of the Spirit of God upon our lives. If there is one thing we are conscious of when we rise from our knees at prayer, it is that the Spirit of God has touched us. Prayer puts us "in the Spirit" as nothing else does. And what greater blessing could it bring than that? For when we are in the Spirit we will not speak harsh or caustic words. In the Spirit we will not rebuke people except in love. In the Spirit we will not walk in the lusts of the flesh. In the Spirit we will do the works of the Spirit, will bear the brand of the Spirit, will be filled with the love, joy and peace of the Spirit, will be led and guided and comforted by the Spirit. There is no greater blessing that prayer could bring to us than to put us in the Spirit. And when Christ gives us this passage--"How much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him,"--He utters it as though that were the gift in prayer that took in all else, the supreme equivalent of all the other "good things" which everyone that asks receives.

Everyone that asks receives--THE VERY THING HE NEEDS.

"For your Father knows what things ye have need of before ye ask Him" (Matt 6:8). Not only as we ask does God give us *something*, not only does he give us "good things," but He gives us the very thing we need. "Your Heavenly Father knows what things ye have need of before ye ask Him." "My God shall supply all your need." God always gives us the very thing that we need in prayer, whether we get the thing we ask for or not.

What more could we want than this? Prayer is the soul's cry to God to meet some great need. The particular petition put up is only the soul's interpretation of that need. But the soul may be mistaken in this interpretation, for it is often conscious of need but fails in coming to God in prayer to rightly translate that need into petition. So God looks deeper than the words upon the lips and meets the secret need of the life, which is the real--even though unconscious--cry of the heart. That cry of the heart is real prayer. The word of the lip is often only our mistranslation of it. We know not how to pray as we ought. Thus there may be unanswered petition, but in the profoundest sense there is never any unanswered prayer.

We close with an illustration. Several summers ago, with body broken in health, we were spending the vacation time on the shores of the great lakes. On account of physical weakness, sailing was the only recreation possible. Day after day we sailed the beautiful bay and under the blessing of God were slowly regaining the lost strength. One day when sailing in the midst of the bay the wind suddenly died out. Our boat was utterly becalmed, with not a breath of air astir. The surface of the bay was like a mirror, so still and motionless. The hot rays of the August sun beat down upon the weak body, and we knew that unless help soon came we would be in desperate straits indeed.

We had come out with a stiff, fresh breeze, and naturally we began to pray for a breeze to take us back. We prayed and prayed for an hour for a breeze, but none came. The bay still lay like a mirror, motionless, the water not roughened by a single ripple. But by and by over toward the shore we espied a black speck creeping around the point that projected out into the channel from the village whence we had started. It came nearer and nearer and soon disclosed the bent form and the whitened head of the old fisherman host with whom we were staying. As he drew near we greeted him with, "Well, Grandfather, I am glad to see you. What brought you here anyhow?" "Well," he said, "I knew you were not strong and could never row that great boat in to shore. So I felt as though I ought to come out and search for you, and here I am." He got into the boat, and bending his sturdy form to the ash oars, in twenty minutes we were safe in the quiet of our own room.

Then and there the Lord taught us a lesson. We had prayed for a breeze. God had denied the words of our petition, but the real prayer of our heart was for *Deliverance*, and that God had heard and signally answered. Let us be thankful for the God who always gives when it is best. Let us be grateful also for the God who refuses when it is not best. We would not have any other kind of a God if we could. We could not trust any other kind of a God if we would. Thank God that though we may make mistakes in asking, God never makes any mistakes in giving. He may fail to give us the thing we ask, but He never fails to give us something. And if that something is better than we ask, and always the very thing we most need, what more could we desire? Would we have it otherwise? Behold--even for the veriest beginner--the certainty of all prayer in these great promises of God.

*"Everyone that asks receives"--SOMETHING.
Everyone that asks receives--good things.
Everyone that asks receives--the very thing he needs.
Everyone that asks according to God's will--receives the very thing he asks for.*

Chapter II, "The Certainty of Prayer", in James H. McConkey, *Prayer*, 3rd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Fred. Kelker, 1906). Note: The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verbs forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.