

John 16:23-33 "In Jesus' Name"

The Word of the Lord from John 16: "Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." This is the Word of the Lord.

I. About Prayer

"Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." Jesus said this to the disciples at the Last Supper. Up to now, they hadn't had to ask for anything in the name of Jesus: Jesus had been right there with them, so they'd just ask Him. But things were about to change: in a few hours, He would leave them and go to the cross. After His Resurrection, He would leave them and ascend into heaven. In a little while, they would see Him no more.

So note two things that Jesus did for His disciples at the Last Supper. For one, He gave them the gift of Holy Communion. In that Sacrament, He gave them His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Although they would not be able to see Him face to face, He would still be with them to the end of the age, by His Word and Sacraments. As we speak of often, these means of grace are how Jesus is present with His people even today. This is how He gives us forgiveness, life and salvation.

But here, in our text today, He reinforces another gift: the gift of prayer: "Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." Until He returns in glory, this is how we speak to our Lord. Now, prayer is an oft-misunderstood gift among Christians, so we take some time this morning to learn of our Lord's gift of prayer.

We begin with Jesus' assurance: "Most assuredly, I say to you." "Most assuredly"—this is a "truly, truly," a double "amen." Here you have Jesus' promise to you that He hears your prayers. He doesn't pick and choose which calls to return, nor does He send most of your petitions to the junk-mail file. He hears and honors each one, and promises to answer every prayer that is prayed in Jesus' name.

"Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." That's an astonishing promise—hard to believe, but it's what Jesus promises "most assuredly." The Father will give whatever you ask for in Jesus' name. Jesus doesn't give you three wishes. There are no limits. You can't bother the Father in heaven in prayer enough. As our Lord says in our Gospel lesson, God the Father loves you just as God the Son loves you. He delights to hear and answer every prayer prayed in Jesus' name.

"In Jesus' name." That's the key phrase we keep coming back to. That is what the promise and gift of prayer rely on. We pray in Jesus' name. We go before the Lord in prayer by saying, "We are terrible sinners, and we are not worthy of Your grace or mercy or help. Therefore, we do not ask You to help us because we're deserving. No, we ask You to hear us and to help us because Jesus has died for our sins and risen again for our salvation. Do not help us because of our goodness: help us for Jesus' sake. Help us because Your Son has shed His blood to make us Your children." That is what it means to pray in Jesus' name.

And as long as you pray in Jesus' name, you can be absolutely sure that the Father will give you whatever you ask.

II. The Law and Gospel of Prayer

Therefore, the Law for us sinners is quite straightforward today: we sin whenever we fail to pray in Jesus' name. Now, let us be clear: I do not mean that every prayer is good as long as we attach the three words, "in Jesus' name," at the end before the amen. Nor do I mean that an otherwise good prayer goes unheard because we fail to end it with those three words. This is not some sort of magic phrase. Again, to pray in Jesus' name is to confess that God answers prayers for Jesus' sake, not because we or anyone else has earned God's help.

The classic example for Luther was, naturally, praying in the names of saints. In Luther's time, the Roman Church declared that Jesus was quite the angry Son of God, and encouraged Christians to pray for God's help in the name of one of the saints who had gone before—perhaps St. Paul or St. Lawrence or certainly St. Mary, Mother of God. But Jesus never commanded us to pray in the names of other sinners. One can imagine the Father saying, "Why should I hear a prayer prayed in the name of Peter? My Son had to shed His blood for Peter, too; apart from His grace, Peter is no more righteous than the one who is praying in Peter's name." Indeed, were the saints who have gone before us aware of such shenanigans, they would certainly not want us using their names when we can pray in the name of Jesus.

Another widespread error in our day is that God honors all prayers, even those prayed by unbelievers. But why should God hear such a prayer? The prayer of an unbeliever says, "Even though I don't believe that Jesus died for me, and even though I give Him no thanks or honor for the cross, I still expect you to help me anyway." Such a prayer is exactly against praying in the name of Jesus.

Now, if you're a member here at St. John, I take it that you're already a believer and already confess that it is incorrect to pray in the name of saints. However, you still face many temptations which would mislead you away from praying in Jesus' name.

Perhaps the greatest temptation for you is to pray in your own name. It is so seductive to think that God hears your prayers when you've behaved better, when you've been trying harder. But if that is how you approach prayer, you are saying, "Dear Lord, hear my prayer because of my works, because of my intentions, because I've been trying hard to be a little less sinful than I was before." A "little less sinful" is still terribly sinful, and God makes no promise to hear such prayers. Do not pray in your own name. Repent; and instead rejoice in the certainty that God hears your prayers for the sake of Jesus, who died for you. That is why you pray in Jesus' name.

Another error is the one made famous by televangelists: it is the error that God will give you whatever you ask, as long as you have enough faith in Jesus. As long as you believe in Jesus enough, then God will give you whatever you want. "Name it and claim it." There are two problems with this. One is that this says that God answers prayer not because of Jesus' work, but because of how hard you work at believing in Him. If your faith is strong, you can count on Him. If your faith is weak, then you can't. How terrible is this? How terrible to tell someone who prays for stronger faith that God won't answer that prayer because his faith is too weak! The other problem is this: it uses Jesus for personal gain. To pray "in Jesus' name" does not mean that you can expect Him to give you whatever your little old sinful heart desires. Often, what you want to ask for is not what is righteous or best for you. To pray in

Jesus' name is to trust that He knows what is best for you. It is to pray "Thy will be done, not mine, O Lord." Plagued by the devil, world and sinful flesh, this is what makes prayer so terribly difficult. You will be tempted to pray for deliverance on your terms: "Heal me now!" "That job is perfect for me, so get it for me!" "Save this relationship!" "Save this life!" But God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. His will is always best, and He often works through hardship to do us good. If you fall into these errors, repent. And rejoice: the Lord doesn't only hear you when your faith feels strong. He always hears you for Jesus' sake. And while you may not see the benefits of His answers in the short-term, you have His promise that He hears your prayers, and answers them in the way that is eternally best for you.

Here is an error that we want to approach gently: it is the idea that, God hears prayers more when more people are praying them. Therefore, if many are praying for us, we're more likely to get the Lord's attention. Please don't misunderstand: it is good and right and proper for us to pray for each other and ask others to pray for us; and it is immensely comforting for you and me to know that many people are praying for us. I don't want to take anything away from that. At the same time, however, it is good for us to embrace this truth: whether the prayer is prayed by one or by many Christians, God promises to hear it. Why? Because it doesn't depend on the one or the many. It depends on Jesus, who died for the one and the many. Should you trust in many voices rather than Jesus, then repent. And rejoice: it is indeed a great comfort to know that, even if you are the only one to pray in Jesus' name, God promises to hear you and answer you.

Here is one more: it is tempting to think that God will answer your prayer as long as you choose the right, eloquent words. As long as you articulate your need clearly, then God will answer. If that is true, then the prayer does not depend on Jesus; rather, it depends on you and your communication skills. But it is not true. In fact, the Bible declares that we do not know how to pray. However, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (Ro. 8:28).

If you place your trust in your eloquence in prayer, repent. And rejoice. Rejoice that even if the longest prayer you can string together is "Lord, have mercy," that prayer in Jesus' name is heard. Likewise, rejoice in this: not only has the Son given you His name and prayer, and not only does the Father love you and delight to hear your prayers, but the Holy Spirit works to present your prayers in a proper manner to the Father. All the holy Trinity bids you to pray. Rejoice: God hears your prayers prayed in Jesus' name. To pray in Jesus' name is to trust that the prayer will be answered because Christ has died for you. And to pray in Jesus' name is to trust that His will is best, rather than imposing your sinful desires on Him. Rejoice, too, in this: after Jesus spoke of prayer in John 16, He then went to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed for His disciples—and prayed for you. Even now, He prays for you until He comes again. Therefore, dear friends, rejoice: you can be sure that the Lord hears your prayers for Jesus' sake...because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In Jesus' name. Amen