

### **John 16:23-33**

Easter 6C + May 26, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
In the Name

The Word of the Lord from John 16:23: Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Our Gospel lesson for this day is full of all sorts of joy and comfort, and let's begin with this: Jesus says, "The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God." God the Father loves you because you love and believe in Jesus, but don't for a moment think that God's love depends on your love. You believe in Jesus – you believe that He is the Son of God who became flesh to be your Savior – by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word. This text, then, is built around the truth that the Father loves you because the Holy Spirit sanctifies you to believe in Jesus who died for you. For those who think that the Holy Trinity is some little-known abstract doctrine in Scripture, Scripture begs to differ.

More to the point for you is that the Lord doesn't take care of you in shifts: it's not that God the Father created you, then handed you off to the Son to redeem you, who in turn dumped you on the Holy Spirit to babysit you for the rest of your days. Your life and faith are guarded and preserved by Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's been that way for you since you were baptized into that triune name.

In the name of the triune God, you are a holy child of God; and what do children do to their parents? They ask them for things! Jesus thus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give to you. ...Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."

Whatever you ask in the name of Jesus, God the Father will give you, that your joy may be full. That sounds like the recipe for a happy life.

In fact, I daresay it wouldn't take too much effort to get on the internet and find a few sermons that are all about that promise. Such sermons will usually be by preachers with very nice tailored clothing and Plexiglas pulpits, humbly bragging about all that the Lord has done for them in the way of wealth, health and prosperity. They will claim to be living proof that, if you are a child of God, then God will give you whatever you ask. However, be careful because many preachers change the basis of the promise. They will say that God will give you whatever you ask *as long as you have enough faith*.

That's always the out for the prosperity-gospel preacher: if you have enough faith, then God will give you whatever you ask. Therefore, if God doesn't give you whatever you ask, then the problem is that you just don't have enough faith; and if you just work on believing more, then perhaps you get have enough faith to get what you want. If you need suggestions on strengthening your faith, why, the aforementioned prosperity-gospel preacher can help you out. All you need to do is purchase his book and 6-DVD set on how to make your faith stronger, for a special low price of \$59.95 today only, and your faith should get stronger. Maybe not strong enough to get what you want (for you may be an especially difficult case who also needs to attend a conference), but it should be stronger than it was before.

This teaching is just hopeless and awful. It is no small error to teach that God will give you whatever you ask as long as you have enough faith. For one thing, it turns prayer on its head. It says that the sinful child is in control of the holy Father. It says that you know better than God does, that you're the brains of this operation and He's just the muscle with the bag of goodies, who is just waiting for you to give Him some direction.

For another, it destroys any sense of thankfulness. Instead of rejoicing in all the blessings that the Lord pours out freely, this prosperity-gospel notion gets you to think that you've earned everything you've got by your hard work of believing, and that you deserve more.

This means, of course, that it turns faith from a gift of God into a work that you do. That's an insult to the Holy Spirit who gives you faith by the Word of God. It also makes your faith undependable, because nothing you do is certain. If God answers your prayers because you believe enough, you can never be sure you believe enough for any prayer to get through; and the greater the trouble you're in, the more likely your faith will feel weak for being under attack, and so – according to prosperity theology – it is less likely that God will hear and answer your prayers when you most want Him to.

As it turns faith into your work, it can't help but redefine faith: in fact, prosperity theology teaches that faith is believing in things seen, not unseen. In other words, you know you have faith because God is giving you what you ask for: you can see the reward for your hard work of believing.

Do you see how faith gets redefined into what it is not? Let me ask you this: which requires more faith: when you have everything you need in abundance, or when you suffer trouble and don't see God at work? According to Scripture, faith trusts in what it does not see – often in spite of what it does!

All this mischief arises because someone rewrites the promise. Despite all of its problems and deception, prosperity theology is popular stuff; and, in fact, it lurks in your heart because that old sinful nature wants to be in charge. Your old Adam will always want God to be the cosmic butler who cleans up your messes and provides for your whims, no questions asked; and when He doesn't snap to it and do things your way, you're going to question His love and faithfulness to you – because you're holding fast to a rewritten promise that Jesus didn't make.

But what Jesus really said is so much better. He didn't say, "God will give you whatever you ask as long as you have enough faith." He said, "Whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you."

"Whatever you ask in My name," says Jesus. God's attention to your prayers doesn't depend on how well you've done or how well you've behaved or how hard you believe, all of which fails to measure up to holiness. God's response depends on Jesus, the *holy* Son of God. He will hear your prayers as long as Jesus is your holy Redeemer. In other words, God will always hear your prayers.

Furthermore, God will always answer your prayers in the way that is best for you: this too is included in Jesus' words, "Whatever you ask in My name." To ask in His name is to ask according to His Word. The name of Jesus is not a magical incantation, some sort of "Abracadabra" or "Hocus Pocus" that forces God to answer: nor is your prayer more effective if you repeat the name "Jesus" a dozen times in your petition. Think of it this way: when I speak to you in the name of Jesus, I don't make up my own stuff – I tell you what He says in His Word. That's what it means to speak in the name of Jesus. Likewise, when you pray in Jesus' name, you don't seize control and put Jesus to work on a list of your ideas. You pray according to what He has promised you in His Word.

As I've said before, prayer is essentially the children of God saying to their Father, "Dad, you promised." Knowing what God has done and said for you, you respond by thanking Him for His promises, praising Him for His promises and reminding Him of His promises. And what fantastic promises! He's promised to provide you with daily bread, with all that you need for this body and life. He's promised to heal you of all diseases, disabilities and afflictions. He's promised to work all things for your good. He's promised to forgive your sins and raise you from the dead! He's promised to give you the kingdom of heaven and everlasting life!

Remember: God's generosity is always because of Christ, not you and your faith. Think of it this way: God gives nutrition to all people by means of food – everybody who eats today eats because God is generous and God. They may not acknowledge Him. They may deny His existence or give credit and thanks to a different, false god. But despite their ingratitude and lack of faith in Him, He keeps giving them food because they are part of this world, and Christ has died for the sins of all.

In the same way, He offers salvation to all people by means of His Word and Sacraments. The great tragedy of the blindness of sin is that people are quick to grab His gifts of daily bread, but just as quick to refuse forgiveness and everlasting life! Despite such thanklessness again, the Lord still makes His salvation known, because – by the work of the Holy Spirit – some will hear and believe and gladly receive these gifts too. This also, of course, is because of Christ – certainly not because of sinners.

It's a joy to pray in the name of Jesus because it means that you are praying God's promises back to Him; and God's promises to you are wondrous things! He keeps giving abundantly, far more than you know every day! They are so wonderful that your sinful nature is constantly working to chip away at them. Where God promises to provide what you *need*, you'll be tempted to think that He isn't keeping His promises when He doesn't give you what you *want*. Where God promises healing, He doesn't give a timeline; and so you will be tempted to think that He is breaking His promise when it doesn't happen on your schedule. Where God pays such close attention so as to sustain your fingers and toes, you're tempted to complain far more about the ingrown toenail than the nine that are functioning normally. Where God promises to raise all believers in Christ from the dead to everlasting life, you'll be tempted to fault Him because the resurrection of a dear one involves them dying.

You will be constantly tempted to believe that you can do better than God's promises because He doesn't do things your way: that's what kids do to their parents here, and you echo that to the Lord. That is why you constantly repent of being the stubborn, willful child that you are. That is why you constantly remind yourself that your Father in heaven knows best.

He knows best, He gives abundantly and it's certain because it's all for the sake of Jesus. As St. Paul writes in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?" Likewise, he writes in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "All the promises of God find their Yes in Christ."

All the promises of God find their Yes in Christ! There could be no better news, then, when Christ says to you, "Whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you." Despite the tribulations of this world, you have peace because you belong to God who keeps His promises and gives abundantly – most importantly, He gives grace upon grace. He forgives your sins. He provides for your needs and gives you everlasting life. He gives all this abundantly for the sake of Jesus, His beloved Son, who has overcome the world for you.

In the name of Jesus. Amen