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# Whatever You Ask in My Name

## John 14:12-14 in Literary and Theological Context

By Jeffrey Peterson

*Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes on me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it.*

The Gospel according to John serves as both a model for preachers and a judgment on many of our efforts. The reader is everywhere struck by the simplicity of the Gospel's language and by the profundity of divine truth which these simple words convey. Martin Luther said it well:

John speaks as simply and straightforwardly as a child, and his words (as the wise men of the world regard them) sound very childish. But within them there is hidden a majesty so great that no man, however profound his insight, can fathom or express it.<sup>1</sup>

The passage on which we focus illustrates this characteristic of John: it presents a clear enough sense on first reading, but reflection on it leads us into the depths of the salvation God has wrought through Christ.

Indeed, the apparent clarity and simplicity of the passage invite us to deeper reflection. On first reading, our eyes are drawn to Christ's promise that he will grant to his disciples *whatever they ask in his name* (John 14:13). This promise seems clear, but it also seems to be contradicted by the experience of every devout, praying Christian. What Christian of mature years has not prayed in desperation for blessings that were not granted—the debilitating illness that was not healed, the children not spared

the consequences of their folly, the seemingly intolerable situation left unchanged? We may say, if we like, that such prayers are answered—answered not with *Yes* but with *No* or *Wait*, but then we are no longer using the language of our text. Christ promises that he will *do* whatever we ask in his name. Perhaps (we think) if we had greater faith, this would come true for us. As it is, our experience of prayers seemingly unanswered is difficult to reconcile with Christ's promise.

The interpretation of the passage is further complicated by the teaching about prayer many television evangelists broadcast, along with some established churches. These preachers say that faith in Christ and devout prayer to God can bring us not only what we *need*, but also anything we may *want*. A nondenominational church recently set up a billboard I passed every day on my drive to work. It displayed in large red letters one of the benefits of churchgoing: MIRACLE DEBT CANCELLATION.

The advertisement may sound comical, but it is not far removed from what we have heard promised in the name of the Gospel, or perhaps even promised ourselves on occasion. If the dominant message that we teach and preach were placarded on a billboard in front of our churches, we might be surprised to find there, not SUFFERING SERVANTHOOD or DIVINE SELFLESSNESS or TAKE UP YOUR CROSS but rather MIRACLE SELF-ACTUALIZATION or WONDROUS FAMILY COHESION or AMAZING RELEVANCE TO SOCIETY. Several New



Testament texts have been cited in support of the understanding of prayer as a supernatural delivery system for needs and wants, and ours can plausibly be included in the list.<sup>2</sup>

### The Promise in Context

It is not at all clear, then, what we should make of Jesus' promise, or how we are to preach this text so as to disclose its witness to the Christian faith. Our starting point must be the context of the passage—both its literary context in the fourth Gospel and its theological context in the faith shared by the Gospel's author and the churches in his care.<sup>3</sup> The literary context includes the *paragraph* in which vv. 12–14 stand, the *section* of the Gospel that reports Jesus' farewell discourses to his disciples (John 13–17), and the Gospel as a *whole*. The theological context is the most important in which to view our text. John himself tells us that he took the trouble to compose a Gospel to shape the convictions of Christians (John 20:30–31). In this brief essay, we will note a few aspects of the literary context that both clarify the passage and reflect the central convictions of the Evangelist.

### A Promise to the Church

Throughout John 13–17, the Evangelist is concerned with the plight of the disciples alone in the world without Jesus after his earthly ministry. John begins the section with a look forward to Jesus' "return to the Father" by death and resurrection (John 13:1). He ends it with Jesus' prayer on behalf of the disciples and their converts, who must remain in the world separated from his physical presence (chap. 17). Throughout John 13–17, we hear Jesus speaking to the church, which remains in the world after his departure. His word of encouragement to the church is summarized in John 14:18: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you."

Jesus' promise to grant whatever we ask in his name should be read with this concern in mind. Jesus makes the promise not to individual Christians but to *the church*. The disciples gathered at the Lord's table are the nucleus of the community that will extend the work of Christ across the globe and through the centuries. It is the disciples and their successors who will pray in the name of Jesus and be granted their common petitions. When Jesus next repeats his promise to the disciples, it is in the parable of the vine and branches (15:7, 16). It is the

group of disciples abiding in Christ who are promised that God will grant whatever they ask.

The Christian never prays as an isolated individual before God, bringing a private wish list before him. Even praying in his closet, the Christian prays as a member of the body of Christ, and our

private prayers aim to express the desires of the body of Christ. Indeed, our prayers are our attempts to share the mind of Christ and ask from God what the Son asks of his Father.<sup>4</sup>

When we think of the divine response to the petition that Jesus

mentions, we should not picture God agonizing over the conflicting prayers of two of his saints; much less should we picture him rushing to grant me what I desire. Rather, we should imagine God responding in love to the entreaty of the whole company of the faithful. The recognition that Christ's promise is to the church rather than to the individual Christian relieves much of the difficulty that we have in reconciling this promise with our own experience of individual prayer. But it still leaves us wondering whether Jesus here grants the church as a whole *carte blanche* in the exercise of petitionary prayer. If the church throughout the world were suddenly to pray as one for (say) miracle debt cancellation, should we then expect it? To see why not, we turn to another aspect of the context.

### Continuing the Ministry of Jesus

The church is not a community that enjoys special divine favors as God's favorite people, the ones out of the human race whom he happens to like the best. The church enjoys special standing before God because it continues the work of his Son. Indeed, the church is the continued manifestation of Christ on earth, the extension of his incarnation through time and space. The prayer Christ envisions in John 14:12–14 is the church's entreaty to God as we work to continue the ministry of Christ. This interpretation is suggested by a consideration of the paragraph in which the text stands.

John 14:12–14 forms a part of the answer that Jesus gives to Philip's request, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (John 14:8). The answer begins in v. 9 and continues until Judas (not Iscariot) asks Jesus another question in v. 22, which Jesus answers in the remaining verses of chapter 14. So the paragraph runs from vv. 8–21. Our passage, then, forms part of Jesus' answer to Philip's request

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to be shown the Father.

Jesus answers Philip's request by pointing to his incarnate ministry. He invites the disciples to recognize the manifestation of the Father in his life among them (John 14:9). He then refers, in vv. 10–11, to the unique relationship between the Son and the Father that makes this manifestation possible, a relationship of indwelling.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Jesus appeals to the disciples to recognize God's presence in him by focusing their attention on the *works* that he performs, or rather, the works that the Father performs through him. What is revelatory about Jesus is not the timbre of his voice or the piety of his expression; God is revealed to us in Jesus' *words* and *actions*.

In the verse before our passage (v 12), the emphasis on works continues, but the focus shifts from Jesus to his disciples: "he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these ...." Jesus promises his disciples that they will continue his ministry; the works that the Father has done through Jesus, he will henceforth do through believers in the Son.

Our passage is not an attempt to state a comprehensive doctrine of prayer, but part of an answer to the question how God will manifest himself to the world. The answer includes the observation that the work God began in Jesus will be continued, and even magnified, in the church. Through the church, the proclamation of the Son will reach people and places whom Jesus never saw in the flesh. The life of the church is the extension of the Word's incarnation in human flesh, and it is to the disciples, who are exerting themselves to carry on his ministry, that Jesus makes his promise to grant whatever they ask in his name. This is far from a blank check; it obligates the church to commit itself to the mission we see begun in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles.

### Praying in the Name of Jesus

Our attention was first captured by the statement that Jesus will grant us whatever we ask. We have seen that the context of this promise to the church is the "greater works" believers in Jesus will do after he departs from the world to return to the Father. Now it is time for us to look more closely at the other element of Jesus' statement, the promise that he will grant us whatever we ask in *his name*. This phrase can refer merely to the mention of the name of Christ in prayer, or to a petition made with Christ's authorization. But the context suggests a stronger interpretation: Jesus promises he will grant the requests of his disciples who pray in spiritual union with him.<sup>6</sup> Let us see what is involved in this interpretation.

In modern times (even more, in "post-modern" times) people are acutely aware of the *distance* between names and things, words and reality. In antiquity, emphasis was on the connection between a symbol and what the symbol represented, especially between a name and the person it signified. Indeed, in an idiom very foreign to our way of thinking, one New Testament passage refers literally to "a crowd of names" (i.e., "a crowd of persons," Acts 1:15). *Name* may mean in the Bible what *person* means to us.

John has surrounded the reference in 14:13–14 to the name of Jesus with the language of indwelling—the Father in the Son, the Son in the Father, the Spirit in the disciples, the disciples in the Son, the Son in the disciples (John 14:10–11, 17, 20). We are only picking up John's cues if we translate the phrase in vv. 13 and 14, "Whatever you ask *in my person*, I will do it."<sup>7</sup> We first see the image of the disciples as existing in the Son in John 6:56, a passage that alludes to the participation in the body and blood of Christ which the church experiences at the Lord's Supper—and which the disciples experience in chapters 13–17. John regards this participation in the person of Christ as the normative experience of Christian prayer. Like Paul, John teaches that the church lives on earth as the body of Christ and prays to God with the mind of Christ.

In John 14:13–14 and 15:7, the wording of the promise does not specify to whom Jesus' disciples will address their requests. In John 15:16, the suspense is removed: "whatever you ask *the Father* in my name, he will give it to you." When the promise is repeated for the last time in the Gospel (16:23–24), Jesus discloses the significance of this: "In that day you will ask nothing of *me*. Truly, truly, if you ask anything of *the Father* in my name, he will give it to you." Through union with Christ in the church, the company of disciples will share the position that the Son has occupied from all eternity; in the Son, they will recline on the Father's breast as he does (John 1:18), and anything they ask from him they will receive.

### Conclusion

Jesus' promise is an unbelievable honor granted to the church, to stand in the presence of the Father with him. It also calls us to immense responsibility, for we enjoy the divine favor only in virtue of continuing the ministry of Christ. There is nothing higher for which Christians can pray than that the church will so order its life as to manifest Christ to the world, and that each of us so order our lives as to contribute to that end.

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