

*Rogate*  
John 16:23-33

Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you.” (v. 23)

Before we get to the question of whether you have received everything you’ve ever prayed for, let’s look at why we pray in Jesus’ name.

We pray in Jesus name because we’re not worthy to ask God anything in our own name. Luther’s explanation of the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer states it perfectly:

*What is the Fifth Petition?* And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

*What does this mean?* We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.

Luther immediately identifies your sin as the reason you’re not worthy to pray to your Father in heaven. I’m not talking about unbelievers here. I hope that it is obvious to you that God does not listen to the prayer of the unbeliever. God, of course, hears everything. After all, He is omniscient. But listen implies that you act positively on what you have heard. God says in Psalm 34:

The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.  
The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them  
from the earth. (vv. 15-16)

There are many other verses that say the same basic thing: God listens to the righteous and not to the wicked. Yet, God desires all the wicked to repent and believe the Gospel:

“Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11)

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” (Mark 1:14–15)

“[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”  
(1 Timothy 2:4)

On a side note, we can never hear these verses enough. They should shape our attitude towards the unbeliever.

Yes. God desires the repentance of the wicked. Yet He will not hesitate to punish the wicked in this life and in the life to come. Earthly punishment constrains their evil to protect the innocent and is also meant to lead the wicked to repentance.

You, however, are not wicked. You are believers. You are sons and daughters of God the Father, and you have Jesus as your Brother! Through faith and baptism, you were brought into the family of the church. Through faith and baptism, God is your Father. Through faith and baptism, Jesus is your Brother. Through faith and baptism, you’re given the Holy Spirit who works a living faith in you. It is through faith and baptism that you are worthy to talk to God. And Jesus is the one that makes this possible.

Through His perfect life and baptism, Jesus blessed the waters of baptism so that they would become a garment of righteousness for you. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, the baptismal waters pouring out of His side become a cleansing, life-giving flood for you. These make you worthy to pray to your Father in heaven. Then we can ask God “as dear children ask their dear father.”

Sometimes its easy to forget that our standing before God depends on Jesus and not our own efforts. According to the world and your old sinful nature which you still have, your efforts are what matter before God. This is where the doctrine of vocation is so helpful. Jesus says,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37–40)

Loving God is a matter of faith. Luther points out that your God is the one that you “fear, love, and trust.” Whom do you fear more than anyone or anything else? Whom do you love more than anyone or anything else in the world? Whom do you trust more than anyone or anything else? This is a matter of faith because we haven’t seen God. (Hebrews 11:1) Our faith points toward God.

It’s very unflattering, but God doesn’t need your good works. You cannot really do anything for God. Consider your daily devotions. Does God need to meditate on the very Word He sent? Or do you? Daily devotions are critical for us, because it is through God’s Word that we have our existence in Him. But your neighbor does need your work. Works is a matter with your neighbor.

Your neighbors are all those whom God has put into your life, both good and bad. They need your works, which we can also call love. Think about 1 Corinthians 13:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

These are attitudes and behaviors towards your neighbor. Towards other people. Now certainly God cares about how you act towards your neighbors. This is what gets James so riled up. Don’t tell me you’re a believer and treat your neighbor so poorly!

So, when you think of your relationship with God, think about faith. When you think about your relationship with your neighbor, think about works or love. The awesome thing is that it’s your faith that makes you worthy to talk to God and not your works! On this side of glory, your works will be tainted by your old evil Adam. They will be imperfect and incomplete. But your faith is perfect because Jesus is perfect. Faith is nothing other than trusting in Jesus and in His promises for you. And His promises are backed up by His works which were perfect and righteous before God our Father. His promises are backed up by his atoning death on your behalf which paid for you sins and the sins of the entire world. His promises are backed up by His ascension before the Father where Jesus sits at the right hand of authority working all things for the good of those who trust in Him. (Romans 8:28)

And Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you.” (v. 23)

So, why don't you always get whatever you ask for in Jesus' name?

First, let's clear up that there's no *formula* for prayer to get what you want. Many people falsely believe that if you just pray hard enough or somehow say the exact perfect words or if you get enough people to say the same prayer that God will answer your prayer the way you want Him to.

God answering your prayer doesn't depend on your effort. This is making the mistake of thinking that God listens because you are worthy in yourself or because your prayer is so heartfelt. As you've already heard, you're not worthy in and of yourself. And God says through the prophet Jeremiah that your heart is deceitful above all things. (Jeremiah 17:9) I definitely wouldn't count on the condition of your heart to ensure you're heard by God. You're heard by God because you're in Christ. God answers your prayer because you are His dear child.

God answering your prayer doesn't depend on using the perfect words. There is a perfect prayer which we'll get to, but God doesn't act because you use the right words. God is not some pleasure machine that works for you if you hit the buttons just right. This turns God into an automaton. God is personal. That is, He is one God in three persons. God is personal. Just as we don't talk to our friends in a prearranged script, we don't talk to God with a prearranged script. To be sure, we use prayers that have been written down so that we might learn from them, but God doesn't guarantee to listen to written down prayers. What are the Psalms but prayers that teach us to pray as we pray them? A wicked man can recite the Psalms all day long, but God will not listen to him. God listens to you because you're His dear child!

God answering your prayer doesn't depend on how many people are praying. This is the false motivation for the protestant National Day of Prayer. They come right out and say that if enough people will pray together, God will save America, whatever that means. That's why Lutherans don't typically participate in the National Day of Prayer. Please hear the next part carefully.

I fear we fall into this mentality with our prayer list. Sometimes it comes across that if we get enough people from Grace to pray for someone, God will act how we want Him to. Rarely do we pray for a person's eternal well-being. I know that's assumed by all of you, but maybe we shouldn't assume. There also seems to be the implication that the "Christian" answer to prayer is that people are healed. God certainly heals here in the earthly realm when and where He wills.

Most of the time, He uses His good gift of daily bread called medicine, to heal both Christian and wicked alike. Sometimes, God intervenes directly to heal a person's affliction. But God doesn't promise that He'll do this for everyone. Our healing that is promised is an eternal healing. In the new heavens and earth, you won't know what it's like to be sick or dying.

Please hear me correctly. I don't want us to stop using our wonderful prayer list. I see it as a way to share each other's burdens. And, of course, this means we pray for each other. This is a wonderful, God-pleasing activity that we must continue. I would encourage you to ponder about what you are really praying for when you submit prayers to the prayer chain. And when you pray for each other, God listens because you are His dear child through faith.

Second, let's clear up that the Lord's Prayer is the perfect prayer. The disciples in Jesus' earthly ministry were just like us. They heard Jesus' condemning words on prayer and wanted to pray God-pleasing prayers. They had an advantage because they could ask Jesus directly, face to face, how to pray. And Jesus gives us the incredible gift of the Lord's Prayer.

This doesn't mean that the Lord's Prayer cannot be abused. It can be prayed by rote, with a disengaged mind, like any other prayer. When this happens, you truly become like the Gentiles who think they're heard for their many words. If you find yourself praying the Lord's Prayer by rote, slow down. Engage your heart, mind, and lips in prayer.

One of the great comforts of the Lord's Prayer is its completeness. One of the traps we are all guilty of falling into is praying only for daily bread which includes health. That's only one petition out of seven! The Lord's Prayer reminds you as you're praying it that there's so much more to life than daily bread. We tend to think in earthly, temporal terms and the Lord's Prayer reminds us that life and salvation are eternal things!

Third, let's clear up that that Lord's Prayer isn't the only prayer. Your Father in heaven cares about you because you're in Christ. That means he cares about the minutia of your life. He cares about your hopes and dreams. He cares about your triumphs and failures. He cares about your emotional and physical well-being. Prayer is nothing else than talking to God. And you have a wonderful promise from God. When you get to the point where you are so overwhelmed, you don't even know how to pray, God's Holy Spirit prays for you "with groanings too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

And Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you.” (v. 23)

But you don’t always get what you pray for, do you?

Regarding prayer, Jesus says in Matthew:

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9–11)

Jesus says it a little differently in Luke:

“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11–13)

Jesus equates giving good things with the giving of the Holy Spirit. If you have the Holy Spirit, you have all you need in this life and in the next. And Jesus promises you that if you ask for serpent, He won’t give it to you. If you ask for a stone, He won’t give it to you. When we ask God for things, we’re still in this frustrating position of being both saint and sinner. Sometimes we ask for bread and eggs as we ought to, but many times we ask for serpents and stones, not really knowing that’s what we’re asking for. But Jesus only gives good gifts. Paradoxically, this can also include suffering to conform us to the image of Jesus, but we’ll talk about that another time.

From our perspective, prayer can look ineffectual and weak. It’s a much different perspective when you have an eternal perspective. Eternally, our prayers are powerful things that affect actual change for good in this temporal world. Regardless of what goes on in the world, know that you are a beloved child of your Father in heaven. Let me leave you with this promise that is guaranteed in Christ:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

And ultimately that good is the same good that Jesus is talking with His apostles: that you are not scandalized. To be scandalized, technically, means to fall away from the faith. Jesus gives you the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gift of prayer, that no matter what happens in this life, you will die a victorious death in Christ Jesus!

May God be praised for all the good he gives to us through His grace! Amen.