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RADIOING HEADQUARTERS

John 14:7-14

There are some behaviors that all of our grandchildren have shown that I find curious. One of them is they all want to climb up a slide. Several of them at first were a little fearful of going down a slide, but as soon as they mastered that, for some reason they want to climb up the slide instead of using the steps that are provided for that purpose. I don’t know what the fascination is. Another odd thing is they all seem to love to go through Nana’s purse. Again, I don’t get the fascination. What is so intriguing about Laurie’s purse? Laurie usually has to put things back in order in her purse after this has happened. More than once in putting things back she has discovered a gift card that we had been given and had forgotten about.

It is common to forget about a gift card, to fail to use it, and maybe even lose it. Surveys reveal that 51% of Americans have done this. In fact, 6% of gift cards are never used. The cost of this particular action runs to $3 billion in this country. Surveys reveal that 4% of Americans admit they have thrown away a perfectly good gift card accidentally. I know, you’re all thinking right now that you should go through your wallet to check for forgotten cards.

Why am I talking about unused gift cards? It is because there is another much more useful and powerful resource that we have available to us that we fail to effectively employ all too often. You’ll see what I mean as we look at John 14:7-14.

JESUS REVEALED THE FATHER

Jesus said several things in verses 7-11 that are a bit difficult to understand. Jesus had said he was the only way to come to the Father, then said in knowing him they knew the Father also. Uh, was Jesus the way to the Father, or was he the Father somehow? Philip had a little trouble tracking what Jesus was saying. It seems he was kind of confused and just wanted Jesus to lay it out plainly for him. He said, “Lord show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

He wanted Jesus to put it in simple terms. Jesus’ response probably wasn’t quite what he was hoping for. He said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” Jesus has repeatedly spoken of the Father in the third person, meaning he is someone other than Jesus. But what he says in these verses can really cause heads to spin. If you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen the Father. Then he went on to say he is in the Father and the Father is in him. Um, what now? How is that possible? What does it even mean? To some people this sounds like nonsense. How can Jesus be God’s Son, be in God, and have God be in him?

A friend of ours went to Europe recently and had an interesting comment about it. She said, “If you’ve seen one or two castles, you’ve seen them all.” She didn’t mean that she had literally seen every castle in Europe. She didn’t even mean they are all exactly the same. She meant that when you’ve seen one or two you have the basic idea of what a castle is like. You understand the idea of a castle. That’s kind of what Jesus meant. When you’ve seen him you have the idea of what God is like. You understand the nature of God because Jesus had it and displayed it.

When Jesus talked about being in the Father and the Father being in him, he was dealing with the enigma of describing an infinite, eternal God in finite human language. He was talking about the nature of God, who exists in ways we can’t completely comprehend or explain. To get a perspective on the difficulty of explaining an infinite God to finite humans all we need to do is think about God being eternal. He has always existed. He existed before the universe came into being. But where did he exist before the universe was created? Does the word “where” even have meaning when we talk about before the universe? My head starts to hurt. To say we are finite is to say we are limited. There comes a point where human ability hits a wall and can go no further. Understanding things like infinity, eternity, the nature of God, we inevitably get to a place where we cannot comprehend it.

To get a feel for the problem, try explaining how a television works to a 4 year old. I guarantee you, you’re not going to get very far. At least I didn’t. They don’t have the capacity to get it. The point Jesus was making was that God wants us to understand him to the extent our human capacity will allow us. So he revealed himself in the person of a human being, Jesus Christ, who used human language to explain himself, even though it would hit limits. The key idea to understand what Jesus was saying is, if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. In him we see the character of God displayed in a way that is at least somewhat comprehensible to us.

JESUS PROMISED TO ANSWER

Beginning in verse 12 Jesus said some things that are astounding. Jesus’ disciples were upset because Jesus said he was going to leave them. They thought they had joined a movement that was going to last forever, that Jesus was heading toward setting up a powerful kingdom. But if he left, they were sure the movement was going to collapse. Jesus was the movement. People weren’t flocking to listen to the disciples and learn from them. Jesus leaving would destroy everything.

They were upset and fearful. So Jesus reassured them. He said in verse 12 that those who believe in him would do the works he had been doing. His work, his movement would go on, led by them! Then he astounded them by saying they would do even greater works than he had done. The movement would continue, and they would do the amazing things to make that happen.

Jesus had verified his identity by doing miracles. He had healed people by the hundreds. The blind were given sight, the deaf were made able to hear, paralyzed people were made able to walk, lepers were healed. He had demonstrated power over nature by walking on water, calming a storm with a word, feeding thousands of people by miraculously multiplying a small amount of food. He even brought a dead man back to life. We typically think when Jesus said the disciples would do the works he had done, that’s what he meant. They would also perform miracles. This leads to some believers thinking that they have to do miracles. We have to do the things Jesus did, and he did miracles, so that’s what we must do. But there is a problem with that thinking.

Jesus said they would do *greater* works than he did. How could they do greater things than Jesus? What is greater than giving sight to the blind, having power even over nature and raising people from the dead? What is greater than rising from the grave yourself? In other words, how are you going to top what Jesus did? A common answer to that is that Jesus’ followers were going to do more miracles than Jesus did. But that’s not what John wrote. There were a couple of Greek words John could have used that meant “more.” But he didn’t use those words. He used the comparative form of the word “mega,” which meant great. It meant “greater,” not more. He said his followers would do greater works. What works are greater than bringing a dead man back to life or controlling the weather by telling it what to do? I’m a little hard pressed to know what that would be.

What did Jesus mean then? What did Jesus say was the work he had been doing? He said in Luke 19:10 “the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.” The work he did was to save the lost, not primarily to do miracles. If he did miracles, but didn’t save the lost he would not have accomplished the work he came to do. The work wasn’t about the miracles, it was about saving the lost.

At the end of Jesus’ life he had a few hundred followers. On the day of Pentecost, after he was gone, the Holy Spirit was given to his disciples who proceeded to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. On that day more than 3000 people became believers in Jesus. That was way more followers than Jesus previously had. In that one day his disciples did greater work than Jesus did when it came to his work, saving the lost. Today there are, experts say, 2 billion followers of Jesus in the world. Perhaps there were 500 followers of Jesus at the end of his ministry. There are 4 million times as many followers today than when Jesus made this statement. I’d say that is a greater work, wouldn’t you?

That brings us to a promise Jesus made that we all think is wonderful. “I will do whatever you ask in my name.” In verse 14 he said again, “You may ask for anything in my name, and I will do it.” Jesus said all we need to do is ask and he would give us what we ask for. This sounds like a blank check. Jesus guaranteed he will give us whatever we ask. He has signed the check. All we have to do is fill in the amount.

Jesus said similar things at other times. In Matthew 7:7 he said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” In Mark 11:24 he said, “Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” That is exactly what we want. You ask and it will be done. That’s awesome. And we have all had examples of that happening in our lives, sometimes dramatic examples. I am married to the best woman that has ever existed, and that is an answer to my prayer. Laurie and I wanted to have a baby, and God answered our prayer. We had a daughter we named Carissa. After our lives were devastated by the death of our second child, we prayed that God would give us a healthy baby, and especially that it would be a boy. And he gave us Toby. Later we prayed that after years we might be able to buy a house. And God answered that prayer. We prayed for years for a husband for Carissa and he gave her Michael. Michael and Carissa wanted so badly to have a child, but after years it seemed like it wasn’t going to happen. And then God answered prayer and Wesley came along. We prayed that Toby could get into medical school against considerable odds, and he got into his first choice.

I could give you an endless list of tremendous answers to prayer, and I am sure you could give me a similar list of answers that God has given you. So it seems like this promise has proven true. But it’s not quite that simple, is it? We think the best thing in the world would be that Jesus would give us whatever we ask of him. But that’s not true. I can think of a number of prayers that he did not answer by giving me what I asked, and I’m really glad he didn’t.

I dated a girl that I thought was terrific for some time when I was a junior in college. And then she jettisoned me. It hurt. She didn’t even say, “It’s not you, it’s me.” She said, “It’s you.” She wasn’t cruel about it, but she was very clear. I was sad. I prayed that God would show her the error of her ways and she would come back to me. Instead she found another guy and married him. And I am so glad God did not answer my prayer. No knock on her. She was a wonderful person. But first, I wasn’t anywhere close to being ready to be married at that point. And second, years later, as I said, God answered my prayers and Laurie became my wife. Like I said, that other girl was a wonderful person, but she was no Laurie Myatt. No one is. I could not have imagined anyone as awesome as Laurie. Wow, am I ever glad God didn’t answer that prayer.

Our grandchildren are much closer to having capabilities like those of grownups than we are to having capabilities like God’s. What I see is that it would be a terrible idea for their parents and grandparents to give them whatever they ask. They will ask to play on tablet computers and watch television all day long. They will ask to never eat a vegetable in their lives. And they would never, ever go to bed at a reasonable hour. For us to be loving to them means we must say no to them often, because they don’t want what is for their own good. Given that reality, should we be surprised if we don’t understand what is for our best, but God does, so sometimes he must say no to us because he loves us and wants our good?

There are many people who believe that this is a blank check from Jesus. It sure sounds like it is, doesn’t it? All we have to do is have faith. Just believe and God will give us whatever we ask for. But this is like one of those close plays in a football game where the referee says, “The previous play is under review.” We need to put our understanding of this promise under further review. It turns out when we do we encounter some problems.

There is an **experiential** problem. Every Christian who has ever lived has run into the wall of unanswered prayer at some point. Laurie and I prayed that the thing the doctor found on my head would not be melanoma. We believed God was able to answer that prayer. It was more than disappointing when it turned out to be malignant melanoma. What happened to “whatever you ask, it will be given”?

We took care of our grandchildren for much of this week. One day Laurie was driving our two oldest, Ella and Cara, home from school Somehow prayer came up in conversation. Toby has told them that he has a brother in heaven. They know that his brother, Joel, died as an infant before Toby was born. They asked Laurie why, if we prayed for Joel, did he still die. That’s a good question. We can only say, “We don’t know.” What we do know is, we asked, and we didn’t get what we asked for.

I don’t have to say much about this to you because I know that every single one of you has had those disappointing moments when you have prayed fervently, and what you asked did not happen. That is true of all of us. It happened to Paul. He said in 2 Corinthians 12:8 that when he was given something he called a “thorn in my flesh,” something that tormented him, he pleaded 3 times with the Lord to take it away. It didn’t happen. Those prayers were not answered.

What happened to Jesus’ promise? Does this mean he doesn’t keep his promises and we can’t trust him? This reality, one that is so common, means either there is something wrong at God’s end and he doesn’t keep his word, or there is something wrong at our end. Maybe we didn’t ask right. Something wrong at our end is the usual approach taken by those who interpret these verses as a blank check from God. They point out that in Mark 11:24 Jesus added the phrase, “believe that you have received it.” You have to have faith. In Matthew 9:2 when some men brought a paralyzed friend to Jesus Matthew says, “When Jesus saw their faith” he healed the man. In Matthew 9:28 when two blind men asked Jesus to have mercy on them he asked, “Do you believe I am able to do that?” They said yes and he healed them. So the issue is having faith, right? You have to have enough faith for Jesus to answer.

I once read something written by a pastor back east who claimed this verse was a blanket promise to give us whatever we ask in prayer. He related an incident where he and his family had prayed fervently for a new, badly needed piece of furniture, and they didn’t get it. He then said that this apparent failure “forces me to conclude that I didn’t really believe.” That is a big downside to this understanding of these verses. In addition to the disappointment of not getting what we want we get guilt. We didn’t have enough faith.

But there is a flaw in that thinking. In the story of the pastor that I just cited it was obvious that he did believe. He and his family expected God to give what they asked. They anticipated it and eagerly looked for the answer. They had no doubt. They expected to get the furniture. They had all the faith God could ask for, and it made no difference. They had faith, but they didn’t get the furniture. I have found that often when my prayers have not been answered the issue has not been faith, because I knew God could answer my prayer and thought he would. In 2 Corinthians 12 when Paul asked 3 times for God to remove his thorn in the flesh, it is obvious that faith was not the problem. The reason that God gives for not answering Paul’s request is that God had another, more important, plan for Paul, one that required saying no to his prayers.

There is also a **theological** problem with the blank check interpretation. Not only is there the problem of this apparent promise not proving true in our experience, there is a big theological problem. Psalm 103:19 says, “The Lord has established his throne in heaven and his kingdom rules over all.” Verse 22 says, “Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion. Praise the Lord, my soul.” God rules over everything, including us, and he is to be praised. James 4:6-7 says, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Submit yourself, then to God.” We are to submit to him. 1 Peter 5:6 says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand.” These verses call on us to submit to God, humble ourselves under him and his will.

The problem with understanding these verses to say that God will do whatever we ask of him is it makes him our servant. He’s like a genie, waiting to grant our wishes, whatever they may be. He lives to serve us. That is not submitting to God’s rule, it is making God submit to our rule. It turns God into a vending machine. Put your prayer of faith in the slot, push the button and out comes what you have selected. Our wish is his command. In his commentary on John, Rodney Whitacre wrote, “This verse has been understood by some Christians to be a blanket promise that Jesus will give them whatever they want. Such idolatry of the self is the very opposite of eternal life.” That is exactly the problem. Understanding these verses the way many do is idolatry of self. It is worshiping ourselves and our own immature desires rather than worshiping Almighty God and seeking his will. I feel safe in asserting this absolutely was not what Jesus had in mind.

There is a **logical** problem as well. What is Jesus supposed to do when two of his followers make exact opposite requests of him? There is no way he can answer both requests in a positive way. Yes to one means no to the other. I learned an important lesson when our kids were young. I have to confess it took several failures before I finally got the lesson. We would sometimes go out to a restaurant for lunch after church on Sundays. Sundays were usually very busy, tiring mornings for us, so going out to eat gave us a bit of a break. We’d get in the car, I’d start driving and make my mistake. I’d say, “Okay, kids, where would you like to go eat?” I found out that invariably one would request one restaurant and the other would request a different restaurant. Once their preferences were announced, they morphed from preferences into absolute necessities. They were hills worth dying for. The worst thing in the world for them would be to give in and have to go to the desired restaurant of their brother or sister. I got opposing requests and there was no way to give them both what they had asked. I learned to not ask. My policy became “Don’t ask, tell.” This understanding of these verses puts God in the same position because we might have contradicting requests.

I’ve shared before I had an “aha” moment about this in my younger days playing baseball. I was about to bat, and I was digging in to the batter’s box I prayed. “Lord, please let me get a hit.” I looked out at the pitcher and the thought came like a lightning bolt. “What if that guy on the mound is a believer and he’s praying, ‘Lord, please let me strike this guy out’”? There is no way for God to give us both what we asked. What can God do? That’s easy, answer the prayer of his favorite and give me a hit. Just kidding.

Experiential problem, theological problem, logical problem. Strike one, strike two, strike three. The invariable rule of the universe is 3 strikes and you’re out. So this simple reading of Jesus’ words cannot be right. But how are we to understand what seems to be a blank check, an open ended promise?

First, we always have to keep the context in mind when we interpret the Bible. There was a context to this promise. The context was that Jesus was reassuring his men that he was not abandoning them. He wasn’t going to simply bail out, leave them alone with the impossible mission of establishing his kingdom. He was promising resources to them. Imagine an army officer sending his troops out on a difficult mission. He tells them, “I know this is daunting, but you will have radios with you. At any time you can call back to headquarters and request help. We will have air assets overhead continually, and we can send in airstrikes. We have artillery on call. You can request artillery support and it will be on the way within seconds. And if you get in a serious bind, we have helicopters ready to come pull you out within minutes.” Jesus was saying that as they went out on the mission he was giving them to do greater works, there would be resources available to them. They could radio headquarters, which we call prayer, and ask for those resources to be employed. Jesus said he would employ them. This promise wasn’t, “Hey, if you want to get rich, if you want to be healthier, just ask and I’ll give you whatever you ask.” It was, “If you need help in carrying out the mission, just ask, and I’ll send you whatever resources you need.”

There was also an important, but easily missed, caveat in this promise. Jesus said, “I will do whatever you ask *in my name*.” He promised to give what we ask in his name. Oh, well, I always end my prayers, “In Jesus’ name, amen.” It’s kind of like “over and out” on the radio. It’s how you sign off when you’re done praying. So I always pray in Jesus’ name. Yeah, uh, that’s not what Jesus meant.

Suppose that I have some of my favorite doughnuts from our go to doughnut shop. You’ve been talking to Laurie, and she tells you that you should ask me to let you have some of the huge apple fritter, which is her favorite. You come to me and say, “Laurie told me to ask you if I could have some of that apple fritter.” I would say, “Well, if Laurie wants you to have it, then absolutely, here it is.” You have asked for that apple fritter in Laurie’s name, and since I would give her anything, I gladly share the apple fritter with you.

When we pray in Jesus’ name we are asking the Father not because we deserve something, but because Jesus does. We are heard in our prayers not because we are so holy and worthy and have earned the right to pray, but because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. He has earned the right to ask of the Father. If you’ve ever felt like you can’t pray about something, or about anything, because you’ve been undeserving, you’ve missed the point. We never deserve to have our prayers heard and answered. But Jesus always does, and we pray in his name, which guarantees those prayers are heard.

But praying in Jesus’ name like that implies something else. This past week as we were taking care of Toby and Anna’s 4 kids and 250 dogs, okay I’m exaggerating. There were only 3 dogs, it just seemed like 250. We stayed at their house. One of the days they were having some people come to do some work at their house. Anna told us she left us some checks she had signed, and we could fill in one of those to pay the people. Hey, this was great! She gave us blank checks. It was sort of like this promise coming true. We could write a check from their bank account, which is larger than ours, for anything we wanted, right? No, that’s not right. We were to write checks in her name, meaning write checks that she wanted written. That’s a bit like what Jesus meant when he said we should pray in his name. We write the check, we pray, as he would pray.

When Jesus talked about us praying in his name, it meant as his proxy. In other words, praying as he would pray. Now we begin to see how this promise makes sense. If we pray in his name, praying as he would pray in a situation, he will give what we asked. That makes sense, because we are praying in line with his will. If his will is that something would happen and we ask that it would happen, he will answer that prayer. 1 John 5:14-15 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know he hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him.” That’s what Jesus meant by praying in his name.

Oh, well that’s not nearly as fun as I thought it was. I can’t just order whatever I want off the menu. Well, actually you can. You just can’t claim this particular promise when you do it. Philippians 4:6-7 tells us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayers and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Note the words “anything” and “every situation.” Paul says we should pray about everything. If you might be anxious about it, stress over it, instead pray about it. The promise there is not that you will get whatever you ask, but that you will get his peace. So we can and should pray about everything. If it is in his name, according to Jesus’ will, he promises we will get it. But if not, we will get his peace, which is just as good, or maybe even better.

Paul wrote “pray without ceasing.” Prayer is to be a continual conversation with God about everything in our lives. If what we ask is according to his will we will get it. But either way, we can have peace, and that’s really what we need.

APPLICATION

LIVE FOR GREATER

In his book, *The Hunger For Significance*, R. C. Sproul wrote, “We want our lives to count. We yearn to believe that in some way we are important. This inner drive is as intense as our need for water and oxygen.” How intense is your need for water and oxygen? It is constant and powerful. That is how desperately we want to matter.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in his book, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Is Not Enough*, “Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that…the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it.”

Jesus has called us to do greater works than he did. He changed the world. And he calls us to join in his mission. We easily think, “I can’t do that. I’m not an evangelist or a great leader or preacher.” We don’t have to be. When it comes to the mission Jesus was on, we don’t have the ability to accomplish the kinds of things he is doing, making spiritually dead people alive, changing lives. He doesn’t ask us to do that. He asks us to have his kingdom be the focus of our thinking and our lives. Seek first his kingdom. As we do this we go about our lives doing whatever he gives us to do. It may seem unimportant to us, but God makes something out of nothing. He uses us in ways we may not even know. Dr. D. A. Carson wrote, “Our own feeble efforts participate in the triumph of Christ and (his) work…These are the true dimensions of our calling, and ***our most mundane activities must be seen against this sweeping backdrop***.” In other words, we can even seek his kingdom in our mundane activities because we don’t know how God is going to use us and the little things we do as we serve him. This fills our lives with meaning, because everything we touch can be and should be about the kingdom of God.

USE THE RADIO

Prayer is often one of the big causes of guilt for believers. We think we should be more diligent in prayer and are distressed at how feeble our prayer lives often are. The problem is, we view prayer as a religious duty. We think we have to pray a certain way and in certain amounts to be doing it right and thus earn God’s favor.

We don’t earn God’s favor. Pray a lot or pray a little, it doesn’t change your standing with God at all, because praying has nothing to do with your standing before God. Our relationship with him is utterly, 100% dependent on Jesus and his work. You are approved and loved by God as he result of what he Jesus did, and his work is complete. You add nothing to it and take nothing away.

We need to see prayer as a privilege and a resource. It’s like that soldier out in the field. Does he beat himself up and feel guilty for not calling back to headquarters often enough? No, when he needs help, he calls for it on the radio. That’s what Jesus told us to do. Talk to him when we need help. Well I feel like I need help all the time. So did Paul. That’s why he said we should pray without ceasing. Let’s see prayer as the powerful, incredible resource that it is. See it as a valuable tool to employ. If our prayers are in line with Jesus’ will, we will get what we ask. If they are not, while we may not get what we ask, we will get peace, which is just as good. So let’s pray!

In his book, *How To Pray: A Simple Guide For Normal People*, Peter Greig tells of the time he was stranded in Chicago when his flight home to England was canceled, along with hundreds of others, by the eruption of that volcano in Iceland a few years back. He prayed. He asked God to use this interruption in his life and to show him what to do. Several American friends invited him to stay with them. But for some reason he felt like God was putting a particular friend, Joe, on his mind. This friend lived in Madison, Wisconsin, 150 miles to the west. He decided to email this friend. He wrote to him that he was stranded in Chicago for a couple of days and asked if there was any chance he could come and sleep on his couch. I will quote him describing what happened. “I didn’t know that Joe had just received terrible news, nor that his wife had asked, ‘Who do you wish you had on our couch right now?’ Those were her exact words. Nor did I know that Joe had said, ‘I wish Pete was on my couch, but I know that’s crazy because he’s in England and he has never even been to our home.’” Wow, what a coincidence. No, what an answer to prayer. Let’s put that radio to work. Headquarters is anxious to hear from us and eager to help.