

NOT A VENDING MACHINE John 14:12-14

According to Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *David and Goliath*, Vivek Ranadive is from Mumbai, but he now lives in Menlo Park in the Bay Area. He volunteered to coach the basketball team of his 12 year old daughter, Anjali. Unfortunately he wasn't skilled or well versed in basketball because he grew up playing soccer and cricket. Even worse his team of 12 year old girls were not very skilled. They would be playing some teams made of girls who were born with a basketball in their hands. What could he do to help his team compete against superior opponents?

Ranadive enlisted some help from some friends, among them former NFL star running back Roger Craig. But in the end he came up a strategy that resulted in remarkable success, including a shot at the national championship. His strategy generated some angry responses from opponents, but it was very effective. The strategy had its roots in his surprise when he saw his first basketball game. He thought the way both teams played was mindless. Team A would score and immediately retreat to the other end of the court where they would patiently wait while team B inbounded the ball and calmly dribbled it back up the court. The teams would only defend about one third of the court! That would be like a football team kicking off then backing off to its own 40 yard line or so, freely ceding 60 yards to the other team. Ranadive thought it made no sense at all.

His strategy was to use the resource of territory. From the very start his teams ran, scrambled and trapped to defend the entire length of the court, and they did so until the final buzzer. They would defend to keep the other team from even inbounding the ball. If the team did get the ball in successfully they would defend every inch of court all the way back. Basketball people call it a full court press. Ranadive's team did it with reckless abandon. The frenetic pace this led to was exhausting so his girls had to be in terrific shape. But as they employed the strategy team after team unraveled and withered under the relentless pressure. Time and time again teams that were far more skilled end up losing to this scrappy team with less ability.

It all happened because Ranadive used the resources he had. He had territory and girls willing to hustle and scrap. Today I want to talk about a resource we have and often don't use. It was one Jesus' fearful disciples would need after he was gone. Jesus was going to be leaving and they feared it was the end. But it wasn't.

The good news was that while Jesus was leaving and that while the kingdom wasn't going to happen in the way they envisioned it, Jesus had a much bigger plan in the works. And that plan involved those troubled men. Jesus was going to use them to change the world in ways they could never have imagined. He also plans to use each of us in ways that are eternally significant. You are called to do something great. Jesus is going to show you what and how today as we look at John 14:12-14.

JESUS CALLS US TO A GREAT WORK

Everything Jesus said was true, but he began verse 12 by saying, “Truly, truly I say to you.” That was kind of like saying, “Now hear this.” It was like putting the words that followed in bold font or italics. It means what Jesus has to say next is HUGE. Literally Jesus then says, “whoever believes in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things.”

This is so significant because his men were thinking it was all over. Without Jesus there was going to be no kingdom. Jesus was saying, “This is not the end. You men, along with everyone else who believes in me, are going to continue this thing. The movement is not going to die. You are going to continue the work that I have been doing.” That’s pretty hard to believe. Which of those guys was going to come up with sermons like the Sermon on the Mount? Who was going to do the miracles that Jesus was doing? Jesus could have drawn some crowds just using his ability as a public speaker who had brilliant insight into spiritual truth, but all those miracles didn’t hurt attendance at all. Yet Jesus said they were going to continue the work, doing just what he had been doing.

There are many people who claim that this means that Christians should be doing miracles like Jesus did. I submit to you that this is not what Jesus mainly was referring to. Notice that Jesus goes on to say that anyone who believes in him “will do even greater than these.” If he was referring to miracles then this means that Jesus’ followers would do greater miracles than Jesus.

Does this make sense? Jesus demonstrated power over nature itself by turning water into wine, walking on water and calming a storm merely by verbal command. He demonstrated supernatural knowledge on a number of occasions. He healed blind people, deaf people, people with numerous and various diseases, and he raised people from the dead. He accurately predicted future events. Of course he finally conquered death itself. So the question is, exactly what miracles can we do that are greater than those? I can’t think of anything, can you?

Some might say that we will do many more miracles than Jesus. After all he was only one person, where his followers are many so they can perform many more miracles. The problem with that is that Jesus didn’t say we’d do *more* than his works, he said we’d do *greater*. The Greek language that John wrote his book in had several words that could be translated “more.” He did not use them. The word he used was a comparative form of “mega” which can only mean greater. Because of this I conclude that the works Jesus referred to were something other than miracles. The miracles he did were merely a part of a larger work. It is that larger work that Jesus referred to here.

What then was the work that Jesus did? In John 17:4 Jesus prayed to his Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” Then in verse 6 he explained what that work was. “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world.” We saw last week that Jesus told Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the

Father.” Jesus came to reveal the Father, to help us all understand that he is a God of love, a God of goodness, a God of justice but most of all a holy God of grace who was acting to bring people into his kingdom through an act of incomprehensible kindness.

In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus described this work by quoting Isaiah 61:1-2, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is the work the disciples would continue, and it is the work we are to continue. We are to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. We are to release the oppressed, preach the good news to the poor, to reveal the Father to all we encounter. The work is revealing that God is a redeemer God, a Savior who in his grace has made a way to rescue the lost human race. It is making known how he has done that through his Son and how people can experience it.

The disciples would do a greater work because Jesus was going to the Father. In other words, he was going to die and rise from the dead. Jesus did an amazing job of revealing the Father and bringing hope and freedom to oppressed people. But they would never truly see the glory of the Father and experience the impact of God’s kingdom until Jesus accomplished his work of dying and rising from the dead. That was the key event that would complete the good news. As the disciples went out they would not be proclaiming a good news of a Messiah who would lead Israel to victory, they would proclaim news of forgiveness and eternal hope and life. They had news that flawed and fallen human beings had been rescued by the Son of God through his death on the cross so that now no one is excluded. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven, no person beyond the reach of God’s kindness and grace. All this required Jesus’ death on the cross so that truth could not be proclaimed until Jesus made his sacrifice for us. As a result Jesus’ followers would have a much greater impact on all people everywhere. They would do a greater work because that work of rescue through the cross was now complete.

Jesus has called us to continue this work. Oh no, he’s telling us we have to go evangelize people. Well, that’s part of it, but not the whole picture. What we are to do is continue the work of revealing the Father. We are to speak and live in such a way that people will see that God is real, that he is a God of grace and love and freedom and hope. We are to announce to them that there is release from the oppression of guilt, condemnation and hopelessness. Yes, we do that with our words, but we also do that with the way we daily live and interact with people.

Laurie and I had something happen to us a couple of times recently that reminds me of this. We went into a jewelry store where I have bought several items that Laurie really likes. We were buying something for our anniversary. The lady who waited on us asked how long we’ve been married and we told her 34 years. She reacted with some surprise and said, “Wow, that’s a long time. That’s very unusual. What’s your secret?” I said, “Well, marry Laurie and the rest is easy.” I went on to say, “I guess we’ve tried to serve each other rather

than just look after ourselves.” A similar thing happened about a week ago and I kicked myself later because I wasn’t prepared for that question. I revealed a little of the character of the Father there, but I could have done more by saying, “We’ve tried to serve each other and love each other the way God has loved us through our Lord Jesus Christ.” But you get the point. There was an opportunity there to reveal the Father, and we did to an extent, but could have done better.

Laurie revealed something of the character of the Father when she had a recent difficult encounter with a neighbor. Several people witnessed this interaction and came away saying, “Wow, we’ve learned to steer clear of that person.” Another neighbor commented something similar about that neighbor. Rather than going to war as would be the natural reaction Laurie baked some cookies for the person then sought her out and told her she was sorry for any problems she might cause her and that she wants to have a good friendship with her. She was revealing the grace filled reconciling character of God.

When we respond to hardships with grace and trust in God we are revealing something of the character of God. When we tell people about what God has done for us we are showing them his character. When we stay faithful despite temptation we are showing people something of his character.

Everything changes in our lives, they become full of purpose when we focus on this great task that God has given us to do. But there are so many people and we are so few. It helps us to know that we have millions of fellow Christians around the world on the same mission. Still we have so few of us here compared to the 300 million in our nation and the 7 billion around the world. How are we ever going to reveal the character of God to the mass of humanity around us? Imagine the task facing Jesus' disciples that night when there were only a few hundred followers of Jesus in the entire world. How were they going to make a dent? Fortunately God has given us a powerful resource to help us.

JESUS PROMISES TO DO WHAT WE ASK

In verses 13 Jesus said, “I will do whatever you ask in my name.” He repeated the promise in verse 14, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” Hey, this is great. This is the all powerful God we’re talking about. Ask him for anything and he will do it, and since he is unlimited nothing can stop him. Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:20 that God is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” So nothing can stop God. All we have to do is ask.

That sounds like Jesus has just handed us a blank check, doesn’t it. You just fill in whatever amount you want and cash the check. Ask for anything, he said,. Whatever you ask I will do, he said. This isn’t the only place where Jesus said something like this. In Matthew 7:7-8 he said, “ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” In Mark 11:24 he said, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for

in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” All you have to do is believe and God will give it to you.

This is terrific. You have just learned the secret to harnessing God’s power to serve you. Do you need some money? Just ask and believe and you will receive it. Do you need a new job? Just ask and believe and you’ll get it. Do you want to be healed of that disease? All you have to do is ask. You want your spouse to change so you can have a more fulfilling marriage. Believe God can do it and ask. Do you want to find that right person to marry and have that person fall madly in love with you? All you need to do is ask. Do you want your child to make better choices? Ask and you will receive. Do you want to be independently wealthy? Ask and believe. Do you want to ace that test that is coming up? You don’t need to study. Just pray and ask God. Do you want this sermon to end within 5 minutes? Just ask God and he will give it to you.

There are a lot of people in the “Name it and claim it” camp. They believe all you need to do is tell God what you want, name it, and if you believe God will give it to you. This is the promise that most of us think we want. It is how we want prayer to work. It appears to have unlimited upside. But there is a gnarly downside to it, as you will see shortly. But it is also impossible. In baseball three strikes and you’re out. Let me share three strikes against this idea that Jesus was giving us a blank check and guaranteeing he would give us anything we want.

The first strike is *theological*. Psalm 99:1-2 says, “The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake. Great is the Lord in Zion, he is exalted over all the nations.” Psalm 95:6-7 says, “Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker, for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.” God reigns and we are to bow before him. We are the sheep. The sheep don’t tell the shepherd what to do, they follow him because he knows what is best for them. But if this promise means God will do whatever we tell him carte blanche God looks a whole lot more like a vending machine than a Sovereign Lord. Just put your prayer in and push the right button and out comes what you’ve ordered. Our hymn suddenly becomes the song “A Friend Like Me” from Aladdin. The genie sings, “Mr. Aladdin, sir, what will your pleasure be? Let me take your order, jot it down. You ain’t never had a friend like me, no, no, no. Life is your restaurant and I’m your maitre d'.” That song captures well the theological problem. You become the boss and God has to pride himself on serving you. In his commentary on this gospel John Whitacre wrote (p. 355), “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’s it. This is not worship of a holy God, it is idolatry of the self. I don’t think Jesus endorsed idolatry of the self, so surely this cannot be a correct understanding of what he promised.

The second strike is *logical*. This kind of thing creates impossible situations. I’ll give you an example. The first time I met Laurie she was with her boyfriend, Rob. In what I think was

perhaps the dumbest move ever made by a guy Rob decided to stop seeing Laurie. I can't imagine what he was thinking. We went to a movie this week. When we entered the theater Laurie handed our tickets to the usher at the door. He said, "The goddess has arrived." That kind of thing happens periodically. So Rob was crazy. What happened was his eye was caught by another girl named Debbie. However, there was another guy named Eric who also was attracted to Debbie. Let's suppose that both Rob and Eric prayed in faith that God would give them Debbie. Uh oh. Problem. Two guys but one Debbie. How can God keep his promise to both of them? No matter how much faith they have God cannot give them both what they have asked for because there was only one Debbie, not enough to go around. In the end, Eric got Debbie, Rob got nobody, and I was the big winner because I got the goddess. While you are praying right now that this sermon will end quickly there could be someone praying that this sermon is so compelling and inspiring it will go on for another hour. It could happen. How is God going to answer both of those prayers? It simply cannot happen.

The last strike is *experiential*. Every Christian, every single one, has had the experience of asking God for something and not getting it. I have been praying for years that someone will put some wells in on my mother's land in Oklahoma and produce petroleum. It hasn't happened. I prayed that Michael would not have to go to Afghanistan last year. He had to go. I prayed that Michael and Carissa would get assigned to Miramar so they could stay here. They're in Mississippi. Either Jesus hasn't kept his promise or there's something wrong with me. Maybe it's that I didn't have enough faith. I came across a sermon on this passage by a "name it and claim it pastor." His family had grown larger and as a result their dining room table was too small. They needed a new table. So he prayed for a new table. He had to go away on a trip and while he was away every time he would call home he asked, "did anything special happen today?" He expected to hear that a new table had miraculously been provided. But every time he called he was disappointed. Nothing unusual happened. He got home and still no new table. Here's what he said, "The fact that no big dining room table is there at my house *forces me to conclude that I didn't really believe.*" There's the gnarly downside of this interpretation. If you don't get what you ask either God is untrustworthy or there's something wrong with you. You just don't believe enough.

There is a passage in the Bible that refers to unanswered prayer. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 Paul referred to some debilitating physical problem he called a thorn in the flesh. He pleaded with God three times to take it away. It didn't happen. Paul didn't say, "I just didn't have enough faith," nor did he accuse God of being unfaithful. Instead he learned what God wanted him to learn, that God's grace was sufficient for him.

Strike one, strike two, strike three, you're out. This doctrine is a big whiff. We know that it cannot be true because we simply don't know what is best for us. God would be neither wise nor loving if he gave us everything we asked. Our problem is we are really pretty childish. One dad in the church told me that his day had started with a meltdown by his son because the boy just wanted to play with an I Pad as soon as he got up and do nothing but play with it

all day long. As a parent they know that is most definitely not for his best, so they have to say no. The result is he is miserable and angry at his unreasonable and unkind parents. That's our problem. We know what we think we want and if God doesn't give it to us we have a spiritual meltdown. It is important for us to know and accept the idea that we don't know what is for our best, but God does and he is always working it out.

What did Jesus mean then? This verse sounds like a blanket promise, so how are we supposed to view it? What should we believe? It's always a good idea to try to understand the context of a verse. Do you suppose that the disciples would have understood Jesus to be telling them they could ask for lots of money, good health and beautiful wives and he would give them anything they asked? The context is that Jesus has just told them they would continue the works that he had been doing. How were they supposed to do that? They knew they were lost without him. The idea of doing his work without him seemed impossible. This is part of his promise that he was not going to abandon them. He would give them what they needed to carry on the work that he was calling them to.

That promise is one we can claim. As we think about the work of revealing the Father to the world around us we can claim this promise. If we ask for the strength to be patient with difficult people, to give grace to failing people, to have courage to speak in the name of the Lord, Jesus will answer that prayer. He will give us the strength, the courage, the love, the grace that we need to do what he asks us.

There's something Jesus said here that we easily ignore. He said, "I will do whatever you ask *in my name*." What does it mean to ask in his name? We've all been taught to end our prayers, "In Jesus' name, amen." It's kind of like concluding a radio call by saying, "over and out." It tells the Lord we're done talking. That's not what it means to pray in Jesus' name.

When our church has a vote, on our annual budget for instance, we send out ballots to all the members. Suppose for an absurd illustration the leaders have proposed that the church raise pastor Myatt's salary to a million dollars a year. You can't be here when the vote takes place so you give your ballot to a friend and ask this person to vote in your name. You express that you don't just want to vote no, you won't to vote "no stinkin' way and all you leaders should be fired for even suggesting such a terrible idea." Would that person be voting in your name if they then voted yes? Absolutely not. They might be using your name but they're not really voting in your name. You get the point.

Jesus is saying, "Pray as my proxy." Now this has some amazing aspects. When we talk to the Father we pray in Jesus' name. That means that we talk not on our own merit and our own importance, but on the merit and importance of Jesus. We are, after all, his proxy. The Father will always hear my prayer not because I deserve it, not because I've been really good and have been to church, given money, read my Bible, not done any of the terrible ten or nasty nine, but because Jesus is his perfect, sinless, righteous beloved Son. He hears my

prayers as though Jesus was asking. I am always going to have all kinds of blemishes and shortcomings spiritually, but that doesn't mean my prayers won't be heard. They are heard because I come to the Father in Jesus' name.

But of course if I'm praying in Jesus' name I should be praying as his proxy, thus asking what he would ask. If Jesus were physically here, what would he want? What would he talk to the Father about? These are the things we can pray and know that the prayers will be heard and answered.

There are going to be a lot of other things that I care about and that I'd like to ask God to do something about that I don't know if they are in fact what Jesus would want. Does that mean I shouldn't pray about them? Quite the contrary. Philippians 4:6 says that we should not be anxious about anything, but that instead we should pray. Whatever might cause you even the least bit of anxiety you should talk to God about it.

God doesn't promise that we will get whatever we ask in those situations. What he does promise is that he will hear our prayers, give us peace and do what is best for us. He says prayer can make a difference in any and every situation, so pray and leave it to God to do what is best. At the least you will get peace. In our situation God did have mercy, our flight was only delayed a few minutes and we made our connection with no problems.

APPLICATION

BE EXCITED ABOUT THE QUEST

Jesus Christ changed the world. It is nearly impossible to imagine how the world would be different had he not come and revealed the Father. I cannot imagine how my life would be different had Jesus not come and done his work. And now we have been given the amazing privilege of being involved in that work. We don't have to change anyone or convince anyone of anything, for in the end we can't. What we are called to do is to reveal the Father in every circumstance we encounter. Eventually seeing the Father is what everyone needs. So this past week Laurie and I took my mother to a medical center where she had cataract surgery. When the surgery was done and my mother had recovered sufficiently I was told to go to the parking lot, get our car and drive around to a place where they would bring my mother. I headed out to the car and when I arrived a man showed up and said, "is this your car?" I said it was and he said, "I'm really sorry." I thought that was an unnecessarily harsh comment about our car, but it wasn't. He went on to explain that when he was pulling into the parking space next to us he kind of missed. He put a nice scratch and dent in the side of our car. I didn't need this. I needed to get over to pick up the patient. And I didn't want to have to deal with the annoyance of insurance companies and repair shops. There was an initial feeling of impatience and frustration over having to deal with what this guy had done. But I thought, "Jesus wants me to reveal the Father to this guy." He wants him to know that he is a God of grace, of love, of patience and kindness. So that's what I tried to reveal to the guy.

We can and should pursue this quest at every moment of our lives. An important thing to remember is what when we lose sight of the quest and we also lose meaning and significance.

USE THE RESOURCE

Last week we considered some theological matters that in the end are mysterious, that we will never completely comprehend. Prayer is another one of those mysteries. I don't know completely how it works. But Jesus did not give his men an empty promise here. He gave this promise to them in lieu of having him physically be present. That means it has to be a powerful resource.

Prayer is typically a guilt producer for Christians. Most of us feel like our prayer life out to be far more robust than it is and we carry around this sense that we are failing in our duty. We see prayer as some sort of religious obligation that earns us God's approval if we do it well enough. But that kind of thinking could not be further from the gospel of Jesus Christ and it really makes no sense. Laurie and I are both cold averse. We both start feeling really comfortable around 75 degrees. Below that is a bit cool for us. We have a gas fireplace that on these chilly winter nights we huddle around to keep warm. Would it make sense if we didn't use it to feel guilty about that? That would be absurd. If we don't use it we are the ones who lose out because we don't get as warm. That's a bit like prayer. It is a great resource for us. If we don't use it we are the ones who lose out. It is not a matter of feeling guilt about it.

So as we are focused on our quest to reveal the Father we should pray that God will give us whatever we need to accomplish that and we can know that he will answer it. Furthermore, we must always remember the power of prayer. God can use our prayers in any and every situation.

James 5:16 says, "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Well, that's my problem, I'm not righteous enough. No you're not. But the gospel is not "be righteous enough and God will reward you with his love and blessings." The gospel is if you put your faith in Jesus God records his righteousness in your account. If you believe in Jesus you are righteous in God's eyes. Remember, you pray in Jesus' name. In other words, ***when I pray I don't ask God to answer because I deserve it, I ask him to answer because Jesus deserves it.*** And that makes it powerful. James literally said the "asking" of a righteous one is very strong and it is operative, meaning it sets things in motion. It's kind of like the ignition switch on your car. It starts it going.

Years ago I read a book titled *Risking Faith* by a man with the unusual name of Steve Stephens. In it he told an interesting story of being on a camping trip in the mountains with his family. They were on a hike at one point and a branch kind of swiped his face. It wasn't a big deal except somehow it popped one of his contact lenses out. He searched all around for

it even though that seemed hopeless. He didn't have a spare lens which meant he would have to spend the rest of the trip with blurry vision. Eventually they gave up and went back to camp. That night while he was asleep he had a dream. In the dream Jesus appeared to him and said, "Why didn't you ask me about your lens?" So he asked him where it was and Jesus took him to the place he had lost it and showed him a large rock next to the path. On one side of the rock there was his lens. When he woke up the next day the dream seemed so vivid. He thought, "No, it can't be." But he was desperate. He went back to the site and sure enough there was the rock he had seen in the dream. He bent over and looked on the side, and there was his lens!

That was an astounding story. Carissa was in college when I told that story but happened to be home that weekend. That Sunday she went back to school. She had to do some laundry but on her last load she ran out of quarters for the laundry machines. Her clothes were wet but she didn't have the money for the dryer. She remembered the story I had told and thought, "Why not?" She prayed and said, "God, I know this is a little thing and it's kind of silly, but I am out of quarters, none of my friends are around and I need to dry my clothes. Could you do something about it?" Immediately the thought popped into her head, "Look in the couch." She went to her apartment, lifted up the cushions on her couch and found 5 quarters. She dried her clothes. Silly example? Maybe. But maybe a reminder that our God is not limited by anything in any situation.

Recently Laurie and I were on a walk and we talked a bit about the prayers God has answered in the past year and a half for us. It was amazing. One after another, and they weren't things like quarters in a coach, in many cases they were fervent prayers about some of life's biggest issues. God has answered, time and time again. So rejoice, and let your requests be made known to God with thanksgiving as you live out the exciting quest of revealing the Father with all your being in every situation you encounter this week.