

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM - PART V

"What More Could You Ask?"

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John 14:13-15

As every parent here this morning will readily agree, we never know what our children might say next. A few days ago I had to make a call out in the country so I took the family along for the ride. Jody was singing, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world..." When she came to the line, "Red and yellow, black and white," she stopped and looked at her brother who was playing on the back seat. After studying him for quite some time she said, "Mommy, Daddy...Jeff's white on the outside and red on the inside, where is he black and yellow?" Like I say, we never can tell what is going to come out of our youngsters! I have learned a great deal about life and its meaning since our two children came to live with us. One of my most important discoveries, I think, is the fact that when a child is born, it receives every faculty, every potentiality and talent for living it will ever have. Did you know that? Well, it's true. For instance, a baby is given every muscle it will ever get the moment it is born. The mere fact that it cannot crawl, or walk, or sit up, does not mean it doesn't have sufficient muscles. It only means the baby has not learned to use the muscles it received at birth. A baby never gets any more intelligence than it has the moment it is born. Through the process of growth it gains information. It gains knowledge and wisdom. It learns to use its intellectual capacity. But all of its potential is within it the moment of birth. If a boy is going to grow up to be another Otto Graham or Mickey Mantle, the athletic ability, the muscular coordination which makes a great athlete, is given to him at birth. He only needs to develop it. I got to thinking about that the other day in regard to our two children. If Jody, for instance, is going to grow up to be a fine singer like her mother, that ability is within her right now and has been with her since the moment she was born. If Jeff is going to grow up to be wise, intelligent and handsome like his father, well, I guess this is a rather poor illustration after all . . .

I'll never forget the time Jody first saw her hand. I mentioned this to a group of our men the other evening, but I think it bears repeating because it illustrates what I'm trying to say. She was about three and a half months old. We were back in New Jersey holding a six-weeks state-wide crusade involving about 200 Baptist churches. On this particular day we had her propped up with some

pillows on the living room floor of our hotel apartment, waiting for the baby sitter to arrive so we could leave for the evening service. She was laughing and cooing when all of a sudden she saw this thing. She had never seen it before. She looked at it. She studied it. It seemed so strange. She wiggled it and it moved, and she began to laugh and giggle. She was just fascinated by her hand. Well, she was still very small and lacked coordination, so pretty soon she lost it. She began looking around, trying to find it. But it was gone. A big cloud came across her face. Her lip began to quiver and she started to cry. I grabbed her hand and put it back in front of her eyes. A big smile came across her face and she was happy once again. Of course, she had had that hand ever since she was born, but not until she was three and a half months old did she learn to coordinate her muscles and her eyes to bring her hand into focus so she could see what had been hers from the moment she was born. What I'm simply saying is that the moment a child is born, it receives, it possesses, all of the potentialities for growth and life it will ever have. It simply must develop the gifts which are given it at birth. Now the same is true in the spiritual realm. The moment you become a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, God gives you all the potentialities, all the basic necessities for living a victorious, abundant, creative Christian life. You never get any more than you are given at the moment of your "new birth." But, like a small child, you must learn to use the gifts which God had given you. These **Keys Of The Kingdom** about which I have been preaching the last few weeks were all placed in your hands the moment of your conversion. Through faith, love, forgiveness, prayer and obedience, the infinite power of the infinite God is placed at your disposal. The only requirement is that you develop skill in using these Keys to unlock the vast spiritual resources which are hidden within you. Now when you begin to use the Key Of The Kingdom called Prayer, you may be tempted to handle it gingerly. If so, it is because prayer is, by all odds, the most misunderstood, misused, misappropriated force on earth. I suppose one reason for this is to be found in the words of Jesus which form our text, "If you shall ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). **Prayer In Jesus' Name** A lot of people have the impression that means they are free to ask for any little old thing their heart desires. I was chatting with a fellow not too long ago who said he didn't believe in prayer. When I asked him why, he said that when he was a boy he had experienced a grave disappointment in prayer.

He had been taught that if he prayed for anything, it would be his. After all, he reminded me, Jesus did say, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." And so, he prayed for a little red wagon as a birthday gift. When his birthday came and passed, and no little red wagon materialized, his faith in prayer was completely shattered. As a result, today he refuses to recognize prayer as a vital force in his life or the life of anybody else. Now this man, like many people, experienced disappointment in prayer primarily because he read into the words of Jesus something which isn't there. He failed to see Jesus' true meaning. Jesus said, "If you ask anything in My name." When you go to someone to ask a favor of them in the name of another person, you don't ask them to grant something which is contrary to the nature of that person. Suppose you need a piece of furniture for your home and in talking with one of your friends you mention your need. She suggests you see a certain dealer who does business "the low overhead way" and will give you a good price. By way of introduction, she says, "Tell 'em I sent you!" Later on if you go to that dealer in the name of your friend you might say, "Sue sent me and said you would give me a good deal on the furniture I need." But you wouldn't say, "Sue sent me and said you would give me the furniture for nothing." Or, "you would sell it to me even if you had to lose money." You see, you would not be speaking for yourself. You would be speaking in the name of your friend and, consequently, you could not ask for something which would be contrary to the true character of your friend. That's what it means to pray in the name of Jesus. When He said, "If you ask anything in My name," He was reminding us that we must come to God with petitions which are befitting His character and nature. Our prayers must not be contrary to the spirit of His prayers.

What was the prevailing spirit of Jesus' prayers? It was always one of self-surrender and self-denial. "Father, if it be Thy will." "According to Thy will let it be done unto me." "Not my

will, but Thine be done." So, if you are going to pray in His name, if you are going to accept His invitation to "ask anything in My name, your petition must match the spirit of Jesus, the One who has given you an introduction to God. I think that's why George Buttrick said if we had but one prayer to offer in our lifetime, that one prayer should be "not my will, but thine be done." Does that seem too restrictive? It shouldn't! For knowing the spirit of Jesus, knowing His compassion, knowing His concern for the needs of people, knowing His love and understanding for everyone, **What More Could You Ask?** than that which God has already given you through the indescribable generosity of Jesus who said, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." Very often, when we look in retrospect upon some of our prayers, we can see how foolish and unwise they were. We are glad God answered them in the negative. I, for one, am eternally grateful to God that He did not answer some of my prayers the way I thought they should be answered. Looking back through the lens of hindsight, I can see now that they were not prayed in the name of Jesus; that is, in His spirit. There was nothing of self-denial or self-surrender in them at all. They were selfish and haughty. Never once did I take into account God might have something better for me than I could plan for myself. In a recent article in the Chicago Tribune, Harold Blake Walker emphasized this idea by telling the story of a small boy who came racing down the stairs one morning and said, "Dad, will you buy me a motor scooter?" Then without waiting for an answer from his startled father, he ran back up the stairs calling over his shoulder, "Never mind. I know the answer." Dr. Walker says there was a disarming naturalness about that eager request, but there was also a simple honesty in accepting the inevitable answer before it was given. In other words, the boy accepted the fact that his request was not a wise one and his father knew what was best for him better than he knew himself. Many of our prayers are like the boy's impetuous request for a motor scooter. They are expressions of our childlike yearnings to God. They may reflect the mood of the moment. They may express our passing fascination with a particular object. But almost before the words have found their way to our lips, we know the prayer was not asked in the name of Jesus. It had not taken into consideration His spirit or the fact that God has something better for us than we can plan for ourselves. The first prerequisite then for making skillful use of the Key Of The Kingdom called Prayer is that you place your petitions in line with the spirit of Jesus, the One in whose name you will make your approach to

God.**Prayer As Petition**A second requirement for creative use of prayer is the awareness that God has already done His part and that the rest is up to you. Through Christ, He has made the offer, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." Now it is up to you to complete the transaction by "making your requests known unto God" (Phil.4:7). And again, "**What More Could You Ask?**" What wonderful blessings, what mighty miracles may be wrought if you avail yourself of the rich treasures God has placed at your disposal? Sometimes we fail to fully use this great power. I think one reason is that we are baffled by prayer. We cling to the mistaken notion that prayers must be said in a special way, at a special time and in a special place. As a result, we lose the spontaneity which was characteristic of Jesus' prayers and should be characteristic of ours. Instead of talking freely and easily with God, we come to look upon prayer as a pressing appointment--like going to the dentist--and it takes all the joy out of praying. We get too wrapped up in rhetoric and grammar. We think we cannot pray as nicely or fluently as someone else we know, so we do not pray at all. As if God cares about how we say it! My little boy doesn't talk very well. As a matter of fact, he only jabbars. But when he looks at me with a twinkle in his eye and says, "Da Da" and then adds a lot of "gobbldey gook," it's the sweetest sound on earth to me. Well, in the early stages of our Christian growth, our childlike prayers may be little more than saying "Da Da" to God. But I believe with all of my heart that those childlike expressions of our love and faith are the delight of God's heart and are as readily heeded as the most grammatically correct, beautifully phrased, succinctly said prayers of a Peter Marshall. I like what Paul Gallico says in his forthcoming book **Ludmila**, "A prayer need not be a rhetorical address, or an itemized petition, or lips moved soundlessly inside a cathedral, or even words spoken into the air. A prayer may be a wordless inner longing, a sudden outpouring of love, a yearning within the heart to be for a moment united with the Infinite and the good, a humbleness that needs no abasement or speech to express it, a cry in the darkness for help when all seems lost, a song, a poem, a kind deed, a reaching for beauty, or the strong, quiet, inner reaffirmation of faith."**Prayer As Listening** Another reason we fail to fully appropriate the power of God in our lives through prayer is a secondary reaction to the first cause. Because we put so much emphasis upon talking to God, we fail to put proper emphasis upon listening to God. Suppose you wanted to learn to play the organ and made an appointment with Mark Hallett. When you arrived for your

lesson, you spent the whole half hour rattling on and on so Mark couldn't get a word in edgewise. (Now, I don't think that could happen, but let's pretend it could.) Then suppose after all your talking you went off and someone asked you, "Did he give you any help?" And you answered, "No, not a bit." Well, you see, the difficulty would lie, not in Mark's teaching technique, but in your failure to allow him to put it to work in your life. That's how many of us pray and then we wonder why God gives us no help. Again we completely ignore the spirit of Jesus' prayer life. Take a look at the prayers of Jesus. On one occasion we are told He spent forty days alone with God. Yet only a few "words" He uttered are recorded. On another occasion when He was at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane He spent an hour alone with God. Yet we have just one paragraph of "words" which He spoke. No prayer is worthy of the name unless half of the time is spent in listening. That's why we begin our prayer time on Sunday morning with the Sacrament of Silence. That's why we pause quietly in an attitude of prayer during Communion. Prayer doesn't change God. "Prayer changes things." The things in our lives which are out of focus with His purpose. The things in our lives which are short-circuiting His power. The things in our lives which make it impossible for Him to impart His peace. "Prayer changes things." By getting rid of "things," or bringing them into conformity with the character of Christ, it is possible for God to do in us and for us what He has been longing to do from the very start. But only as God speaks to us and, we listen, can that happen. So we need to cultivate the art of being alone amidst the multitudes. Of pulling down the shades of our soul for a moment of peace and quiet amid the harsh noises of the world. Of closing our ears to the rapid click of the wheels of the commuter train in the morning as we enter with a hush into the Sanctuary of our Soul. There was a time when we could "go into (our) closet, shut the door, and pray" (Matt.6:6). But this crazy world of ours has crowded out most of those opportunities. As one young housewife put it not too long ago, "We don't even have a closet in our apartment. We don't even have a door we can shut!" We live at such a hectic pace. The demands upon our time are terrific and the strains upon our body are stupendous. If we are going to survive our time and grow in grace and in favor with God and people, then we must develop the art of spontaneous prayer...living moment by moment with Christ. A few months ago I came across a little prayer, written anonymously, which has come to mean a great deal to me. So much so, in fact, I had a special copy printed and sealed in plastic

which I carry with me in my pocket all the time. I have found it a great help in the midst of a hurried, harried day. It's called a "**Busy Christian's Prayer**" and goes like this, "Slow me down, Lord: Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my mind. Steady my hurried pace with a vision of the eternal reach of time. Give me, amidst the confusion of my day, the calmness of the everlasting hills. Break the tension of my nerves and muscles with the soothing music of the singing streams that live in my memory. Help me to know the magical, restoring power of sleep. Teach me the art of taking minute vacations, of slowing down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to pat a dog, to read a few lines from a good book. Remind me each day of the fable of the hare and the tortoise, that I may know the race is not always to the swift; that there is more to life than increasing its speed." As I have said, I carry a copy of that prayer, sealed in plastic, in my pocket at all times. Sometimes I refer to it in the midst of a conference or committee meeting. Often, quite by accident, I slip my hand in my pocket and just touching it is a gentle reminder that "the race is not always to the swift and there is more to life than increasing its speed." When I am driving through traffic and draw up to a stop light, I often pull it out and read the lines, "Break the tension of my nerves and muscles with the soothing music of thy singing streams that live in my memory." And my mind races back to those luxurious days spent camping in the rugged, rocky terrain of the high Sierra beside a singing mountain stream. And, as I fill my mind with those sweet memories of quiet, relaxing days, I can literally feel the tension dissipate and leave. Sometimes when the white pages of my little date book are literally black with reminders of things I have to do and places I have to be, I reach in my pocket, pull out this little prayer and read, "Teach me the art of taking minute vacations, of slowing down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to pat a dog, or read a few lines from a good book." And by doing those very things, by taking "minute vacations," by pausing for a moment to step into the quietness of the private chapel of my own soul, I experience a fresh infilling of the power of God in my life. This "**Busy Christian's Prayer**" has come to mean so much to me I have had a special copy printed for you. There are some encased in plastic and these are primarily for you men who wish to carry them in your pockets. The women can put the plain card on the refrigerator, tack it to the wall over your sink, or scotch tape it to your telephone. Put it anywhere you get to see it in the midst of a busy day. It isn't necessary to memorize it, for as the power of this prayer grows upon you,

the mere feel of the card will start the prayer wheels turning and will "ease the pounding of your heart by the quieting of your mind." In other words, I am suggesting you become a "card carrying Christian". It's my earnest hope this little prayer will come to mean as much to you as it does to me. I am convinced that if you let this little prayer be a starter, you will soon learn the secret of spontaneous prayer. Before long you will be sending your own "flash" prayers winging their way to the throne of Grace. There is a famous photograph of King George V taken while he was still living and on one of his visits to the Tyneside Dockyard. It shows him stooping down to talk to a little river boy. While the King is looking away from the camera, and his face cannot be seen, you just know he is smiling because of the expression upon the face of the boy who is looking toward the camera. It is perfectly obvious the little lad is thrilled to be speaking with the king. His eyes are sparkling and there is a huge smile upon his face. "He speaks with the king and reflects the glory of the king!" I think it is something like that with us when we pray. By coming into close communion with Christ, by basking in the warmth of His smile, by entering into the comfort and security of His love through prayer, something happens within us. The burdens lighten. The tensions dissipate. The clouds lift. The darkness flees. The light brightens. Our faith stiffens. Our courage mounts. Our vision grows. And our countenance reflects the fact that we have seen the King. **What More Could You Ask?** than this which God has already given you. Through the indescribable generosity of Jesus you have this promise, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." **ASSIGNMENT FOR THE WEEK** Begin a more active prayer life by offering "flash" prayers, "thought" prayers, or "minute" prayers for those around you. Pause to pray spontaneously for the fellow sitting next to you on the train, for the one you read about in the newspaper, etc. This Key Of The Kingdom called Prayer will enable you to be more successful in the use of the other keys: faith, forgiveness and love.