

Be Careful What You Don't Ask For

In the name of him who is called “Immanuel”, “God with us”, dear friends in Christ: I’m willing to bet that at some time in the last month and a half or so just about all of you have had one or more persons ask this question: “What would you like me to give you for Christmas?” How many were asked? Go ahead and raise your hands. Okay. Now let me ask this: How many were asked by more than one person? All right, here’s another question: those of you who were asked by more than one person, how many of you tailored your response depending on whom it was that asked? That is, did you give different answers to different people?

Sure, it only makes sense that some of you would. In my own situation, I’d give a different response to my wife, say, than I would to my daughters or to my mother—that is, if any of them had bothered to ask, which I don’t recall that they did; but that’s not my point. My point is that in most cases you’re going to take into consideration things like the nature of the relationship you have with the person who asks, and what that person’s relative means are, and probably several other factors when formulating a response. A mother is not going to tell her five-year-old who asks that she’d like an expensive string of pearls for Christmas, but she might very well suggest it to her husband. From the child she might ask for a big hug instead, or perhaps a little more diligence when putting toys away. But you can see what I’m saying: when answering the question “What do you want for Christmas?” it’s necessary to take into account a lot of things which include the potential giver’s closeness to you and their capacity and willingness to give—and, it’s worth saying, what that person would enjoy giving to you, that is what the person might want you to have as a manifestation of their love and esteem for you. A gift always says a lot about the character and heart of the giver.

With this in mind, then, let me ask the big question: What if the Lord were asking what you want for Christmas? How would you respond to him? And please understand, this is not merely a hypothetical question. The Lord loves you and delights in giving you things – not just at Christmas, but all the time. And you know he’s got some pretty deep pockets. Even the sky is not the limit with him. He can give you anything your heart desires. Still, I’m asking what you want from him specifically at Christmas – a gift that you need and that says something about him and what he might like you to have as a manifestation of his love. Think about that.

And as you do, bear in mind that it’s necessary to be careful what you ask for. The Bible gives us several examples of people who got what they wanted from the Lord only to discover that what they wanted didn’t make them happy. King Solomon is a case in point. He asked the Lord for wisdom and got it. But for all his wisdom, he ended up making a lot of dumb mistakes. And if you’ve ever read through the book of Ecclesiastes, you know that his great wisdom brought him to almost the point of despair. I know personally of someone who prayed to the Lord for more patience. And the Lord delivered. How? By putting that person in situations that called for greater patience. If you want to grow a muscle, you have to exercise it. Think about that next time you pray for more faith or the grace to forgive your enemies. Don’t get me wrong: these things are good; but how do you suppose the Lord is going to give them to you? By putting you in situations that demand more faith and by giving you more enemies and more egregious offenses for which to forgive them. So, be careful what you ask for – because you might very well get it.

At the same time, however, I think it's only fair to warn you that it's also necessary to be careful what you *don't* ask for. James, in his Epistle, says "You have not because you ask not." The indication is that there are good gifts that we could have from the Lord which we don't receive because we don't ask for them. Why don't we ask? Well, it could be that we don't believe we'll get them – which means that we believe instead that the Lord is stingy or unconcerned or too weak to deliver; none of which casts him in a very good light. Or maybe, and here's my real concern today, it's that we don't want them. I mean, don't you find yourself sometimes thinking, "You know, I want just enough of Christianity to get by. I want to be safe; but not a saint. I don't want to grow at all. I like my life pretty much as it is, and so I really don't want a closer walk with the Lord or to be more faithful or more fruitful or to grow in Christian virtues or to become a better witness because it would mean upsetting my life and the way I do things now. Besides, people might think I've become a religious fanatic. No, just give me the minimum dose of all this God stuff. That's enough for me."

What do you suppose the Lord thinks of an attitude like that? Here the Lord, the King of all Creation, reaches out to you in his love, longing for a closer relationship with you, wanting to be with you personally and intimately in all that you think, say, and do, and you're like, "Eh, naw. No thanks. Keep it. I don't need it. I've got enough of you in my life already." What does the Lord think? We get an answer in today's Old Testament lesson.

And I'm sorry, but to really understand what's going on here, I'm going to have to explain some history. The year is 725 BC. It's the time of the divided kingdom. You've got the Kingdom of Judah, whose territory corresponds to roughly the southern half of what is the modern-day Israel, and the northern Kingdom of Israel which corresponds to the upper half of modern Israel. Judah, in the south, is ruled over by kings of the house of David – but the glory of those days that the kingdom enjoyed under David and Solomon, his son, 250 years earlier are but distant memories. Now it happens that over the years some of the kings of Judah have been good, godly men, who worshipped the Lord and tried their best to serve him, and others, well, not so much. The present king, Ahaz, falls into the latter category. He's a bad king. More on him in a bit.

The northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital of Samaria, has only had bad kings, especially from a spiritual standpoint. Some were successful leaders in worldly terms; but all of them freely mixed the worship of the one true God with all kinds of pagan gobbledygook and idolatry and encouraged their people to do the same. They've had a long history of leading their country farther from the Lord. All right, east and some to the north of the Kingdom of Israel is the nation of Syria, with its capital of Damascus. This was a purely pagan nation. They worshipped false gods and idols. Syria was often at war with Israel, but they weren't at this particular point in history. And that's because both the northern Kingdom of Israel and Syria had been conquered by the big superpower of the day, which was the Empire of Assyria. Assyria was centered around where Iraq is today; but it had, through military conquest, expanded its frontiers far beyond that, capturing and gobbling up lots of other countries, like Syria and the northern Kingdom of Israel.

What this meant was that the conquered countries had to pay the King of Assyria an annual tribute of gold, silver, grain and other commodities, and, of course slaves – citizens handed over to do all the low and dirty work for their Assyrian masters. So, you might think of the Assyrians as the ancient world's big bully on the playground who takes all the other kids' lunch money; and if they don't pay, he beats them up again because he wants to be feared. In fact, the Assyrians were particularly known for their cruelty. They wanted the nations they conquered to be terrified of them precisely so that they would be afraid not to pay their annual

tribute. So they developed all kinds of horrible tortures and committed atrocities on whole cities that stepped out of line. They were pure evil. They made the kinds of things the Nazis did look kind by comparison.

But the strength of nations waxes and wanes. Over time, if the bully doesn't have to beat anyone up for a while, he might get fat and lazy. And when that happens, some of the kids on the playground might think, "Hey, if we work together and join forces, we might be able to defend ourselves against the bully and keep our lunch money." That's exactly what Syria and the northern Kingdom of Israel did. They secretly decided to rebel against Assyria. They thought that if they both refused to pay the annual tribute and joined their forces, they could fight off an Assyrian army if it came. But in order to do it, to have a big enough army to get the bully to back down, they decided they needed the help of the King of Judah, our friend Ahaz. They secretly sent a message asking him to join their cause. They said, join us in our fight against the big bully. Together we can lick him. King Ahaz, who was a fearful, weak and vacillating man, said, no way. It's not my fight. I'm not getting involved. They responded, what, you think the bully is going to leave you alone forever? You're next on his list. If you don't join us, you'll soon be paying tribute just like we are. Still Ahaz said no. Then the two kings sent him a message that said, look, if you don't join us voluntarily, we're going to attack you, kill you, and put a guy on the throne of Judah who will cooperate with us.

This is the backdrop of today's Old Testament lesson. King Ahaz is terrified. He's afraid to join the two neighboring kings against the Assyrians, and he's afraid of what they will do if he doesn't. The latter is the more immediate threat. Enter the prophet Isaiah. He goes to Ahaz and says, "Don't worry. The Lord is with us. He told me that he won't let Judah fall. All we have to do is trust him." Ah, but Ahaz didn't want to trust the Lord. He wanted to trust in his own wits and his skills of political wheeling and dealing, which, unfortunately, were minimal; but he didn't think so. In fact, he had a plan to save himself. He sent envoys to the King of Assyria – yes, to the big evil bully. He sent these envoys along with a huge payment of gold and some sacred articles that he had taken from the Lord's Temple. Through his messengers, Ahaz revealed to the king of Assyria the secret plan of his neighbors to rebel and he begged him to come defend him against their attack. Ahaz told the King of Assyria, "We'll gladly be your subjects if you save us from this threat." And you need to see that this is like making a pact with the devil. It's like having rats in your house and letting loose a tiger to deal with them. Oh sure, he'll make short work of the rats; but once he's had his appetizer, you're next on the menu.

The Lord revealed to Isaiah Ahaz's supposedly brilliant solution. So again the prophet went to the king and said (and yes, I'm paraphrasing here a bit), "Are you out of your mind? We don't need help from Assyria. We *don't want* help from Assyria because if they come, they'll stay and we won't like that." (Just an aside here, it's like those scary words, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help you.") Anyway, Isaiah went on, "Look, I know that you don't trust the Lord to save us, so ask for a sign. You name it: it can be anything from the deepest pit of hell to the highest height of heaven. The Lord wants to prove to you that you can trust him – so that you will know that he is with us and he will defend us from all our enemies."

That was the Lord's offer: ask for anything you want to prove my faithfulness; but as we heard, Ahaz refused to ask. He didn't want a sign. He tried to make it sound like he was doing the right thing, "Oh no, not me, I won't put the Lord to the test. That's a sin. God doesn't have to prove himself to me." But what he really meant was, "I've already made up my mind to do it my way. No sign from God will change my decision. *I will not trust the Lord to save us.*"

That was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Isaiah said, "It's bad enough that you've driven your people to frustration with your no-backbone, wishy-washy flip-flopping; but now you're trying even the patience of the Lord. So fine; have it your way. But know this: The Lord is going to give you a sign anyway. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel (that is, God is with us) ... and before that boy is old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the two kingdoms you're so worried about now will be totally destroyed. And you'll get what you brought on yourself and us: some of the absolute worse days we've ever known in our history, hard times of misery and affliction when the king of Assyria comes.

Now, apparently Isaiah had a young woman with him when he said this – the virgin to which he referred, because immediately in the next chapter of his book, he tells how he went into her chamber and she did indeed conceive a child – a son born nine months later – whom Isaiah understood to be fulfillment of what he prophesied. The child was the sign that God is with his people. And sure enough, before that boy was old enough to know the difference between good and evil, that is, within a couple years, both of the kingdoms that had threatened Judah lay in ruins. They never even began to mount the attack that Ahaz was so worried about. Oh, and the King of Assyria came, as foretold, and he made life miserable for Ahaz and God's people – which could have been avoided if only Ahaz had asked for a sign to bolster his faith so that he could trust the Lord to save.

This is what I meant earlier when I said, "Be careful what you *don't* ask for". The Lord has any number of gifts that he wants very much to give us, gifts that will help us grow in Christian faith and life, in fruitfulness and godly living, in the power and boldness of our witness, and in such virtues as kindness, compassion, self-control, patience, and steadfast faith to name but a few. And to prove his earnest, he has given us a sign – a sign that is much more than a sign, one that the child given to Isaiah only foreshadowed. God has given us his Son, born of a virgin, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is true God, begotten of his Father from eternity, so he is rightly called Immanuel, God with Us. And he also is true man, born of woman, born in flesh to take upon himself our sin and die in order to save us.

This, more than anything, is the gift the Lord wants to give you for Christmas. He wants to give you Jesus. He wants to give you the perfect life Jesus lived for you. He wants to give you the forgiveness Jesus' death upon the cross won for you. He wants to give you the power of Jesus' resurrection to rise from your old life of sin and walk with him who is God with us. He wants to give you through Jesus the Holy Spirit to equip and empower you to live as a child of God and grow daily in grace that produces the fruit of faith. All this and more he wants to give to you.

So let us not be like fearful Ahaz who refused to trust the Lord, who refused the Lord's offer to prove his faithfulness, who thought he could do it on his own, who tried to work out his own plan of salvation, who didn't need any more of a God who is with us, and who was brought to ruin on account of it. This Christmas, and on all the days that follow, let's not hold back. Let's take the Lord's offer. Let's ask for Jesus, for the Lord will surely give him to us and fill our lives with him. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!