

Most often we think this way when something bad happens. We say things like, "If God was really a loving God (or really existed, or really cared about me or was really powerful), God would not have let that happen to me." What we're really saying is, "I had a deal with God. I kept my side of the bargain, but God didn't."

When we say it right out like that, we can see the problem with it, but it's easy to fall into that kind of expectation. In fact, there's even a Bible verse that seems to lend itself to such an approach. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus says, *Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.* In context the verse is not meant as a guarantee that no matter what you ask for you will get, but it could read that way.

The fact is the Bible takes a dim view of this business of trying to manipulate God. *Do not put the LORD your God to the test* (Deut. 6:16). Jesus cites this same text when tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:7). Our reading from Acts gives another example.

Until the arrival of Philip, Simon the magician amazed the residents of Samaria with his tricks. He persuaded them that he was *someone great* (v. 9). He was so convincing that folks thought Simon was himself *the power of God* (v. 10). But when Philip came to town preaching about Jesus, many in Samaria, including Simon, believed. In Simon's case, however, the Bible suggests that his conversion was, in part, because he was dazzled by the healings that Philip performed. Still, when Philip baptized the new converts, Simon accepted baptism as well.

Then, Peter and John came to Samaria to reinforce Philip's work, and Simon got even more interested! The two apostles prayed for the Holy Spirit to descend, and many of the converts (but not Simon) were filled with the Spirit. When Simon saw this demonstration of the *real* power of God, he pulled out his wallet and offered to pay Peter and John if they would but teach him how to bring the Holy Spirit upon people, too.

For this, Simon gets a severe scolding from the apostle Peter. *May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!* (v. 20). Peter's words in the original are actually stronger than the translation: in effect, he says, "To hell with your money!" But Peter is just getting started: *Your heart is not right before God*, he yells. *Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness* (vv. 21-23).

Simon wanted to manipulate God. That's a big no-no. You can't use God as a secret weapon, as a personal wizard, or as your private "genie in a bottle." Peter told Simon that his heart was not right before God and urged him to repent, which Simon apparently did, if for no other reason than to avoid bad consequences (v. 24).

The book of Acts tells us no more about Simon, but this story from Acts suggests that we should let God do what God wants to do, and not consider God a "secret weapon" for dealing with hard times, and certainly not our silent partner in a poker game or in the "game" of life.

Simon's motivation in trying to "buy" the Holy Spirit reminds us to reconsider our own motivation in our practice of faith. If we do good deeds to increase God's blessings or God's care for us, we're attempting to manipulate God. If we tithe and give to the poor so that God will bless us financially, our heart is not right toward God. If we seldom miss a Sunday service so that God will be pleased, we're missing the point of worship. Simon's story reminds us that we cannot earn God's favor; but then, we don't need to because God's favor is a gift of his grace.

There's nothing wrong with asking God for what we'd like to have happen. But we need to remember first to seek God's will and not our own wishes. God is able to act through any means God chooses - even through people who seem unlikely candidates to us - but the decision to act is never ours to command. And, with that understanding, we can offer ourselves to be conduits of God's grace, and maybe even ask to be recipients of it.

Jesus himself gives us the model. He knew what it was like to surrender to the will of the Father. Remember when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion? He didn't want to die and so he prayed to God, saying, *If it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want* (Matt. 26:39). In other words: Here's what I want, but I am here to do my part in what YOU want.

When we really grasp what the Bible says about God's love for us, we see why bargaining with God or trying to obligate God to what we want is so wrongheaded. God already loves us, and cannot love us more. God already sent Jesus to die for us. What greater love is there? Life does not always go as we want it to. But when we allow God to be God in our lives, we put ourselves where we can be channels through which God works, if God so chooses. Which brings us to today: January 24, 3016, the annual meeting of the congregation. This is the day we recommit ourselves to God's will. Whatever we may want from God, today is the

day we tell God that our lives, our money, our talents, and our church are all God's disposal to use as God sees fit.

One of the amazing things about our God is that he chooses us – you and me – to be partners in the building of God's Kingdom. So, let's not bargain with God or present a list of requests before we'll serve: rather than trying to force God's hand, let's take God's hand and walk boldly with God into the future God has planned for us.

Prayer: Lord, if what I seek be according to our will, then let it come to pass and let success attend the outcome. But if not, my God, let it not come to pass. Do not leave me to my own devices, for you know how unwise I can be. Keep me safe under your protection Lord my God, and in your own gentle way guide me and rule me as you know best. Amen.

Sources:

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Forcing God's Hand

Sunday, January 24, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Acts 8:9-25

Back in July, when tennis great Serena Williams won at Wimbledon, she exclaimed, "I want to thank Jehovah God." It's not uncommon for professional athletes to express gratitude to God for a successful play in their field of competition, but in Williams' case, whoever wrote the headline about her post-match victory exclamation seriously misunderstood what these expressions of faith really mean.

The headline read, "Wimbledon winner Serena Williams' secret weapon: 'Jehovah God.'" It was the headline, no doubt written by an editor, which caught my attention. Did Williams really believe that God was her "secret weapon"? No. We were misled. The article explained Williams' involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses and her faith in God, but it never described God as "a weapon" in some sort of arsenal to which the tennis star has access. Whoever wrote the headline sacrificed accuracy in favor of a punchy eye-catcher. But it made me think: how great would it be if we could control God's actions, force God's hand? Wouldn't it be awesome if God could be persuaded to do *whatever* we wanted, *whenever* we wanted it?

I suspect there are times when we all wish God was more like a genie in a bottle, granting our every wish: helping us to pass a test when we didn't study; giving us the words when we have writer's block; healing us when the cancer returns; rewarding us when we're up for a promotion or a raise.

At other times we try to make deals with God. A cartoon a few years ago showed a man playing poker, pushing money into the pot. A bubble above his head showed that he was silently praying, "Lord, if you just let me win this hand, I promise I'll never gamble again." Perhaps we think of religion itself as a kind of bargain with God. We attend church, pray, go the extra mile, live an upright life and so on, and, in return, we want God to make sure that things go well for us.