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CONFIDENCE AND CAREFULNESS IN PRAYER

1 John 5:14-17

By

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June 11, 2006
1 John Lesson 24

Confidence and Carefulness in Prayer
1 John 5:14-17

Last week I cited Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who viewed 1 John 5:6-8 as the three most difficult verses in 1 John, and perhaps in the entire Bible. I find our current text *far* more difficult to understand than those verses! In verses 14 & 15, I struggle to understand how the promise really applies, because frankly, it does not line up with my experience. In verse 16, I struggle to understand the exact meaning of the “sin unto death,” and thus I’m not sure how to apply this to my prayer life.

So today I face a difficult task. I’m sure that John wrote these verses to encourage us to pray, and so I want to encourage you to pray more faithfully. God is a prayer-hearing God (Ps. 65:2). But at the same time, I can’t gloss over the tremendous difficulty that our text creates for my prayer life. It is simply *not* true to my experience. John, who is echoing here the repeated promises of Jesus (Mark 11:22-24; John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:24), says that if we ask *anything* according to God’s will, He will answer *favorably*. “No” is not an acceptable answer. It must be “yes” every time!

Over the years, my “prayer batting average” is pretty low. I have prayed for the salvation of people who have not gotten saved. I have prayed for the restoration of sinning Christians, who have not repented and been restored. I have prayed for the reconciliation of many Christian marriages that have broken up. Some try to get God off the hook by saying, “He gives people free will.” But if God cannot subdue a sinful person’s will, then He can’t do anything! That means that sinful man, not God, is sovereign! And it means that prayer is useless and impotent. If God promises to answer our prayers, then He has the power to answer them!

I’m sure that the fault is with me, not with God’s promise! I am probably lacking in understanding God’s perfect will and lacking in faith. But I could not find any preachers on this text who admit to having the difficulties that I have. So this has not been an easy message to prepare, because if I’m honest, I have to expose my own failures in prayer to you! My prayer has been that perhaps

by sharing my struggles, you will be motivated to keep “swinging” in your prayer life. Maybe we’ll all improve our batting averages!

Verse 14 is closely connected with verse 13 (The Greek text opens with the word, “And”). Confidence in prayer is founded on the assurance that you have eternal life. If you do not have eternal life, there is no way that you can pray according to the will of God, except to pray that God would save you from your sins. The promise of our text is only for God’s children. The promise is:

As believers we have confidence that God will answer our prayers, if we pray carefully according to His will.

Our text falls into two sections. First (5:14-15), John states the general principle, which has both a promise and a qualification. Then (5:16-17), he gives a specific example of how we should apply the promise, and again he gives a promise and a qualification. In each section, we have to grapple with a difficult problem.

1. The general principle: If we ask anything according to God’s will, He hears and grants our requests (5:14-15).
 - A. The promise: When we pray, God hears us and we have the requests that we ask of Him.

John has already brought up this idea of having confidence in prayer and of a promise of answered prayer, if we are obedient to God (3:21-22). Here, he repeats it for emphasis. Prayer is not optional for God’s children. It is absolutely essential, because if you do not pray, you are not living by faith in God. If you do not pray, you are trusting in yourself, which is exactly how the world lives. Note five things about this prayer promise:

- (1) We should have *confidence* when we approach God in prayer.

Our confidence is never in ourselves, but rather in Christ. After reminding us of our sympathetic high priest, the author of Hebrews states (4:16), “Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (see also, Eph. 3:12). Our confidence is never in anything in ourselves, but only in Jesus Christ, whose blood gives us access to the very throne of God.

- (2) We must *come into His presence* when we pray.

We have confidence *before Him* (5:14). Prayer is not just mumbling through a list or repeating some rote formula. Prayer is coming before the living God, humbling ourselves in His presence. If we have not come before God, we haven't prayed.

- (3) We must come confidently into His presence and *ask*.

As James (4:2) pointedly reminds us, "You do not have because you do not ask." He adds (4:3), "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." We need to be sure to ask (not assume), but we need to ask with the proper motives, that our requests would further God's purpose and glory.

- (4) If we ask anything according to His will, *He hears us*.

I'll deal with the condition in a moment, but for now I'm focusing on the promise that *He hears us*. Since God hears *everything* and even knows the unspoken secrets of our hearts, John means that He *hears us favorably* by coming to our aid. I've been at church gatherings where many children were playing as the adults sat eating or talking. Suddenly one mother jumped up and ran for her child. Why? Because she heard his cry. None of the other parents heard the cry, or if they did, they knew that it was not their child. But the mother knows the cry of her own child, and she responds to his need. Our heavenly Father knows the cry of His children. He hears our prayers.

- (5) If we know that He hears us, "we know *that we have* the requests which we have asked from Him" (5:15).

The idea of verse 15 is that we know that we *presently* have whatever we have asked in accord with His will. We may not actually see it for many years, but it's as good as done. Abraham prayed for a son and God promised to give him that son. But it was 25 years before Abraham held Isaac in his arms. There is much in Scripture about waiting on God. So we would be mistaken to think that God is promising that if we pull the prayer lever, all the goodies instantly come out of the chute. Sometimes in His purpose and wisdom, God delays the answers to our prayers for years. Yet, in another sense, He has already granted the requests.

Usually, we should continue praying until the request is actually granted (Luke 18:1-8). At other times (I can't give you a rule for this), you should stop praying and begin thanking God, even though you haven't yet received what you were praying for.

B. The qualification: We must ask according to God's will.

Many who do not know God pray, but they are not seeking God's will in prayer. Rather, they are trying to use Him (whoever they conceive Him to be) to get what they want. But biblical prayer is *not* trying to talk God into giving us what *we* want. Rather, it is submitting our will to His will. It is praying, as Jesus instructed (Matt. 6:10), "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

It would be the height of stupidity to pray for your will to be done as opposed to God's will. For one thing, it would mean that you know better than God what is best for your life. But He knows everything and He has assured us that He loves us far more than the best earthly father loves his children. So it only makes sense to submit to and pray for His will for your life and for others. Also, to pray for your will against God's will would be asking God to abdicate His sovereignty over the universe and submit to you as the sovereign! Again, this would be the epitome of stupidity!

But, the difficulty is, *how do we determine what God's will is* so that we pray in line with it? Are we talking about His *will of decree* or His *will of desire*? God's will of decree is what He has determined to do. In this sense, God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). Everything that happens takes place because God decreed it. If anything could happen outside of His will, then He would not be in control of the universe. He would not be the sovereign who plans it and does it (Isa. 46:9-11).

God's will of desire, however, is different than His will of decree. God does not in any sense desire that men sin, and yet in His will of decree, He permitted the fall of man and He ordained the cross as the means of rescuing us from sin. But although God ordained these events, He did not cause Adam and Eve to sin. He was not responsible for the evil men that crucified Jesus (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). They sinned because of their own evil desires. God took no delight in their sin. He hates sin. Yet, He ordained that Jesus had to die at the hands of sinners.

Here's the difficulty when it comes to praying for God's will: It is God's will of desire that all men be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). Yet, we know that in His decree, God has willed to save only His elect (Rom. 9:9-24). So it would be going against God's will of decree to pray, "God, save everyone in the world." (In fact, Jesus excluded the world in His prayer; John 17:9). But, we should pray, "God, save my loved one," and, "Save my neighbor." The problem is, I cannot know in advance whether or not He will do it, because I do not know His will of decree. So I ask, but I have to say, "Not my will, but Yours, be done."

Also, it is difficult to pray according to God's will because His ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9), and we often think that He has to work in the way that makes sense to us. If I had been a disciple of John the Baptist, I would have been praying that he be released from prison and have many more years of effective ministry. God's way was to have a drunken, lustful king make a stupid promise that resulted in John getting his head lopped off!

If I had been the apostle John, I would have prayed for God to spare my brother, James. After all, he was one of the inner circle of three disciples who were especially close to Jesus. His gifts were needed in the early church. But God permitted Herod to put James to death, but He sent His angel to deliver Peter from the same fate (Acts 12:1-17). Although Scripture does not say that John was praying for his brother's release, I could not imagine anything else. Yet, his request was not granted, because it was not God's will!

One more example, which I used when we studied 3:22: If I had heard that Satan was asking permission to sift Peter like wheat, I would have prayed that Peter be able to resist the devil's attack. But, Jesus didn't pray for that. Rather, He prayed that Peter's faith would not ultimately fail, and that after he was restored, he might strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-32).

I hope that I'm not discouraging you from praying, but I want you to understand that while God promises to grant our requests when we ask according to His will, it's not a simple, "name it and claim it," process. God's will is that His kingdom *will* come, and yet the outworking of His will involves thousands of years and many setbacks. We must persevere in prayer even when we do not understand God's will or His ways.

That's the general principle, that if we ask anything according to God's will, He hears and grants our requests. Then John gives a specific example:

2. The specific example: We should pray for God to give life to those who are in sin (5:16-17).

Again, John gives a promise and then a qualification.

- A. The promise: If we pray for a person who is not committing a sin unto death, God will give life to him.

John does *not* say, "If anyone sees his brother sinning, go tell the pastor so he can deal with it." Nor does he say, "If anyone sees his brother sinning, call up all of your friends and tell them about it so that they can pray." That is a thin spiritual cover for gossip. Nor does he say, "If anyone sees his brother sinning, he should shake his head in disgust and ask, 'How could he do such a thing?'" That is called "judging your brother."

Rather, he says that if you see a brother in sin, pray for God to give life to him. While we all are responsible for our own sins, only God can truly deliver us from sin, because only God can impart life. So we're dependent on God to deliver, but at the same time the sinning brother is responsible to turn from his sin and take the necessary steps not to fall into it again. Also, before we speak to a brother about his sin, we need to speak to God about the brother. Prayer is essential in the restoration process!

But, John's words set up an interpretive dilemma. If this person is a *brother*, then why does he need *life*? Don't believers already have new life from God? This had led interpreters into two camps. Some say that John is using the word "brother" loosely, to refer to a *professing* Christian, who is not truly saved. They interpret *life* to mean conversion, moving from spiritual death to spiritual life (see 3:14). But others say that *brother* means a true Christian, and thus they interpret *life* to mean either restoration to fellowship with God or preservation of *physical* life. To probe further, we need to consider the qualification:

- B. The qualification: The promise does not apply to a person committing a sin unto death.

John makes it clear (5:17) that while all unrighteousness is sin, some sins lead to death, whereas other sins are not unto death. John does not forbid praying for someone committing a sin leading to death, but he does not extend the promise that God will grant life to such persons.

The difficult question is, *what is a sin unto death?* Apparently, John's readers knew what he meant (since he doesn't explain it), but we do not. There are four main views, but I'll warn you in advance, no view resolves all the problems (see John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], pp. 191 and James Boice, *The Epistles of John* [Zondervan], pp. 172-175):

- (1) The "sin unto death" is some terrible sin that God will not forgive.

Tertullian taught that some sins, such as murder, idolatry, fraud, denial of Christ, blasphemy, adultery, and fornication could not be committed by true Christians, and that God would not forgive these sins (cited by B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* [Eerdmans], p. 211). The Roman Catholic Church divides sins into venial sins, which can be forgiven, and mortal sins that result in spiritual death. But the Bible makes no such distinctions, and if Tertullian's list were applied to those in the Bible, David, Solomon, Peter, and Paul would all be in hell! We can reject this view.

- (2) The "sin unto death" is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Jesus warned the Pharisees about this sin (Matt. 12:31-32) and said that it could never be forgiven. Jesus was referring to the continued, willful rejection of Him and attributing His works to Satan. John Stott argues that it is such hardened, willful rejection of known truth that constitutes the sin unto death. He also argues that both groups of sinners here are unbelievers, because God will give *life* to those not committing the sin unto death. This implies that they were spiritually dead.

So for those whose sin is not unto death (those not blaspheming against the Holy Spirit), believers may pray and God will save the sinner (give him life). For those blaspheming the Spirit, there is no promise of life in response to our prayers. They have hardened themselves beyond the possibility of salvation.

There are several problems with this view. You have to understand *brother* to refer to unbelievers. And, the promise seems to *guarantee* salvation for everyone that you pray for who has not yet committed the unpardonable sin, which doesn't fit reality. Also, God has saved some pretty hardened unbelievers, such as the apostle Paul, who was a blasphemer (1 Tim. 1:13). Of course, John doesn't forbid prayer for such, but only limits the promise to the other group.

- (3) The "sin unto death" refers to apostasy from the faith.

Some say that true believers can lose their salvation. But, this goes against the truth that God keeps all whom He saves, which 1 John 5:18 goes on to affirm (also, John 10:28-29 and many other texts). But the Bible does describe those who make a *profession* of faith and look like believers for a while. But then they turn from the faith, showing that they were not truly born of God (Mark 4:3-20; Acts 8:9-24; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 2 Pet. 2:1, 20-22). The context of 1 John, with the false teachers who had been a part of the fellowship, but who had denied the faith, lends support to this view. Again, John is not saying that we should not pray for such apostates, but he is not extending the promise of God's giving life to these people.

This view has the same problem as the second view, that it guarantees *life* to all that we pray for, as long as they have not gone into total apostasy. And, in some cases, *life* would refer to restoration of fellowship to sinning believers, not to salvation.

- (4) The "sin unto death" is physical death inflicted on believers who persist in some sin.

In 1 Corinthians 11:30, Paul mentions some who had died because they were partaking of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner (see also, Acts 5:1-11). In this view, John is saying that in the ministry of prayer, some Christians have gone too far. God will not turn back His judgment of physical death, and so it is useless to pray for them. This view takes *brother* in the normal sense, but it has to understand *life* and *death* as physical life and death, not spiritual. The problem with it is, how do you know whether the sinning believer is too far gone to pray for his restoration before you see him

die? So it is a somewhat useless command. I used to be inclined to this view, but I probably now lean to the third view.

Whatever view you take, it is still a difficult promise to apply, because John says that if the person has not sinned unto death, God *will* give life to him. I have not seen the guaranteed results that John promises. I've seen many professing Christians go on in their sin without dying physically or being restored to the faith or getting saved, in spite of my prayers. So I have to confess that there is much that I do not understand about prayer. But even if we cannot understand these difficult verses, we should pray for God to bring sinners to repentance and salvation and leave the results to Him. He alone has the power to deliver from sin.

Conclusion

In 1921, Thomas Edison, with many inventions to his credit, said, "We don't know the millionth part of one percent about anything. We don't know what water is. We don't know what light is. We don't know what gravitation is. We don't know what electricity is. We don't know what heat is. We have a lot of hypotheses about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about all these things deprive us of their use" (cited by Lehman Strauss, *Sense and Nonsense About Prayer* [Moody Press], p. 122).

In the same way, there is much that we do not understand about prayer and we will never understand in this life. But, we should not let that keep us from using it in accordance with what we do know. We do know that if we are children of God, we have confidence before God that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us and will grant our requests. So, let us pray at all times and not lose heart (Luke 18:1)!

Application Questions

1. Does praying, "Your will be done," nullify praying in faith? Why/why not?
2. George Muller prayed confidently for the salvation of specific individuals. Was he presumptuous? How can we know that God will save specific people?
3. If we can't know with certainty God's will, how can we pray in faith? How can we know that He has granted our requests?
4. Is a subjective sense that God has answered our prayer (before we see the results) dangerous? What role do our feelings play in the matter of assurance of answered prayer?

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