

March 6, 2016 by Steve Brandon



Prayer Revisited

1 John 5:14-17

1. The Confidence of Prayer (verses 14-15).

2. The Ministry of Prayer (verses 16-17).

During the month of January this past year, we focused our attention upon the topic of prayer. The month had five Sundays. And so, we preached five topical messages on prayer.

On January 3, 2016, I preached a message entitled, "Circles of Prayer." I spoke of how your prayer life should circle outward. I encouraged you to: Pray Alone, Pray With Your Spouse, Pray With Your Family, and Pray With Your Church.

We have had a great response, in that our prayer meeting on Sunday mornings has grown. If you aren't coming to that meeting, I strongly encourage you to consider it. It is a place where we can bring our needs to God as a church family.

On January 10, 2016, Patrick Loner preached a message entitled, "Devoted to Prayer" from Romans 12:12, which simply reads, "Be devoted to prayer." He exhorted us to that very thing, looking at the many exhortations found in the Bible about prayer. To the end that we would be devoted to prayer.

On January 17, 2016, Phil Guske preached a message entitled, "Praying With Confidence," looking at the Lord's prayer. He exhorted us to pray with confidence, because God commands us to pray (Luke 11:1); because Jesus instructed how to pray (Luke 11:2-4); and because God answers our prayers. In light of God's care for us, we have every reason to pray with confidence.

On January 24, 2016, I preached a message entitled, "Early Church Prayer Meetings." The title of that message wasn't a call to early morning prayer meetings. Rather, it was a look at the prayer meetings of the early church. We found that the early church prayed In Confusion for Direction (Acts 1:14), In Victory for Boldness (Acts 4:23-31), In Danger for Deliverance (Acts 12:12-17), and In Uncertainty for Guidance (Acts 13:1-3). And so should we.

On January 31, 2016 (the last Sunday in January), I preached a message entitled, "How to Pray" from Luke 11:1-4. In that message, I spoke about Praying with a Pattern (Luke 11:2-4). That is, God first and then our needs -- our daily bread, if you will. Pray every day. Pray for the day. Pray all the day.

In focusing on prayer during the month of January, it was my hope and desire that we would become a more dependent people, depending upon the Lord every day and all the day for his supply. Depending on Him individually, as families, and as a church. Praying is important to the Christian life. May the Lord grant to us to be dependent upon him!

Well, this morning as we come to our time in the Scriptures, we come yet again to another passage on prayer. My message this morning is entitled, "Prayer revisited." It comes from 1 John, chapter 5 and verses 14-17.

This title is appropriate because it is an opportunity for us as a church to return to this all-important topic of prayer. But, this title is also appropriate because it is the second time in 1 John that he speaks about prayer. The first time was in chapter 3 and verse 22, "And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him." And now, in our text, John is going to address our prayers again. Let's read our text.

1 John 5:14-17

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

My first point comes from verses 14 and 15. I'm simply calling it ...

1. The Confidence of Prayer (verses 14-15).

1 John 5:14-15

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

I believe that these verses come as a direct result of verse 13. In other words, if we have assurance of our eternal life, then we can have the confidence that God answers our prayers. In fact, that's the verbal link between verses 13 and 14. It's the idea of assurance.

Assurance of eternal life leads to confidence in answered prayer. Did you notice how extensive the promise is here? It's incredible, really.

1 John 5:14-15

... if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

This even includes the prayer for life. Look at verse 16, ...

1 John 5:16

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. ...

Now, we'll talk about that verse in a little bit. But look what it says: a brother (that is, a believer) is sinning in some way. And John says that another person can pray to God on his behalf, and God will give him life. God will listen to the prayers of his people. And God will grant their requests.

We know that God answers prayer for those who are his children. This promise, of course, doesn't include the many billions around the world who make no profession of following Christ. "If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). Nor does the promise include those who are believing in Christ, but are engaged in sin. That's what the Psalmist said in Psalm 66:18, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

In fact, that's part of the premise of why we ought to pray for one another. Verse 16 pictures the person engaged in sin "not leading to death," His prayers will not be heard until the sin is resolved. And another brother comes along and prays for such a one. And God gives him life. And his prayers, presumably, will then be heard again once he is restored to life.

But all of that doesn't negate the overwhelming promise of God in 1 John 5:14-15 to answer our prayers.

1 John 5:14-15

... if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

Now, there is one caveat given in these verses regarding God answering our prayer. It's the four words, "according to his will." See, God isn't going to answer all of our requests that we make to him. Rather, he will answer those requests that are "according to his will." And these, he will answer freely.

Consider your children. They are "asking machines." They will ask and ask and ask and ask. They will ask if their friends can come over. They will ask if you will purchase them a new basketball or a new Lego set or a pair of shoes or some new clothes or a bunk bed or a bike or a camera or a computer or an iPhone or a car. As they get older, their requests only get more expensive! They will ask if can order pizza tonight. They will ask if we can go skiing next weekend. They will ask if we can take a vacation to Walt Disney World.

And parents, when do you answer the requests of your children? When it's according to your will. When their request meets up with your plan, it becomes "the plan." And you make it happen.

You go to the store to purchase the new clothes. You look on craigslist for the camera deal. You search Orbitz for some cheap plane tickets. You make it happen when their request meets up with your plan.

And this is what God does with our prayers. We pray to God "according to his will" (1 John 5:14). And as our requests line up with his will, he answers our prayers. At least, that's the promise of verses 14 and 15, ...

1 John 5:14-15

... if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

This is the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, ...

Matthew 6:9-10

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Our heart's desire is that God's will be done. And so, we pray. We pray for God to accomplish his will. And our requests are what we want. And our requests are our desires. And we submit them to the plan of God, just like any child does with his parent. "God, this is what we want. Will you do this for us? Is this in your plan? Is this your will for our life?"

There are times when we aren't particularly fond of his will, but we must learn to accept it. That's how Jesus prayed. Remember in the garden, when Jesus was soon to be betrayed by Judas Iscariot? When Jesus was soon to be crucified upon the cross? Jesus knew that this was coming. He told his disciples, ...

Matthew 20:17-19

Jesus ... took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

And yet, when it came down to it, Jesus desired a different reality. He said, ...

Matthew 26:39

"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

Isn't it interesting that Jesus prayed contrary to the will of God? He knew that he would have to drink the cup. He knew that this is why he came to earth, to die for our sins upon the cross. He knew that "his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father" (John 13:1).

Still, Jesus, in his humanness, prayed for a way out: "Let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39). And he prayed this fervently. Luke, the doctor, noticed how "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). And yet, Jesus submitted his will to the will of the Father, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

What a great pattern of prayer for us. To see that even Jesus brings his prayer to God, and sees it unanswered, because it wasn't in the will of God.

And God has his reasons for not answering our prayers. Do you remember Paul's "thorn in the flesh"? (2 Corinthians 12:7). We don't know if it was a physical ailment or if it was a difficult person. or a demonic being. But, what we do know is that it was painful. And we know that Paul desperately wanted to be rid of it. And so, he prayed "that it should leave" him (2 Corinthians 12:8). And God said, "No." And so, Paul prayed again "that it should leave" him. And God said, "No." And Paul prayed again "that it should leave" him. And God said, "No."

Three times he prayed. Three times God said, "No." The deal was that it wasn't according to God's will for the thorn to be removed. God's will was that Paul's thorn would remain.

He explained to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). In other words, the thorn was "character building."

And aren't there "character building" reasons why you don't answer every desire that your child brings to you? If you would answer every desire of your child, your child would become a spoiled brat, destined for trouble. Instead, there are things that you withhold for their good. And there are hardships that you bring upon them (like chores that build responsibility) for their good.

And that's what God was doing with the apostle Paul. It wasn't his will to take the thorn away, because God wanted Paul to be weak. Because then, God's power would work through Paul in mighty ways. And when Paul understood this, he said, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

And when it comes to our praying, I say, pray big! And accept God's answer. You never know when your request will align with God's will. Because, when it does, it will be answered. Of this, you can be sure.

1 John 5:14-15

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

This week, I prayed big. I prayed big for a small concern of mine.

I take you back to Monday night. As most of you know, I'm in the midst of a Doctor of Ministry program through Southern Seminary. It's a very practical degree program intended to help our church. For the degree, I have to do a project, and this project is designed to help strengthen a weakness of ours at the church. I'm in the beginning phases of this degree. My project hasn't yet been finalized.

Anyway, this past Tuesday, I had a paper due. And I had a bunch of meetings all lined up for Tuesday. It's sort of typical for my Tuesdays. It's when I try to have "death by meetings." This past Tuesday, I had a breakfast meeting. I had a lunch meeting. I had a Kids KLUB after school. I had a meeting before dinner. I had a meeting after dinner. And my paper was due at 11pm on Tuesday evening. And late Monday evening, I wasn't quite done with my paper. I needed every last bit of Tuesday that I could afford.

Anyway, do any of you remember what was taking place on Monday evening. There was a big winter storm brewing. And there was large

possibility that school would be canceled. And if school was cancelled, Kids KLUB would be canceled. And it would free up my schedule to the point where I could finish my paper on time.

And I remember that evening as Yvonne and I were praying together that evening before bed, that I prayed, "Lord, please bring the snow. Please cancel school. You know how incredibly helpful it would be to me if school would be canceled."

Now, is that audacious, or what? I was praying to the God of the universe to control the weather patterns in the world for my benefit. It's no doubt that God controls the weather. Psalm 135:6-7 says this, ...

Psalm 135:6-7
Whatever the LORD pleases, he does,
in heaven and on earth,
in the seas and all the deeps.
He it is who makes the clouds rise
at the end of the earth,
who makes lightings for the rain
and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.

But, what was in doubt is whether or not he would do it for me. For all I know, there were believers in Rockford who were praying for no snow. The city official, who didn't want to get out and plow the roads, because his work load was already maxed out. The working mother, who had no more personal days left to stay at home with the children. The lawyer, who had to drive downtown Chicago for an important meeting in the morning and didn't want to battle the slow drive in.

For all I know, there were believers in Rockford who were praying for snow. The independent snow removal worker, who would be paid for plowing the snow that day. The high school student, who was facing a test the next day, for which she was unprepared. The 3rd grader, who wanted to go out and play in the snow.

But, I prayed to God to let him know my position. I was on the "snow" side last Tuesday. I was on the "lots of snow" side.

Do you remember what happened to the storm? It went north of us. And we didn't have much snow at all on Tuesday morning. And my schedule was full.

And yet, God was gracious. My after-dinner meeting canceled because of sickness. And that extra two hours gave me the time to turn in my paper some 5 minutes before the deadline. I asked that God would change the weather according to his will. And he answered me in his way to show his kindness to me. That's what it means to pray, "according to his will."

I trust that this is how you are praying. I trust that you are letting your requests be made known to God, knowing that if your requests align with his will, they will be answered.

You say, "Well then, what's the use of praying? If God's will is going to be accomplished anyway. Why do I need to pray?" Because, God's will is that you pray. And God's will is that he answers your prayers for his will.

In fact, in verses 16 and 17, we see an instance where God says that he will answer your prayers. We turn now from The Confidence of Prayer (verses 14-15) to ...

2. The Ministry of Prayer (verses 16-17).

Let's read verses 16 and 17, ...

1 John 5:16-17
If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

There are many questions about this text. What is the meaning of "brother"? What is this sin "not leading to death"? What is life? Eternal life? Spiritual life? Physical life? What is the sin that "leads to death"? Why doesn't John say that we should pray for this? Why does John clarify things in verse 17?

The answers to those questions bring many interpretations. I'll do my best to open up these verses. Let's begin by simply walking through these verses, giving the most basic understanding that all interpretations will embrace

There is a "brother" who is sinning. And this sin is of a particular type. It is in the category of the "not-leading-to-death" category of sin. This is contrasted with the sin that does "lead to death," mentioned later in verse 16. Notice at this point that I'm not saying who a brother is, and I'm not saying what this sin is. I'm simply pointing out that John has these two categories of sin.

Anyway, someone comes alongside of this brother and sees that he is committing a "not-leading-to-death" sort of sin. That means it must be an outward sin of some type. It's a sin that is observable for someone to see. It's not a secret sin of the heart. It's something that is clear.

And the presumption here is that the one seeing his brother sin in this way is led to prayer, "he will ask." This may be a command to pray. Or, it may be what love brings him to do. We don't know. But, we do know that he will pray.

And God will answer this prayer of behalf of the sinning brother. And God will "give him life," whatever that life is. And just to be clear, John mentions that this promise comes only "to those who commit sins that do not lead to death."

On the other side, John mentions that there is "sin that leads to death." And if someone is committing such a sin, John places no burden of prayer upon us. He says, "I do not say that one should pray for that."

The presumption is this: that those who are committing a sin leading to death are so far gone, that there is no hope that they will come to life. You can simply let them go. No need to pray. God's mind is made up. He will not change. Their future is secure.

Now, just to be clear, John brings up this matter of sin again in verse 17. "All wrongdoing is sin," he says. In other words, John doesn't want for us to think that there is any sin that is acceptable behavior. All sin is wrong. All wrongdoing is sin. But, John says, "there is this category of sin that does not lead to death." On that analysis, all can agree.

Here are some of the interpretations of the sin.

- a. The sin unto death is a denial of Christ—apostasy from the faith.
- b. The sin unto death is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.
- c. The sin is so deadly that it will lead to death (i.e. murder or adultery).
- d. The sin is a willful persistence in the sin.
- e. It is some combination of the above.
- f. It is so undefined that we can't know.

Here are two of the interpretations of why John doesn't command that we should pray. First, don't pray because it is against God's will to give life to such a one. Or second, don't pray because the answer to prayer is so unknown that John can give no assurance.

"Life" also has multiple interpretations here -- Physical life^[1]; Spiritual life; or Eternal life. And any interpretation can grab onto some of these elements to shape the interpretation.

Instead of looking all over the Bible for texts which speak about these different usages of the word, "life," I think it is wise to look at what 1 John says about this matter.

1 John 2:19

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

1 John 3:10

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother

1 John 3:15

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

1 John 4:1-3

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

1 John 5:10-11

Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

So, regarding prayer for these people, let's look at the life of George Mueller. George Mueller started 117 schools, educated 120,000 children and raised. It was all accomplished through prayer.

Mr. Mueller also believed that more than thirty thousand souls came to know Christ in answer to prayer. These didn't include only orphans but also many others for whom he prayed faithfully every day, in some cases for more than 50 years.

"In November 1844, I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals," Mr. Muller said. "I prayed every day without a single intermission." Eighteen months passed before the first was saved. Five years lapsed, then the second was converted. Six years passed before the third was converted. The last two remained unconverted.

Pastor Charles R. Parsons, in an hour interview with George Mueller towards the close of his life, asked him if he spent much time on his knees. Mueller replied, "I have been praying every day for fifty-two years for two men, sons of a friend of my youth. They are not converted yet, but they will be! How can it be otherwise?"

When he was asked on what ground he so firmly believed this, his answer was, "There are five conditions which I always endeavor to fulfill; by observing these I have the assurance of answer to my prayer:

1. I have not the least doubt because I am assured that it is the Lord's will to save them, for He wills that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4); and we have the assurance 'that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us' (1 John 5:14).
2. I have never pleaded for their salvation in my own name, but in the blessed name of my precious Lord Jesus, and on His merits alone (John 1:14).
3. I always firmly believed in the willingness of God to hear my prayers (Mark 11:24).
4. I am not conscious of having yielded to any sin, for 'if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me' (Ps. 66:18) when I call.
5. I have persevered in believing prayer for more than fifty-two years for some, and will continue until the answer comes: 'Shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him?' (Luke 18:7)."

Mr. Mueller went to Heaven praying firmly in faith, thanking God in advance, for the salvation of those for whom he was praying. Within months of his passing, the last friend on his prayer list was converted. God answers prayer!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 6, 2016 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] 1 Corinthians 11:30; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:3-5