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A0502 -- Jan. 09, 2005 – 1 John 5:14-15, 3:21-22 – Confidence in Prayer

This is the second time John has mentioned confidence in prayer in this epistle. The first time was in **1 John 3:21-22** when he said “²¹ *Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;* ²² *and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.*” There he connected our heart condition with our confidence before God in prayer. If our heart is right before God, regardless of what other people might say, we have confidence before God in prayer. As long as we are keeping His commandments we are doing the things that are pleasing in His sight, regardless of how other Christians may perceive us. Our job is not to look good before other Christians but to look good before God. So, if we are keeping His commandments then we are pleasing God and we have a pure heart condition that gives us confidence to pray with an expectation to receive.

In **1 John 5:14-15** John returns to the theme of confidence in prayer and so once again we will return to the crucial topic of prayer. Contextually, one thing becomes abundantly clear. If we have believed in the name of the Son of God then we have assurance of not only eternal life but also answered prayer! We believe in the name of the Son of God for salvation and we pray in the name of the Son of God for answered prayer. Belief in Jesus’ name is the key for salvation and the key to answered prayer.

What is Prayer?

Before we get into prayer we need to define prayer. What is prayer? Basically, prayer is talking to God. Talking to God has at minimum two aspects: asking God for things and telling God things. Even though God knows all that we think and need He still commands us to pray (John 15:7). Prayer is not God talking to us. God talks to us through the word of God but biblically, prayer is always humans talking to God and never God talking to humans. Prayer is therefore one way communication with God.

The Significance of Prayer

Two observations show the Significance of Prayer. First, Jesus' prayer life. Turn to **Luke 11:1** "It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.'" They must have reasoned thus. Here we have in the person of Jesus the divine ideal of humanity in the human sphere, and notice his complete devotion to the exercise of prayer. If He who is so perfect needed to pray, how much more do we who are so imperfect need to pray. Thus, the request, "teach us to pray". By this request the disciple is not asking Jesus to explain *how* to pray. He's not asking Jesus to teach them a better method of prayer. Instead, he's asking Jesus to teach them to do it, how to really attend to the powerful ministry of prayer. Teach us how to really devote ourselves to the exercise of prayer. The disciples are not interested in a method of prayer but simply the doing of it! You all know how hard it is to devote yourself to praying. It's not an easy task, yet, if the Perfect Savior in His humanity prayed, how much more do we need to learn to attend to this ministry. The general significance of prayer should be observed as one reads the NT gospels. For example, in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17) Jesus returns to the theme of prayer 6 times in these 5 chapters (John 14:12-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24, 26; 17:1-26).

Praying in Jesus' Name = Praying in Will of God

In this discourse Jesus teaches His apostles that they must now pray "in His name". Turn to John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24 (READ). Clearly, Jesus Christ was introducing a new way of praying during the Church dispensation. Before this Jesus says the apostles had never asked for anything in His name. Now they were supposed to. Praying in Jesus' name is therefore a condition for receiving answered prayer during the Church Age. But what does it mean to pray "in Jesus name"? Does it mean that if we simply tack on the words "in Jesus name, amen" at the end of our prayer that it will be answered? No. That is abusing this idea and treating it like a magical formula that guarantees our request will be answered. That's not what Jesus meant. In our text today John is giving a commentary on what it means to pray "in Jesus name" to clarify what Jesus meant.

Greek Text 5:14 Kai aute estin he parresia hen ekomen pros auton hoti ean ti aitometha kata to thelema autou akouei hemon. 5:15 kai ean oidamen hoti akouei hemon ho ean aitometha, oidamen hoti ekomen ta aitemata a etekamen ap autou.

Translation 5:14 And this is the boldness that we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 5:15 and if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we asked of Him.

To pray in Jesus' name is not like a magic formula. Instead, it means to pray according to His will. When one prays in the will of God, He hears us and because we can know that He hears us then we can know that we have the requests that we asked of Him. But how can we know if we are praying according to His will? John seems to be saying that there are times when we can know with absolute certainty that our prayers will be answered. But how can we ever pray with absolute certainty that God will answer? There is actually one way to pray that guarantees your prayer will be answered.

Praying in the Known Will of God

We know that our prayers will be answered whenever we pray in the known will of God. God cannot deny His own will. God has expressed His general will for all Christians in His commandments (1 John 5:3a). We can know these commandments through study of the word of God. The NT has many commandments and it is always God's will that we obey His commandments. Therefore, whenever we pray for enablement to follow a specific commandment then we can be sure that He will hear and answer.

However, the Bible does not promise immediate answer to these prayers. *When* God will answer the prayer (the timing) and *how* God will answer the prayer (the means) is another issue. When and how He answers is up to His sovereign determination. It may well be that in order for God to answer your prayer He has to take you through some spiritual training. Or God may delay answering your prayer to *test your character* and to *increase your persistence* in praying (Mark 7:23). Whenever and however God determines to answer our prayer is up to Him but we can know with absolute certainty that God will answer a prayer for enablement to follow His commandments because the commandments express His will. Therefore, every prayer that is prayed in the known will of God will be answered at some time and in some way. Let me demonstrate how you might pray in the known will of God. Let's say you are reading Scripture and you find this commandment in...

Philippians 4:6 ⁶ Be anxious for nothing

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. (In other words, pray that God would enable you to follow this commandment. Instead of dwelling on what is false, what is dishonorable, what is wrong, what is impure, what is gross, what is evil reputation. When I thought through this I was amazed at what the world dwells on. Secular media dwells on what is wrong, what

is impure, what is false, what is of evil reputation. When you take the antonyms of the 6 things listed here that we as believers are supposed to dwell on you find that the world and the secular media spend all their energy dwelling on things that are just the opposite of the things listed here. This blew me out of the water and it should you too.) Interestingly, when you connect this back with v. 6 and the command not to be anxious for anything let me ask you something. When you dwell on all the bad things happening in the world, the impure things presented in secular media, the false things, the dishonorable things or happenings then what response does that elicit from your sin nature? Anxiety. So, one way to avoid anxiety is to avoid dwelling on these things and dwell on the things in v. 8. But the only way to do this is through praying for enablement to do so.

Ephesians 5:1-4 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; ² and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. ³ But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; ⁴ and *there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, **but rather giving of thanks.*** (replacement – and +)

Hebrews 13:5 ⁵ *Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have;* for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU," (replacement – love of money + contentment with present belongings; Christ is enough now and always)

Ephesians 5:15-16 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of your time, because the days are evil. (wise men make the most of their time, unwise men waste time) How are you going to do this? Pray that God would enable you to follow this commandment. If you do God will answer your prayer in His way in His time.

Ephesians 5:22 Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

Ephesians 5:25 ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,

Ephesians 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. (cry room)

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (replacement, rather than comparing your children with so and so's children bring them up in discipline and instruction of the Lord.) How are you going to do that? Through prayer for enablement. Specific prayer about this issue.

There are hundreds of these commands in the NT epistles. How often are you praying specifically that God will enable you to keep certain of these commandments? There are

hundreds of areas that we each struggle with covered in these commandments. I suggest that as you read the Bible daily, which I know you're doing...right...you are reading the Bible daily at least. When you read it daily and you run across these commands that you stop right there and pray that God will answer the prayer. Another element of prayer that is important to interject here is persistence in praying. It can't be a flippant prayer. It has to be a heartfelt prayer, a genuine desire to be able to obey that commandment if you want the prayer answered. God calls for persistent prayer frequently in Scripture.

One of the key reasons Christians don't obey the commandments is found in **James 4:2** says "*you do not have because you do not ask.*" You must ask God to enable you to follow His commands. It's not just going to happen. How do we do this? *First* you have to know the commands. If you don't know the commands then how will you know what to pray for? *Second*, once you know the command then sin springs to life. You realize more and more how you are breaking commands every day. John Calvin reportedly said that no one knows the hundredth part of the sin that clings unto his soul. The more you study the word of God the more you realize how much sin clings to your soul. *Third*, you have to pray for enablement to keep the command. Sin is the opposite of following the commands of God. To avoid sin you must follow the commands of God (principle of replacement). Whenever you pray for enablement to keep a command(s) you can know with full assurance that God will answer the prayer. *When* and *how* God will answer the prayer is up to His sovereign determination but it is guaranteed that God will answer the prayer at some point in time and in some way. How do I know this? Because praying in the name of the Son of God is praying in the will of God. Our prayers should be addressed to the Father in the name of the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit but praying in the name of the Son is not simply tacking the words "in Jesus name, amen" on the end of our prayers. It means praying in the will of God and anytime we pray for help in following His commandments we can be assured that we are praying in the will of God and our prayer will be answered

Praying for the Unknown Will of God

Second, however, we don't know all of the will of God. Certain things fall outside of His commandments and plan. These things deal with the specifics of your life. Where should I go to college? When should I get married? Who should I marry? When should we have children? What church should I attend? How should I respond to my wife? When should I write up a living will? If my wife and I die who should we ask to raise our children? etc... We call these areas of life the unknown or specific will of God because it is unknown to you and specific for you. How then should I pray for those things? We should always ask for guidance regarding these things subject to God's will. When Jesus prayed for God's

Specific Will for His life he prayed this way in **Luke 22:41**, "*Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.*" We should always qualify these types of requests with remarks to that effect. On this same note I might add two things. *First*, when we have to make choices like this God has given us wisdom principles and examples in Scripture that help us eliminate certain choices and narrow the field. Many times the answer to such questions is therefore to apply wisdom principles and examples gathered from the word of God (Prov. 3:5-6). *Additionally* we can apply the principle of **Romans 8:28** "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God,*" The principle here is that if you are loving God and loving God amounts to obeying His commandments then *God causes all things to work together for good*. This means God will direct your steps. If you are not loving God (i.e. being obedient to His commandments) then you can't count on this promise. So, you can rest in God's sure guidance when you are loving God and we love God through obedience to His known will.

Therefore, it is important to pray in harmony with the will of God in order to get answers to our prayer. This requires praying in the known will of God for enablement to follow His commands and praying for things in the unknown will of God for your life subject to the will of God.

Human Conditions to Prayer Being Answered

Occasionally a passage of Scripture seems to guarantee unconditionally that God will answer any prayer we may offer (Matt. 7:7; **John 14:14**, 15:16; 16:23-24). However, these promises have stated or assumed conditions that become clear when we understand the whole teaching of Scripture. Therefore, every promise to answer prayer is a conditional promise.

First, an obvious condition for prayer being answered is "asking". Although God knows all your thoughts and needs (He's omniscient) that does not constitute prayer. God wants us to tell Him things and ask for things. When we ask God for things we are demonstrating *humility* and *dependence*. **James 4:2** speaks to this: "*You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.* v. 2 amounts to you trying to get things on your own steam. Instead of trying to get things on your own steam the reason you don't have is because you don't ask. "Asking" admits that we are dependent on Him. We can't get it or do it on our own steam. "Asking" is required if we are to see our prayers answered.

Second, another condition for prayer being answered is “asking with right motives”. This is covered in **James 4:3** *“³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”* When you do ask you ask with wrong motives. This is asking God to give you things that you can then enjoy independently of God. That is a wrong motive. God never gives us things so that we can enjoy them independent of Him. We are dependent creatures, dependent on Him. This amounts to not praying in the will of God.

Third, another condition for answered prayer is doing what we can to facilitate the situation. You’ve all heard the story of the man who got stuck in a flood. He climbed on to his roof and began praying that God would save him. Then a boat came by and offered assistance. He refused saying “God will save me”. Next a helicopter came by and tried to save him. “No, no, he said, God will save me.” Well, the man ended up drowning. When the man got to heaven he asked God “why didn’t you save me?” God answered, “what do you mean, I sent a boat and you refused, then I sent a helicopter and you refused that too.” Believers are to use the means God has provided to facilitate aid. Refusal of aid to have a prayer answered is not an evidence of great faith. Instead it proves that we do not understand how God works or are not serious about having our prayer answered.

Fourth, another condition of prayer is the attitude of helplessness. John 15:5 says that apart from Christ we can do nothing! If we can do nothing then we should continually have the attitude of helplessness. It is when we realize we are helpless that we turn to God in prayer. Several attitudes fall out of a genuine realization of our desperate helplessness. *First*, if we are helpless we will be persistent in prayer. Persistence in prayer is one of the most mentioned conditions for having prayer answered (Luke 18:1-8; Eph. 6:18). *Second*, if we are helpless we become humble. When you pray you must come to God admitting that you are insufficient and that He is sufficient. Such is the attitude of humility.

Fifth, another condition of answered prayer is having faith that God can answer our prayer if He chooses to do so (Jas 5:13-14). We can have absolute confidence that God will answer our prayer if our prayer is in the known will of God. But we can never be absolutely certain that God will answer prayers that deal with the specifics of His will for our life. In such a case we must have faith that God can answer our prayer if He chooses to do so.

Sixth, another condition of answered prayer is “abiding” in Christ. Turn to **John 15:7** *“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”* Two conditions are given here. The word *abide* means “to remain or stay”. Therefore, the one who is abiding in Christ remains in fellowship with Christ. When the

Light reveals sin he confesses it so that fellowship goes unbroken. Second, John also adds *and My words abide in you*. This means Christ's word must be remaining in you. When His word remains in you as a guiding life principle and you remain in fellowship with Christ then you can ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you. The reason Jesus says that you may *ask whatever you wish* is that by meeting these two conditions you will not pray for something out of accord with the will of God. God is never moved to answer a prayer that is outside of His will. Only prayers that are in the will of God will be answered. When the human conditions are met and we genuinely pray in Jesus' name then the prayer is in the will of God.

When we pray we should never deliberately pray contrary to the known will of God. For example, praying that Christ will not return is a prayer that will not be answered. We already know the expressed will of God on that matter and no matter how persistently we pray or how fervently we pray God will not answer that prayer. However, when the will of God is unknown the way to pray is to ask *subject to God's will*. "If we always include in our petitions the clause "nevertheless not my will, but yours be done," we would always receive the best answer to our prayers provided we met other conditions."¹

In conclusion, there are six human conditions for prayer being answered. 1) asking, 2) asking with right motives, 3) facilitating when appropriate, 4) attitude of helplessness, 5) in faith, trusting that God can answer the prayer, and 6) abiding in Him and His word in us. When we meet these six conditions the environment is right for God to answer our prayers. When we do not meet these conditions we should not expect God to answer our prayers.

Relationship of Divine Will to Human Will in Prayer

Does prayer change God? Not His character. Does prayer change God's plan? There is always the question of why should we pray if God's will is going to be done anyway? This is the age old problem of the Divine will and the human will. Let it be said clearly that God does condition some of His actions on prayer. Prayer is often the means by which God's purposes are fulfilled. However, it does not follow that those things that are conditioned on prayer are uncertain to come to pass. When human beings meet the six conditions we just spoke of the human will is in agreement with the Divine will. Mighty and wonderful things result from prayer but only things that are in accordance with the will of God. But if God's will is to come to pass anyway then why should we pray? Because the prayer itself is the means by which God purposed to bring about His plan. In other words, the prayers that are answered were a part of the Divine plan just as much as the answer to the prayer. Prayer is

the decreed means by which some of God's purposes are met. Apart from our prayers the will of God could not be accomplished. But, at the same time, apart from the plan of God our prayers could not be offered. God's sovereignty is what sets up the possibility of prayer being offered and answered. If god were not really sovereign then why would you pray to that kind of god? That kind of god could not answer prayer and would not be dependable. God must be sovereign for prayer to have a context for being answered.

Purpose of Prayer

Books about prayer are being published at the rate of about 2 books per month. There is a lot about prayer out there. The overwhelming majority of these books are about the "psychology of prayer". Secular psychologists who do not believe in the Creator God write these books trying to find out if there is any personal benefit for those people who imagine that there is a god and pray. The basic conclusion is that there is a benefit, therefore "prayer is not for a god or the gods, but it's for us". It's something that helps us feel better about ourselves, etc...This sounds really catchy and loads of Christians have bought into this kind of thinking. Biblically this is nonsense. You will never find that idea anywhere in the word of God. That is a self-centered, psychological view of prayer! The Bible says that the purpose of prayer as well as the purpose of everything else in life is to glorify God (John 14:13)! This is because prayer is an essential element in fulfilling the plan and purpose of God not our plans and purposes. Therefore, the highest desire of the Christian should be to see the plan of God unfold and come to completion and to align his desires and will with God's.

ⁱ Constable, Tom, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer, A Biblical Theology of Prayer* (Sonic Light, 2003), 121.

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