

Sermon 33, The Outcome of Confidence/Getting Your Prayers Answered, 1 John 3:22-23

Proposition: God wants to give you everything you want, but a big part of that is training your want to desire His pleasure by faith and love.

- I. Do What He Wants, Get What You Want, v. 22
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I approach the theme of this morning's sermon with fear and trembling. As C.S. Lewis already commented, and all of us have felt for many years, these texts (and they are numerous) which speak of God giving us everything we want are very advanced. They are not for beginners in the school of Christ. They should be put in an appendix for those who have been walking with Christ for more than 30 years, or something like that. At least, that's what we think. But it's clear that God thinks otherwise. The apostle says that this is a teaching for little children.

So what do we make of this? We must realize the unbreakable link between obedience and answered prayer, and therefore must strive to walk in obedience. Another way of putting this is that God wants to give you everything you want, but that the way you get there is not by training Him but by training yourself. When your want wants what He wants, then (and only then) He will give you everything you want. It is a hard saying, but by the grace of the Spirit, I believe that you and I can hear it.

I. Do What He Wants, Get What You Want, v. 22

Our verse is predicated on the consciousness of being obedient and the confidence that gives, a confidence we talked about last Sunday. When we have that confidence, we get what we ask from Him. Why? Because we keep His commandments and please Him. Notice the sandwich here. On the top and bottom, we have reference to our obedience, from a subjective standpoint ("my heart does not know of any sin I've committed") and from an objective ("we keep His commandments and do what is pleasing in His sight"). In the middle, sandwiched between these two references to obedience, is the statement about receiving whatever we ask from Him. If you

want to put it as crudely as I have in my outline here, then you can say “Do what He wants, get what you want.” If you want to put it in a more sophisticated way, you might say that the text is teaching that if you give your heart and life to obeying Christ, you will understand the texts that promise to answer all your requests. In other words, if you don’t give yourself wholeheartedly to obedience, you won’t understand these texts.

A. Answered Prayer Is Tied to Obedience

If I may put in a way that is neither too crude nor over-refined, I will put it like this: Answered prayer is tied to obedience. If you want to know what answered prayer feels like, you need to know what a clean conscience feels like. The Old Testament and the New Testament alike make this point negatively: “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (Psa 66:18). “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (Jam 4:3). But far more often they make it positively. Answered prayer is tied to obedience, and unanswered prayer is a mark of disobedience.

1. In Christ’s Life, Hebrews 5:7

The greatest example of all of this is the life of Jesus Christ. “In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety” (Heb 5:7). Why did the Father hear Christ? Because of His reverent submission, His piety, His godly fear — in other words, because He had the heart attitude that generated an obedient life. At the same time, this verse also teaches us something about the nature of the answer. Hebrews doesn’t say what Jesus prayed. Yet we know from the gospels that He prayed for the cup to pass from Him. Hebrews tells us that that prayer was heard. Yet, obviously, Christ drank from the cup! What, then, is the connection between obedience and answered prayer?

2. In the life of every child of God

B. Answered Prayer Is Founded on the Intimacy of Desiring His Pleasure

The bottom line is that answered prayer is founded on the intimacy of desiring the Father’s pleasure. At the end of the day, prayer is about shaping your own desires so that you want what God wants.

Have you ever seen one of those news articles about studies showing tremendous health benefits from prayer or meditation, whatever you want to call it? Have those bothered you? How on earth could prayer and meditation be equivalent for scientific purposes? The answer is that prayer is a conversation that shapes you, far more than it is a conversation that shapes God. Yes, we know that prayer is fundamentally a look outside yourself toward God. It is a look of trust and affirmation that says “Not my will, but yours.” Meditation is much more about simply taking some time to sit and think, and non-Christians like the Dalai Lama and Jack Dorsey practice it. Yet it too has psychological benefits, presumably because though they aren’t talking to God they are talking to themselves. The benefits of meditation are not as great as those of prayer — but both can significantly alter your mental state and desires. Prayer, then, alters what you want. It

trains you to desire what God wants. How does it do this? Through the intimacy of long conversation.

I'm sure you're all aware that the marriage gurus tell us that the most important factor in marriage longevity is emotional intimacy. What that means is that you care about and, to some extent, feel the feelings of your spouse. If she's hurt, you hurt. If she's happy, you're happy. Well, brothers and sisters, that's simply what we call a healthy marriage. If it doesn't move you that your spouse is upset, then you have a bad marriage.

In the same way, prayer is about cultivating emotional intimacy with God, such that you want what He wants. When you want that, then you will always get what you want. Prayer aligns your desires with God's. It doesn't change God; He is unchangeable. But He does answer prayer. And the greatest answer He gives is changing you so that your desire is aligned with His, so that you want what He desires.

Don't think of prayer as a vending machine where you put in your credit card and out comes the thing you want. It's not that. God is not a vending machine. He doesn't take credit cards. He doesn't credit your prayers at 50 cents a minute, such that if you've prayed for an hour you have 30 Heaven dollars that you can spend on anything He has available. Stop thinking of prayer that way! It's a relationship, a friendship or a father-son relationship. Yes, the categories of capital and spending apply in some sense. But it's not a bank account and it's not a vending machine and it's not about racking up brownie points with God and then blowing them on a bender with hookers. Will your best friend give you whatever you ask for? Yes of course he will. But does that mean that you can ask him for that new Ferrari or a piece of real estate? Brothers and sisters, so often we get confused about what God is like. Comparing Him to our human friends might actually help straighten out our thinking on this one. I know there are people in this church who could afford to give me a new car. I will never ask them for one. I have other friends and relatives, not in this church, who could afford to give me a New York penthouse or a San Francisco mansion. I will never ask them for that. Why? Because my relationship with them is far more important to me than the quantity of wealth they do or don't have. Yes, God has all wealth. Yes, it's just as easy for Him to give you a South African diamond mine as it is for Him to give you a job pushing carts at Walmart. But what do you care about more — the quantity of stuff or money He could give you, or the relationship you have with Him? I can listen to two or three of your prayers and tell you what your relationship with God is like, just like I can listen to two or three of your conversations with your spouse and tell you what your marriage is like. It's not rocket surgery, as the wags say. If you see Jesus as a means to the end of wealth and power, then guess what? You aren't doing the things that are pleasing in His sight. You aren't keeping His commandments. You aren't loving Him for Himself. You don't care about Him; you care about His stuff. And that is the definition of using somebody.

What is your view of prayer? John is not talking about racking up points and then spending them. He's talking about building a relationship, and then living out that relationship. Of course a true friend is willing to come over and help you clean the garage or give you a ride

to the shop to pick up your car. But if you made friends just so that you'd have someone to take you to the airport, you didn't make friends. You found someone to exploit.

I know you all know what I'm talking about. It's just this: The benefits of relationship don't exist without the relationship. It's not that hard. John is not teaching some kind of salvation by works, or prayer answered by works. He's teaching what we all already know from the parallels in our human experience: The better you know someone, the closer you are, the more willing you are to say "Will you babysit for me?" and the more willing they are to say "Absolutely!"

So go to God in prayer because you want to talk to Him, not because there's something you've just got to have that He hasn't yet given you. Right? If you have no relationships in your life where you call just to talk, I pity your soul. If you operate everything on a work-reward mentality, you are cruising for rejection.

So have confidence because you are in relationship with God through Christ. In fact, you are His child in Christ. That's how you can do what He wants!

II. What He Wants, v. 23

And what is it, exactly, that He wants?

A. Believe in His Son Jesus Christ

Well, the apostle tells us. God's commands are faith and love. The first of these is faith. Do you want to please God? Then believe in Jesus! John uses a full title here. We don't merely believe in the man Jesus of Nazareth. We believe in the Son of God. God has told us that we must believe in His Son. That is, we must receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation, recognizing that He is the Son of God and therefore that He is truly and eternally God, just like His Father. We must also believe that the Son of God has taken flesh and become one of us as the man Jesus Christ. And finally, we must believe that this God-man, God's Son who lived as Jesus among us, is God's Anointed One, specially set apart and chosen to save the world.

Do you believe in this name? The name is what signifies the person. To believe in His name is to believe in Him without reserve or remainder. It is to believe in Him totally.

B. Love One Another

And then, on top of that belief, we must love one another. Do you want God to listen to your prayers? If you're content with meditation, go be a Buddhist or a secular monk like Jack Dorsey. But if you want to actually talk to someone besides yourself, you need to pray. And if you want those prayers to matter at all, if you want God to listen to them, then you need to be loving each other — not like Cain, but more like Jesus. Cain killed in order to get his own way. Jesus died in order to do what God wanted. That is the most extreme example on either end. In reality, most of our lives will be spent somewhere in the middle, where the reality is not as stark and the stakes are seemingly not that high. But make no mistake: They are. You can fail to love for the sake of \$10. You can fail to care for the sake of 10 minutes. In fact, all of us here in this room know that we have hurt and devalued people, and especially our own children, over much less. We have withheld attention, affection, affirmation, and generosity. We have forgotten the needs and

desires of others in our own quest for self-fulfillment. Brothers and sisters, that's not love. It's abuse. We have labeled others as cowards or murderers over policy disagreements. We have blamed one another for too much or too little trust in elites and experts. That is not appropriate for children of God!

All Jesus asks is that we believe in Him and love each other. It's not complicated. It's just difficult.

C. Pay Attention to His Commands

He wants us to pay attention to His commands. Just as the words about answered prayer in v. 22 were sandwiched between references to obedience, so these words about faith and love in v. 23 are sandwiched between references to His commands. God doesn't give suggestions, advice, ideas we are free to take or leave. No! He gives commands. He tells us what we must do, what we are morally obligated to do, what we cannot avoid doing without offending Him and damaging one another. Brothers and sisters, listen to His commands! Recognize them for what they are. And get the strength to obey them by going to Him in prayer.

If you're in relationship, you care what the other person thinks, wants, and desires. All of us have had that sickening feeling of recognizing "He's not as into this as I am. He's not willing to make as many sacrifices as I am to keep this relationship going."

Don't give that feeling to the Almighty. Don't say "I want the benefits, but the costs are not worth it to me." The cost of relationship to God is that you have to give up every sin and selfish thought. The benefit is that all your needs are met, all your wants satisfied, every fiber of your being finds its purpose and joy in knowing God and being His child.

Does that sound like it's worth it? Does that sound good? If it does, then believe in Jesus and love your brothers and sisters. Amen.