

“PRAYERS HEARD AND NOT HEARD.”

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June 9, 2019, 6:00 PM

Scripture Texts: I John 5:13-17

Introduction.

We are coming to the end of John's letter. Some think it ended with verse 13, but then he thought of some more things to say. Sort of like the preacher who has two finallys and three in conclusions.

As he comes to the end of his letter he wants to repeat and clarify some things to make sure the people get it, that their confidence and assurance are well grounded. He wants them to know in their knower that they have the assurance of eternal life.

John is writing to those who are already Christians so that they can grow in their faith, believe more firmly, and have greater certainty and confidence in eternal life.

All of us can relate with that man in the Gospels who said, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.” All of us experience weak faith, doubts, fears, times when we wonder if we can trust God. As long as we are in this flesh we will have remnants of unbelief, so we must constantly be fighting the fight of faith and growing and making progress in the Gospel.

John writes for our spiritual benefit, to help us, to encourage and build our faith, to lead us to greater assurance and confidence and hope in eternal life. How can he be so sure? Because his knowing, his knowledge isn't based on himself or the world or the shifting ideas of culture or philosophers. He knows because of the revealed will of God in Scripture.

I John 5:14-15, confidence in prayer.

He picks up again the subject of confidence in prayer (see I John 3:19-22). Where does John get this confidence? One answer would be from Jesus, from his time with Jesus when he heard Jesus say things like:

John 14:13-14 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

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.

John 16:24 Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

Christians of all people should have the greatest hope and securest confidence since we can flee for refuge and deliverance to the greatest God who loves us with a Father's love and compassion. Our prayers can never be in vain.

But there is a qualification.

In Scripture we read our prayers can be hindered by unbelief, disobedience (I John 3:22), wrong motives (James 4:3) and not living with our wives in an understanding way (I Peter 3:7). To that list John adds another. Prayers that are contrary to God's will.

John reminds us to pray according to God's will, even as Jesus taught us to say, "Thy will be done."

Consider what would happen if this wasn't true. Suppose we could ask God for anything we wanted and God was somehow obliged to give us whatever we asked. Can you imagine what might happen? We would without doubt make our lives worse and miserable. We would be so selfish and self-centered.

God would be like a genie in a bottle, a giant Santa Claus, a butler at our beck and call. Prayer would become mechanical, like pulling a lever and out comes the answer we want. Our faith would be weak, anemic. We would know nothing of the spiritual growth that comes through dependence on God, waiting on Him and trusting in Him, learning to submit our desires to His, wanting what's best for others rather than for ourselves.

We really don't know what's best for us. We are so influenced by sin and sinful desires. The truth is we really don't know what to pray.

The goal of prayer is not to drag God down to our will, but to lift our will up to God's. So prayer is not getting God's attention to fulfill our requests but getting our hearts and wills in line with His, loving what He loves, wanting what He wants.

"God wants to give you what you would want God to give you if you were wise enough to want it" (Daniel Akin).

Romans 8:26-27 The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

When you bring all your needs and requests to the Father, you can rest in confidence He hears and will answer perfectly according to His glory and our best benefit. Be confident, but don't be presumptuous.

I John 5:16-17, the content of prayer.

John now moves from having confidence to pray, to the content of prayer, who or what to pray for. What requests can we bring to God?

Notice that the focus is not on us but on others. But just as John gave a qualification to praying with confidence, he also gives a qualification to the content of our prayers, who to pray for.

As you no doubt sense, this is a hard passage, one that has stirred up lots of interpretations and opinions. What is the difference between a sin that doesn't lead to death and a sin that leads to death?

All sin is mortal, any and all sin leads to spiritual death. All sin is a crime against a holy and righteous God. Wherever there is transgression against the Law of God, there is sin and death. Period.

Sins that lead to death.

Let's consider first what this sin that leads to death is. What has been the focus of John's letter? What sin has he most been dealing with? Hatred of the brethren and denial of Jesus Christ. John has been warning against persistent, on-going, total rejection of the Gospel and of Christ.

This is referring to apostasy, men who have rejected God and have no fear of God. They have forsaken God and given themselves over to be slaves of Satan. These are the reprobate, evil, wicked, depraved, who do horrible crimes against humanity.

This is not just any fall into temptation or the breaking of a commandment. This is the person who sees evil and calls it good, who sees light and calls it darkness.

They will do nothing but continue in their wicked sin as they desire, rejecting every opportunity to confess and repent.

These are those John has been fighting, those who willfully and habitually oppose the truth concerning the person and work of Jesus.

I 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.

Can we know when a person is in that condition? According to John it is possible, otherwise he would not have written as he did.

We must exercise extreme caution in saying someone is outside of God's infinite riches of grace, mercy and forgiveness. We must be very slow to suggest someone is only destined for eternal death.

For our part we are to love and pray for our enemies. We are not to seek or take vengeance. We leave to God what He will do according to His wisdom and justice.

But we also must not seek to be more merciful than God. There is a limit on God's patience toward unrepentant sinners. There is a line and when it is crossed God lets them go, they will never be forgiven. They become objects of eternal wrath.

John is not commanding us not to pray, he is just not commanding us to pray.

Sin that doesn't lead to death.

We shouldn't focus on the exception, but on the matter of Christians who are in sin. This brings us to the meaning of sin that doesn't lead to death. Notice John's uses the word brother. Brother here refers to those who do not commit a sin leading to death. No brother can commit a sin that leads to death.

“The sin that does not lead to death (that is, eternal death or damnation — which is what I think John means) is any sin that we commit that we are, by grace, capable of truly confessing and repenting from” (John Piper).

The sin that doesn't lead to death is any sin that by the Spirit and the grace of God we can turn from and repent of and seek God's forgiveness.

John is dealing with praying for Christians in the body who sin, as opposed to non-Christians outside the church who sin. This fits with John's focus on those in the church and those outside attacking the church, the true believers and the false teachers and shepherds.

What should we do about fellow Christians who sin? Gossip, slander, spread news? Tell others about it, talk about it, point it out? Should we judge them, think bad thoughts about them? Should we just leave them to suffer whatever consequences? Let them continue down their wrong path?

We should do none of the above, after all how would we want to be treated?

Rather than judge and condemn, we should pray for those in sin, asking God to bring about confession, repentance and true forgiveness. There is no greater help that we can give than to pray for each other.

Our prayers for others avail much and can go so far as to rescue the perishing, and deliver from death.

James 5:19-20 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Christians who sin are still our brothers and sisters, God doesn't cast them off, so we ought to pray earnestly for those who fall into temptation and sin. When you see a brother or sister in sin, pray for them, plead with God for their restoration to righteousness.

Don't talk to others about it, talk to God about it. Get God's heart and perspective. If you talk to God about it, you are going to hear God say some interesting things.

First, He is going to bring to your mind how you have done or even are doing the same thing. When we start to get judgmental and we stop and listen to God speaking in our own hearts, we see our sin and our hypocrisy. We should look for the log in our own eye before we look at the speck in someone else's eye.

Second, He is going to give you a heart of love for the other person, and take away your heart of condemnation and gossip, and feeling smug about yourself.

Third, He may give you some words of wisdom and compassion about how to speak truth and life and hope to the other person. Rather than attack or point the

finger you might be able to say, “I struggle with the same thing and here is how I have found some help or victory.”

John is calling us to care about people caught up in sin. Not to avoid them, but to engage them. We should intervene with prayer and care, seeking to interrupt them from the path they are on.

Every one of us has someone in our family or circle of friends who is living in some kind of sin and needs our prayers more than our condemnation. Pray that God will deliver them and grant them life. God has put them in our life for us to pray for them.

Can we just say it again, sin is serious, deadly serious. It can lead to death, eternal, spiritual death. Sins is serious. We should take it serious. We should pray about it often. We should pray about others in sin. We should be willing to talk to others and warn others.

And we should receive any such warning with glad hearts that someone cares for our souls so much. That is love. We should not react with offense, with anger, with “Oh yeah, well what about all your sins.”

Whenever someone speaks to us about our sin, they are speaking life to us and that is love.

Prayer: God grant us all grace to grow in our knowledge and love of you, to walk in the light as you are in the light, to know the truth as you are the truth and to be quick to repent of all ungodliness that the blood of Jesus might cleanse us from all our sin and that we might have fellowship with you and with one another.