

Connected and Confident Prayer
1 John 3:21-22

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We are dealing with the subject of prayer, not as an intellectual exercise, but in a sincere pursuit of relating to our God in such a way that we are effective in our prayers. If we are to become effective in any human endeavor, we must be teachable. We must receive instruction as to what we may be doing wrong, how we can improve. We must be motivated; because there is much to learn. If you want to be proficient in golf, you have to do two things. You have to actually play golf; because there is much that can be developed only in the doing. Reading ten books about golf will not, by itself, adequately equip you. You can't just read about it; you can't just talk about it; you have to actually do it! On the other hand, if you want to do it well, you may have to receive some correction. You may have to learn to hold the club correctly. You may need instruction on how to follow through with your swing. I'm making a point about prayer. We have people here who can play the piano. Their proficiency on that instrument came because they received instruction from others who knew more about it than they did; and then they applied the instruction through hours of practice. Practice makes perfect, they say. That may be a bit exaggerated; but nobody becomes an accomplished pianist without spending time actually playing the piano. Prayer works the same way. I am by no means a marksman; but I learned something about hitting a target consistently. I have to find out why I am not hitting the bullseye. Maybe my sights need adjustment. Maybe I need new glasses. Maybe I'm jerking the trigger instead of squeezing it correctly. If I practice, practice, practice; but keep reinforcing the same mistakes over and over I will not become a marksman. I have to receive correction; change the way I'm doing things; then reinforce that through continued use. Answered prayer is the bullseye that we are looking for this morning. What can I change that will help me hit the target? What adjustments might be helpful?

In last week's message we talked about three principles of prayer that matter. (1) Respect: what we meant by that term is the proper mixture of familiarity and honor toward God. The attitude here rests on the first two phrases of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in heaven; Hallowed be Thy name"—an intimate relationship that remains awed by who God is. (2) Focus: we need to be engaged in the process of prayer—paying attention to God and our conversation with Him. (3) Consistency: our life must be consistent with our prayers. If we are asking God for His wisdom and guidance, then we must follow that guidance in all areas of our life.

Today I want to expand on that with two more principles that undergird effective prayer. One is the confidence that comes with a clear conscience. The other is the connection that accompanies habitual abiding in God's presence.

I. Confidence in prayer through a clear conscience.

Turn with me to 1 John 3:22 "*And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.*"¹

First notice the promise of answered prayer in that verse. "*And whatever we ask we receive from Him....*" Of course, that is best exemplified in Jesus' life. In John 11:41 when Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, He lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed, "*Father, I thank You*

¹ All Scripture quotes are in New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

that You have heard Me. 42 And I know that You always hear Me...” There is a confidence in His approach to God that the prayer is answered. He is not just going through a religious ritual; He expects results. Someone may say, yes but He is the Only Begotten Son of God; of course, He would have that confidence. He did not get prayer answered as the Son of God; He got it answered as an obedient man full of the Holy Spirit. And He actually said to His followers in John 14:12-14 *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. 13 And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."* The Bible abounds with verses that assure answered prayer for Christians. If I'm not getting answers to prayer I should be asking why.² Why am I missing the bullseye of answered prayer? Jesus has clearly said we could ask and receive. If that is not happening, I want to know why the biblical promise is not being fulfilled.

"Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 And I know that You always hear Me..." The first sentence tells me that Jesus had already spent time in prayer and already had assurance in His heart that He was praying according to the will of God. *"Father, I thank You that You have heard Me."* The second sentence tells me that He lived in such a relationship with the Father that He knew He would be heard in the context of that relationship. *"And I know that You always hear Me..."* So this formed the foundation and confidence out of which He cried out with a loud voice in Luke 11:43, *"Lazarus, come forth!"* And Lazarus came up out of his tomb. The public victory, *"Lazarus, come forth!"* was possible because of the daily relationship with the Father and because of the assurance He had already gained on the subject during private prayer.

I am concerned that we not accept a sub-standard Christianity that gets no answers to prayer. Most of Christendom has accepted a form of godliness with no power—a kind of Christianity that goes through some rituals of prayer but without any real expectation that the prayer will actually get answered. I look at that; then I look in the Bible. And I say, something is not right here. Jesus says, *"Ask and you shall receive."*³ The Church as a whole says *"Ask, it's the proper thing to do; but don't expect much intervention on God's part. Get by the best you can."* The normal, biblical Christian life is marked by answered prayer. I have recently received some encouraging answers to specific prayers. But I know from Scripture there is much, much more than I am currently experiencing. Instead of bringing down the Scripture to my level of experience; I want to bring my experience up to the provision we have in Scripture.

So here I am with you this morning, asking the question, *"What will make my prayer life more effective?"* One piece of the answer is this confidence that the Father is hearing me and will answer. Now come back with me to our original text, 1 John 3:22 *"And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight."*

There is a condition attached to the promise: *"...because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight."* The condition is easy to interpret. The condition is obedience to the known will of God. The condition is a life committed to pleasing the Father in everything we do. Jesus said that was the kind of life He lived. He did not operate out of his own initiative. He was not operating independent of the Father. He lived in communion with the

² Mark 9:28; Isaiah 58:3

³ Luke 11:9

Father and simply did what God told Him to do. In John 8:29 he said “...*for I always do those things that please Him.*”

Is that kind of life possible for you and me? According to Scripture it is. We are not sinless as Jesus was. We have already blown that. But we have been brought into a covenant relationship with God that empowers us to live pleasing to the Lord. Rom 6:14 “*For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.*” We have been provided all things that pertain to life and godliness. Therefore, we can live lives pleasing to the Lord. We are all at different stages of growth. What a parent requires of a two year old child is different than His expectations for a ten year old. But we can live sincere, godly lives marked by a passionate desire to please the Father in all that we do. In our text, the Apostle John is saying that is the way he lives.

The first problem we have in the American church is a failure to call people to higher ground. The prevalent message is don't strain yourself. God understands the sins that you live in.⁴ That's what grace is all about. Live as *you* please and everything will be just fine. No it won't. Grace is not about overlooking bondage to sin. Grace is about empowering us to live above its dominion. We may not be fully there; but we should be pressing toward that high calling in Christ Jesus.⁵ We should not be lulled to sleep by a sloppy gospel that accepts bondage to sin and no answered prayers. This is not the will of God for you and me. When we ask God to sanctify us, equip us, and bring us onto higher ground—we are praying according to the will of God.⁶ We may have to persevere in those prayers. But God forbid that we give up on ever getting answers to them. The standard of living is a life pleasing to God that can call on the Lord and receive His help in every aspect of our lives.

So here is a common hang-up people have with what I'm saying. It sounds like legalism; it sounds like you're saying we earn answers to prayer by behaving ourselves. The Bible is very clear that we do not earn favor with God. Eph. 2:8-9 “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.*” It cannot be said any simpler than that. Everything we receive is because of how good God is; not how good we are. So our text cannot mean that God answers our prayers out of obligation. It cannot mean that we get answers to prayer because we have earned those answers through good behavior. What it means is that by our obedience we position ourselves to receive answers to prayer.

When Paul was converted in Acts 9, how did he receive the healing of his eyes? Jesus tells him to get up off the ground and go into Damascus and he would be told what to do. What did Paul do at that point? He got up off the ground and went into Damascus. That obedience positioned him to hear his next instruction. There he saw a vision of Ananias coming to him and praying for him. He received Ananias and received his healing. What if he had decided to go to Jerusalem instead of Damascus? I don't think the story would be the same. Paul didn't earn a healing by going into Damascus; but he got into a position where he could receive it.

Jesus encountered a blind man in John 9. Jesus *spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva*. Then He rubbed the clay on the blind man's eyes and told him to "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." The Bible says the man obeyed the Lord and came back with his sight. Did that man

⁴ Jerm. 6:14; 8:11; Ezek. 13:10

⁵ Phil. 3:14

⁶ 1 Thess. 4:3

earn his healing by washing at the pool of Siloam? I don't think anyone would make that assumption. Would he have received his healing if he had refused to obey the Lord? I personally don't think he would have been healed. His obedience simply positioned him to receive the blessing. We could give many similar examples. Obedience to the Lord does not earn answers to prayer; but it does position us to receive those answers.

Look with me at the verses surrounding our text. 1 John 3:18-24

“18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

So that's talking about our behavior—that's talking about being doers of the word and not hearers only.

19 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

The way our hearts are assured that we are genuine people of God is that we live that way.

20 For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.

Condemnation in the heart does not necessarily prove that we are not children of God. God alone is the ultimate judge of that.⁷

But there is a tremendous benefit in living with a clear conscience.

21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. 22 And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. 23 And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. 24 Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.”

John places a special connection between pleasing God and treating one another right. A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 13:34).

Verse 24 again, *“Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.”* John is fighting a Gnosticism that is prevalent today—a disconnection between godly standing before God and godly living. The error that says it doesn't matter how you live; just make sure you have received Jesus as your personal Savior.⁸ But if I have really received Jesus as my personal Savior, it will matter very much to me how I live—because I will have a passionate desire to please Him in all that I do. The real thing produces the real thing!⁹ Real salvation produces fruit that is loving; joyful in God; and full of God's peace. If I had no desire to live godly, I would be shaking in my boots, wondering whether I am really saved. I have my daily temptations and struggles. I sometimes come short of the glory of God. But in my inner core I do not want to live in sin at all; I want to please God with every step I take and every word I say. Paul said in Phil 3:13-14 *“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do,*

⁷ Some take verse 20 to mean that God judges even more strictly and knows violations that even our conscience fails to inform. Paul does say in 1 Cor. 4:4 *“My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me”* (NIV).

⁸ These are general non-technical statements. Gnosticism is a broad term that is heretical primarily because of its false teaching concerning the nature of God and Christ. For example, 1 John 4:2-3 addresses one aspect of the error. The dualism often found undergirding Gnostic thought is that matter is only illusory. This can lead to antinomianism that disconnects the biblical relationship of true salvation and physically living according to the moral law of God, i.e., the kind of problem Jude 4 addresses.

⁹ Matthew 7:16-21

forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul continually pressed toward higher ground. He continually kept his conscience free of accusations.¹⁰ Verse 21 *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.”* In Acts 23:1 he said that he had lived in all good conscience before God.

How do we do that?

(1) First we understand that it is possible to do that.¹¹ First, we decide that we will not tolerate an accusing conscience. We will deal with it so that we can live in peace and we can pray with confidence. Paul told Timothy to *“war a good warfare, hold faith, and a good conscience”* (1Tim. 1:18-19 KJV). He would not have told him to do that if it were not possible. Paul said that deacons must be people who hold *“the mystery of faith with a pure conscience”* (1 Tim. 3:9). NIV says clear conscience. Peter also talks about having a good conscience (1 Pet. 2:19; 3:16, 21). So I ask you this morning; is your conscience clear? Is there any accusation coming from your conscience? If so, I encourage you to deal with that rather than tolerate it.

(2) We deal with an accusing conscience through the blood of Jesus. Heb. 9:14 *“how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”* So we acknowledge the violation and we ask God to forgive us of the offense. Then we receive the cleansing of our conscience along with the forgiveness of the sin. If the Accuser tries to bring it back up, we point to the blood of Jesus that cleanses from all sin.

(3) We also guard our conscience and take care to not violate it. Paul teaches about that in Romans 14 and in 1Cor. 8. Sometimes Christians have difficulty relating to those chapters because he talks about meat that has been offered to idols. But the basic principles he teaches there is that we are not to judge fellow Christians who may have a different conscience on an obscure issue than our own. And we never, never violate our own conscience. If everybody else is watching a certain movie and my conscience is pricked because I am watching it; then I do two things. First, I leave the others to their own choices and their own conscience. Second, I do not watch the movie because it would defile my conscience to do so. Some people have a weak conscience because it is uninformed by Scripture. The answer is still to not violate the conscience; but to inform the conscience of exactly what the Bible says on the subject. The more common problem we have today is people violating their conscience and wondering why they don't enjoy more peace; and wondering why they don't enjoy more confidence in prayer. Some people have violated their conscience to the point that it is seared, insensitive and does not work very well anymore. If we want to be effectual in prayer, we need to keep a clear conscience before God.

“Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.”

The second principle for effective prayer:

II. Connection that come through habitual abiding in God's presence.

¹⁰ Acts 24:16; 1 Cor. 4:4

¹¹ 1 Cor. 4:4 (NIV) makes it clear that a clear conscience is not necessarily sinlessness. I may be coming short of God's glory in ways that I am not aware of in my conscience. But when my conscience alerts me to sin in my life, I should immediately deal with it through the blood of Christ.

Turn with me to John 15 and let's make the connection between abiding in Him and answered prayer (verses 1-8).

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. 8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

Verse 7 *"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you."* Like our text in 1 John, that verse promises answered prayer; but it also carries with it a condition. His words are to abide or dwell in us in such a way that we follow His commandments. In verse 10 He says, *"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...."* So there is a clear connection between obedience—abiding—and answered prayer. *"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you."*

What does it mean to abide? The primary meaning of the Greek word *"meno"* is to stay or dwell.¹² From this passage we know there is something we can do about staying connected with our life-line: staying in communion with the Lord as our very source of life. This passage teaches us that Christianity is not a one-time event of saying the sinner's prayer and then going on in life independent of the Lord. It is a daily drawing upon the life of God. We do that in prayer. We do that in the word and in worship. We do that in our fellowship with one another around the Lord. We do that in our solitary inner soul.

Abide in Me has to do with where you are dwelling. First, in the mind! What are you dwelling on? God has given to us an amazing power. In our will, we can choose what we will think about or in other terms what we will dwell on. Your mind takes you somewhere. It can take you to a place of iniquity and corruption. It can take you to a place of hate and anger. And once you get in that place you can choose to hang there in your thought life. This is a key element in this issue of abiding or dwelling—where you consciously choose to go in your thought life.

On the other hand, by an act of your will you can go to a good place in your thought world. You can begin to think on the goodness of God. You can dwell on His promises. You can bask in His love. To abide in Christ, we have to go where He is in our thought life¹³ and we have to dwell there or stay there with Him. As we do that we draw the wonderful sap of His life-giving grace.

¹² NT:3306 (Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.)

¹³ Isaiah 26:3; Rom. 8:5; Phil. 4:8. Amazingly you can go to a ballgame and dwell there in your mind without your body moving; then by a choice of the will you can go to the mountains of Colorado and watch the water run in a stream and dwell there for a while. Disciplining the mind to dwell/abide where it should in Christ is an important part of all this.

Based on where we have chosen to dwell in our minds and thoughts, we then dwell there in our behavior. We either join with the ungodly world in their activities or we join with the people of God in their service to the Lord. Dwelling in God means we live according to His commandments and live in communion and communication with Him. That vital connection produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit expressed through us produces positive influence on other people.

So let's take the opposite of all that. The person who sets his mind on the things of the flesh and the things of the world is abiding in that realm. He is living according to the dictates of his own fleshly desires, not according to the commandments of God. Everybody is abiding somewhere every moment of the day. And the choice is yours as to where that will be. The Christian whose mind is set on the wrong things has an accusing conscience and lacks confidence in prayer. He is pursuing the wrong things; so the Lord cannot say to him "... *you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.*" for he will be praying amiss that he might consume it on his own flesh.¹⁴ God cannot approve of his prayers and cannot answer his prayers without violating the principles of His own kingdom.

The person who is abiding in Christ will be nurturing the right desires. His or her passion will be "*Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done.*" He will be seeking to please the Lord in everything he does. He will be cleansed and pruned so that the desires of his heart are transformed by his relationship with God. Therefore what He desires lines up with what God desires. To that person God can say, "... *you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.*"

Ps 37:4 "*Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart.*"

There are two ways that verse can be interpreted. It might mean, delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the right kind of desires. Of course, that would end up in answered prayer according to John 15:7. The other interpretation is that if you are delighting yourself in God (not just using Him; but delighting in Him) your desires are right and God can fulfill those desires. I don't care which interpretation you take as long as you are delighting and abiding in the Lord-- because that positions you for answered prayer.

¹⁴ James 4:3