

## Asking According to His Will (II)

1 John 5:14-15

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Our subject is prayer; and more specifically how to pray with confidence and get answers. The text that we began working with last week is 1 John 5:14-15

*“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.”<sup>11</sup>*

There is in that verse powerful assurance that we can *“have the petitions that we have asked of Him”*: in other words we can have our prayers answered. However, the condition to answered prayer in this verse is that we ask *“according to His will.”* Am I or am I not praying *“according to His will”*? How do I know? Last week we suggested four questions that would help us process that issue.

(1) What does the Bible say about the matter we’re praying about? Does Scripture specifically tell us the will of God concerning our request? If it does then we can know we are praying *“according to His will.”* For example, 1 Thess. 4:3 says *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification....”* So if I’m asking God to deliver me from a sinful habit, I am without question praying *“according to His will.”* I can pray with confidence that God already wants to answer this prayer. However, there are a lot of areas that are not specifically addressed in that way. Nowhere in Scripture does God tell me whether I’m to take a job in Boston or stay in Springfield. If I am praying for a particular job in Boston, I cannot turn to chapter and verse and know whether I am praying *“according to His will.”* I can apply some principles revealed in the Bible that will help me with that. But I’ll need to process the request further to gain the assurance that I am praying *“according to His will.”*

(2) Does the request line up with the priorities God has for my life?

We talked a lot about the priority stated in Romans 8:29 that we be *“conformed to the image of His Son.”* God is working all things together in our lives to make us like Jesus. That’s His priority; and sometimes He sacrifices our comfort for our development. Am I working the same priorities that God is working? Maybe there is something He wants me to deal with as I move toward the answer to this prayer. For example, my priority might be to get my stomach healed because it is causing me a lot of pain. But when I pray, God is wanting to talk with me about forgiving Brother Smith and to stop criticizing Sister Jones. Yes, God wants me healed; but what about this relationship with Brother Smith? Let’s get that dealt with first. In fact, the anxiety of that relationship, may be the root of my stomach problems. How does my particular request fit into God’s order of priorities? Are His priorities, my priorities?

(3) Does the request fit within the plan God has for my life? Am I asking God to make me a quarterback in the NFL; but God has called me to be a missionary in Nigeria? Am I swimming upstream against the current of God’s design for my life or am I hearing Him and asking Him to equip me for what He has in mind?

So those questions revolved around the (1) word (2) priorities and (3) plan of God. We ran out of time last week and did not get to the fourth question which is probably where more prayers

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<sup>11</sup> All Scripture quotes are from the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

fail than anywhere else. The key to answered prayer in our text is praying “*according to His will.*” Here is the other question we need to process.

(4) Am I willing to persevere in prayer until I know His will on the matter? Will I keep coming to God until He tells me what I need to know? Maybe the answer is no; but don’t assume that until He says so—especially on subjects that are generally His will.

The common mistake people make is to ask God for something a couple of times; if it doesn’t happen pretty easy they give up. They usually give up wondering why God didn’t answer the prayer. Sometimes they assume it must have not been God’s will. But they don’t pursue it enough to really know one way or another.

The tragedy of that is the person’s faith is slowly undermined, one unanswered prayer at a time. So eventually he just goes through the mechanics of prayer; but in the heart he doesn’t really expect it to make much difference.

If we approached anything else like that, we would not have much success. Suppose I begin classes at Missouri State University in order to receive a Bachelor’s degree. I show up for that first class on Monday with great exuberance. The teacher provides a syllabus for the course and explains some highlights of what we will be doing. When I get home that evening and take a second look at the syllabus, I see that I’m supposed to read two chapters in the text and turn in a ten-page paper next Wednesday. Well this is a problem because I was planning to go out with my friends tonight and I have to work late tomorrow—I mean when am I going to have time to read those two chapters and do the paper? So now I have to decide how serious I really am about getting a Bachelor’s degree. If I don’t make the time to read the text and do the papers, I won’t pass this first class. If I can’t pass the first class, it’s not too likely I will receive the Bachelor’s degree. So I have a couple of options. (1) I can persist in my studies and in due time receive the degree that I want or (2) I can choose not to persist in my studies and not receive the degree. I might even decide that it must have not been the Lord’s will for me to get that degree. That might make me feel better; but it won’t get me the degree.

What am I saying? Persistence is essential to effective prayer just as it is in most anything else. We tend to give up too soon!

I want to make four observations today about persisting in prayer.

- (1) Persisting in prayer can lead to a better understanding of God’s will in the matter.
- (2) Persisting in prayer may be necessary because of spiritual resistance.
- (3) Persisting in prayer is an expression of faith that can bring us into the answer.
- (4) Persisting in prayer is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

**(1) Persisting in prayer can lead to a better understanding of God’s will in the matter.**

Turn to 2 Cor 12:7-10 and let’s see this in Paul’s life.

*“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

So that passage opens with a problem; Paul calls it “*a thorn in the flesh*.” We don’t know for sure what the problem was. There are some hints here because he refers to it as “*a messenger of Satan*” which might suggest a harassing demon. In verse 10 he mentions *infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, and distresses*. We can analyze all that; but we really don’t know exactly what Paul’s “*thorn in the flesh*” was. I personally think God kept it somewhat obscure because your “*thorn in the flesh*” might not be the same as Paul’s “*thorn in the flesh*” or as my “*thorn in the flesh*.” The principle here is God’s priorities. It was more important that Paul be protected from pride than that this discomfort be removed. The Lord allowed this problem in Paul’s life (verse 7) “*lest I be exalted above measure*.” Paul was experiencing supernatural revelations and being used by God in powerful ways. The worst thing that could have happened to Paul was that he follow the path of Lucifer and be lifted up in pride.<sup>2</sup> Avoiding that was a higher priority with God than fixing this “*thorn in the flesh*.”

The thing we need to see in this passage today is that Paul prayed about this until God told Him why the request wasn’t being answered. It wasn’t God’s will because it would not have fit into God’s priority list. In verse 8 Paul says, “*Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me*.” I don’t think he is talking about three quick, causal prayers. This was a major, major problem in his life. He prayed about it with intensity. He prayed expecting God to answer the prayer—because he was accustomed to prayer being answered. When his prayer was not answered, he went at it again. He kept praying. He prayed until God told him why the request was not granted. He didn’t pray a couple of times and then assume it must have not been the will of God. He kept at it until God told him what was going on. Unanswered prayer needs to be pursued until it gets answered or God brings clarity like this as to why it no longer needs to be pursued.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that He be spared the horrors of the cross, “*O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me...*” The “*cup*” was not just physical death; it was becoming the sin offering--carrying the sin of the world as a sacrifice. Father, if there is any other way; let me be spared this ordeal. Then He added the well-known phrase, “*nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will*.”<sup>3</sup>

Matthew 26 tells us He prayed this three times.

Luke 22:44 describes his prayer in this way: “*And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*.” Never was a more intense prayer offered up to God. Understand that this is something very different from a casual prayer request. Jesus is penetrating heaven with His prayers. He doesn’t stop when no answer comes. He prays again and again until He gets a resolution. God did not spare Him the ordeal. What was the answer He got? He received strength for the ordeal. God sent an angel to strengthen Him.

Both Jesus and Paul prayed until a resolution came from the Father. In both of these cases the prayer was answered different than requested. But in both cases they were informed of the answer so they could cooperate with the will of God. Even if I start out with a request that is

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 12:12-15; Ezekiel 28:12-17; 1 Tim. 3:6

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:39; 2Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:26

not “*according to His will*” I can pray until I am privy to His will.<sup>4</sup> Then I can adjust my prayer so that I am in perfect alignment with the will of God. I’m sure there were many days Paul came to the Lord in prayer and reminded Him of His promise to supply grace for His journey. Remember what God said to him in 2 Cor. 12:9 “*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*” That didn’t stop Paul from praying. It simply redirected his prayers. Now instead of asking God to remove the thorn, he’s continually coming to God for grace (divine power)<sup>5</sup> to deal with it victoriously.

(1) Persisting in prayer can lead to a better understanding of God’s will in the matter and a better alignment with His will.

**(2) Persisting in prayer may be necessary because of spiritual resistance.**

In Daniel 9, that prophet is praying according to the will of God. We can see that clearly in the first few verses.

Dan 9:1-3

*“In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans -- 2 in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. 3 Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.”*

Remember our first point last week. If Scripture says it’s the will of God, then it is! Daniel is reading Jeremiah 29:10 and realizes that God’s time for bringing Israel back from their 70 years of captivity has come. What does he do? Does he passively sit back and wait for the will of God to happen? No, he understands the partnership we have with God through prayer. He knows the importance of praying “*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” When Jesus taught us to pray that way in the Lord’s Prayer, He was not telling us to just accept God’s will. He was telling us, as God’s agents on earth, to execute that will through prayer. Daniel’s response in verse 3 was to go to God in prayer with the request that His will be done in this matter. He is without question, praying “*according to His will.*” Yet he does not see the answer immediately. We know that because in verse 21 the angel Gabriel appeared to him to give him insight on the subject. In verse 23 Gabriel told Daniel that as soon as he began to pray the answer was given. This implies that some time had passed since he began to pray about this.

In the next chapter Daniel is fasting and praying again. After 24 days of asserted prayer Gabriel appears to him again and says to him in verse 12, “*... ‘Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words. 13 But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia. 14 Now I have come to*

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<sup>4</sup> It is conceded that an occasion could exist in which God does not do this. The secret things belong to the Lord (Deut. 29:29). However, nominal Christians are often so accustomed to a lack of communication with God that far too often they assume they can’t know. Job’s understanding came progressively as he looked to the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> Grace (*charis*) is the divine influence of the Holy Spirit on the person (see Strong’s 5485 definition). It is unmerited favor: not as a stagnant, abstract notion but as an active operation of the Holy Spirit. The word is being used in 2Cor. 12:9 in the same way it is used in Acts 4:33 and 1Cor. 15:10.

*make you understand what will happen to your people in the latter days....”* So Daniel is praying according to the will of God. God hears his prayer and sends Gabriel to bring the answer. Yet the answer is delayed. Why? Because of spiritual resistance from a fallen angel referred to as *“the prince of the kingdom of Persia.”* Delay does not necessarily mean denial. Daniel prayed the first day and got not tangible results. He prayed the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, on and on until on the 24<sup>th</sup> day when Gabriel arrived. I don’t know what would have happened if on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day Daniel gave up and simply decided God is not answering his prayers. What we do know is that his persistent prayer did get results. There are unseen realities in the spiritual realm that may be resisting the answer to your prayer. Follow Daniel’s example and keep praying anyway.

(2) Persisting in prayer may be necessary because of spiritual resistance.

### **(3) Persisting in prayer is an expression of faith that can bring us into the answer.**

Turn with me to Luke 18:1-8.

*“Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, 2 saying: ‘There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. 3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’ 4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 5 yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’”*

*6 Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said. 7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”*

First notice the objective Jesus had for telling this story. Verse 1 *“that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.”* KJV says *“and not to faint.”* NIV says, *“not give up.”* Have you ever been tempted to *“give up”* instead of persevere? I have; and I suspect some of you have as well. That’s why Jesus gave this parable—to encourage us to not give up. Keep on praying. TLB translates Luke 18:1 *“One day Jesus told his disciples a story to illustrate their need for constant prayer and to show them that they must keep praying until the answer comes.”* So the point of the story is that we *“must keep praying<sup>6</sup> until the answer comes.”*

Notice the contrast Jesus draws in this story: the contrast between a selfish, uncaring, ungodly, secular judge and a loving Heavenly Father who delights in us as His dear children. This judge is the opposite of what God is. He has no regard for God or other people. All he cares about is how things affect him and his own personal comfort. He would not lift one finger to help this woman out of compassion for her need. Yet she gets her request from him. Then Jesus talks about how surely God will willingly and happily answer our prayers. If this woman was not wasting her time making request to this unjust judge, certainly God’s people are not wasting their time calling out on the Lord for help.

Notice the question that Jesus ends the parable with. For clarity I will read verse 7 & 8 from TLB. *“don’t you think that God will surely give justice to his people who plead with him day*

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<sup>6</sup> 1Thess. 5:17

*and night? 8 Yes! He will answer them quickly! But the question is: When I, the Messiah, return, how many will I find who have faith [and are praying]?"*

God will answer prayer; but He expects us to operate in faith. He expects us to not give up on the answer. He expects us to continue in prayer. "*He will answer...*," Jesus says, "*But the question is: When I, the Messiah, return, how many will I find who have faith [and are praying]?"*"

Finally notice the persistence of this widow. She brings her request to the judge and gets rebuffed. It's disappointing; but she comes back anyway. Same response on the judge's part! We don't know how many times this happened. Verse 4 simply tells us "*For some time he refused...*" It went on long enough to wear down this stubborn old judge. Jesus is not saying that we wear down a resistant God through our persistence. He is actually contrasting an unwilling judge with our very willing Heavenly Father. But He is illustrating the power of persistence. And He is encouraging us to keep on praying until the answer comes. There are many stories in the gospels where persistent faith is affirmed and rewarded by the Lord: the woman with the issue of blood, blind Bartimaeus, the Syrophenician mother, and others.<sup>7</sup>

Most of you are familiar with the healing ministry of John Wimber, founder of Vineyard Ministries. In his book, *Power Healing*, he tells about the perseverance that was required for them to enter into that ministry. He was pastoring a church in Anaheim, CA when God showed him from the word that healing should be a vital part of church ministry. So he started giving altar calls at the end of the service for people to come forward and receive healing. They would pray their hearts out for people with no results. He tells about an incident that occurred after ten straight months with no success. He and a few others were praying for a man and nothing was happening. After two hours of praying for the guy, Wimber fell on his face on the floor in despair. He was weeping and screaming, "It's not fair! You tell us to teach what Your book says, but You don't back up our act. Here we are; we're doing the best we can do—and nothing happens. You tell us to believe in healing and pray for healing, but You're not doing anything. Oh, God, it's not fair."<sup>8</sup> The man did not get healed; but the next person Wimber prayed over, got healed. Ten months with no results; then a breakthrough came—and the rest of the story is history. Wimber almost gave up before the breakthrough. That is the point of Jesus' parable. Don't give up. Keep praying; then keep praying some more.

*"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (James 5:16).

The Amplified says, "*The earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available [dynamic in its working].*" When you pray, power is being released in the spiritual realm—God is working! James talks about Elijah praying that it would not rain; and then praying 3 ½ years later that it would rain. Do you remember the story? Do you remember him sitting on Mt. Carmel with his face between his knees praying for rain? He sent his assistant to go out toward the sea for an indication that the prayer had been heard. Elijah is in intense prayer. He is praying according to God's will. The assistant returns. Elijah asks him what he saw. "I saw nothing." "Nothing, after all this prayer?" "That's right, nothing." Well that was pretty discouraging; but Elijah kept praying and sent the assistant to check again. Surely this time we will see some results. But the assistant came back with the

<sup>7</sup> Mark 5:25-34; 10:46-52, 7:25-30; Luke 5:17-26. The story Jesus tells in Luke 11:5-13 also emphasizes the value of bold persistence in prayer.

<sup>8</sup> John Wimber, *Power Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) pp. 48-52

same report the second time. “Nothing has changed.” Elijah knew enough to keep praying. “I’m praying *according to His will*; this has got to work!” Elijah wouldn’t give up. In Scripture, seven is the number of completion. When you’ve gone seven times, you’ve done just about all you can do. It was finally on the seventh trip that the assistant saw something: not big thunder clouds. The sky wasn’t black huge rolling clouds and flashes of lightning. But the assistant did see a little cloud up there that looked about the size of a man’s hand (1 Kings 18:44). For many people, that too would have been discouraging; but not for Elijah. It was all Elijah needed to believe for the whole thunderstorm. Elijah had at least seven opportunities to give up. Instead he persisted until the answer came. With the report of that tiny cloud, Elijah had the 1 John 5 confidence that God had heard him and he had the petition he desired.

(3) Persisting in prayer is an expression of faith that can bring us into the answer.

#### **(4) Persisting in prayer is empowered by the Holy Spirit.**

The persistence that is needed does involve our will and our choices; but without the enablement of the Holy Spirit we will lose heart. He comes along side us as the Divine *Parakletos*<sup>9</sup> or Helper and empowers our prayers. He guides and sustains us in the process. I have thought a lot about Romans 8:26-27 this week.

*“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. 27 Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”*

Based on those two verses I have been asking the Holy Spirit to help me pray; and it seems to be making a difference. The flow of prayer is easier. I am being prompted toward intercession more often. I am also sensing the compassion of the Holy Spirit more in my prayers. I share that for one reason. I would like for you to enjoy the same thing.

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you pray this week. In fact, let’s conclude this message with that prayer. Will you join me in asking the Holy Spirit to help us as individuals, as families, as a church family to pray?

Pray

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<sup>9</sup> Greek word translated Comforter in reference to the Holy Spirit (John 14:26).