

**Reading:** 1 John 5:1-21

**Theme:** Praying God's Will.

A few weeks ago, there was the Leeds International Piano Competition – 24 young people from around the world came to compete in it. To raise its profile, Leeds Council had pianos placed around the city for people to play. Some plonked, some of the competitors went and practised on them and TV had some celebrities play on them. Some of the ‘celebs’ said they had only been playing a few years and previous competitors inspired them to do better. Some experts can inspire us to improve in a skill, sport, ability. Sadly, some can be disheartened by experts and not bother to improve.

This evening we are going to deal with the matter of prayer. I know, from sitting under ministry, reading on prayer and preaching on prayer, that it is so easy to become disheartened with our prayer life and view our attempts to pray as feeble - a danger I want us to avoid in preaching this sermon - for my aim is to show us the wonder and privilege we have in prayer, to encourage us all to go on to use and develop this privilege. When John wrote of prayer here in v14-15 he did not do so to beat his 1<sup>st</sup> readers with a stick or a club of *“must do better in prayer”*, but he wrote to encourage and stir them up to recognise the wonder and the privilege of prayer.

John wrote of 5 certainties:

1. Jesus is God (v6-10);
2. Believers have eternal life (v11-13);
3. God answers prayer (v14-15);
4. Christians do not habitually practise sin (v16-19);
5. The Christian life is the real and true life (v20-21).

This evening we looking at the 3<sup>rd</sup> certainty John wrote of **God Answers Prayer**. John has been building on previously laid foundations - certainty on certainty. Wonderful truths that Jesus is God, is the Christ, the threefold witness that Jesus is God; - the water, the blood and the Spirit, who is truth and these 3 agree and form God's witness - both externally through God's word and by the Spirit internally. We noted John said that to deny Jesus is God, makes God out to be a liar! This gives us the assurance we can be certain we have eternal life and in fact God wants us to know this - which John drives home in v13 and we considered the assurance of faith last time.

John does not stop there at assurance of eternal life, but he recognises believers are here on earth and go through all sorts of nitty gritty experiences in their lives and they need their Father's help. This brought John to the area of prayer. There is so much we could say about prayer, but I'm going to try and restrict myself to what these verses emphasise - obviously said in the wider panorama of what the word of God says about prayer and not in isolation. Sadly, many take verses on prayer in isolation, build up a teaching, a practice of prayer from these fragments ripped out of the context of its wider teaching and this is especially so with the "*name and claim*" teachings e.g. Mark 11:24 "*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*" This used in isolation is a step on the pathway to fanaticism and is unbalanced.

Prayer is a mystery. We have a sovereign, all knowing God, who knows the beginning from the end and knows what we have need before we ask. Yet we are told to pray, to ask, to plead with God to work, save and provide! Some have even said we do not really need to pray because of this. Yet the Bible teaches clearly the need to pray - gives us commands, examples to do so, even the Son of

God on earth prayed and He perfectly knew God's will, plans and purposes. God does not need us to pray, but we need to pray! The God who determines the ends, also determines the means. We have the privilege and honour of prayer. There is, in God's wise mysterious providences, a spiritual law of cause and effect through prayer. Let's note 3 things:

### **1. Confidence.**

As a Christian we have eternal life, can have the assurance and confidence of being God's child and that the great God on the throne of the universe is our Father in heaven. As such we are able to have this confidence of going to Him in prayer. John says that as Christians we can have, as the Greek indicates, "*confidence, openness, free and fearless confidence, cheerful courage, assurance, freedom in speaking*" in approaching God. John has already used this word a number of times in his letter - 2:28 '*confident*' before Him at His coming; 3:21 '*confident* before God' in the context of prayer; 4:17 '*boldness, confidence*' for the day of judgement.

This is a dynamic, upfront and upbeat word. It is not for us to wonder or question if God will be in a good mood to hear and answer our prayers, but we can go openly boldly, confidently to Him in prayer, but never arrogantly or flippantly. Hebrews 4:16 uses the same word and we go boldly, with confidence to the throne of grace. We go to the One who is our Father through our Saviour, yet who is also God Almighty on the throne of the universe, but for us, His children, it is a throne of grace where is One who knows and understands our weaknesses, failures and is able to help us in time of need.

In prayer we go to the One who knows us, loves us and is more ready to help than we feel our need of help! We come to a big God

and nothing is too big for Him to deal with, yet we come to the God who loves us and knows us intimately and nothing is too small or insignificant to bring to Him - our cares, worries, hearts, plans, fears for ourselves and our loved ones.

As we pray in public, we are praying to lead others with us to the throne of grace. In public praying there are things which are not appropriate for us to mention, for it is corporate prayer together, but in our own private prayer times we can pour out our hearts as we pray to our perfect, loving, caring Father. The Greek word for “*confidence*” carries within it the force of “*freedom in speaking, unreservedness in speech*”. Our heavenly Father does not need to be impressed or won over by lots of words, for we are accepted in Christ and can speak as a child to the most wonderful, glorious, loving and caring Father. This truth should encourage us to go to Him in confidence.

## 2. Ask.

Prayer has so many different aspects - praise, worship, adoration, petition, confession, supplication. We can use the Lord’s prayer as a model, a template to give us avenues, areas in which to pray... We can use an acrostic such as ACTS - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Perhaps to structure our prayers we can use a prayer diary - items to pray for, answers given, but we have to beware of routine and a shopping list approach.

We are to note John says we can ask anything (petition)! People like this out of context and jump onto the prosperity, name and claim, visualise it and name it bandwagon. Yet carefully read what John says to these and all believers - “*if we ask anything according to His will*”. Prayer is not a slot machine, a vending machine - put in our prayers, press the right celestial buttons and out drops the item we want. Prayer is not centred on us or our will.

Prayer, true prayer is centred on God and His will, which is the emphasis in the Lord's prayer as it is Godward 1<sup>st</sup> of all, before we come to our needs (not greeds). Robert Law wrote "*Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man's will done in heaven, but for getting God's will done on earth.*" George Muller, who was a great man of prayer, said "*Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance. It is laying hold of God's willingness.*"

How then can we pray according to God's will? The Westminster shorter catechism asks in Q98 "*What is prayer?*" It answers (A98) "*Prayer is an offering up of **our desires unto God for things agreeable to His will**, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies.*" The next asks "*Q99: What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?*" and A99 is "*The **whole Word of God** is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught His disciples, commonly called **The Lord's Prayer**.*" It is important to remember these truths.

To ask things in His will, we are specifically talking of His revealed will and definitely not His unknown, secret will. A children's catechism defines prayer - "*Prayer is asking God for things **He has promised to give**.*" We can ask for our daily bread with confidence, but not to win the weekly lottery! God says He will meet our need, not our greed and to pray covetously is wrong. We are not to pray about doing sin e.g. for God to bless us as we try to... rob, cheat, steal A marriage person is not pray about adultery, leaving their marriage and going off with someone else as it is sin and dishonouring.

It is not only wrong in such situations, but is a waste of time to pray if we are clinging onto any sin or refusing to obey the Lord - for Psalm 66:18 says "*If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord*

*will not hear.” We are not to ask for things in a selfish, self-centred way as James 4:3 shows us “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with **wrong motives**, that you may spend **what you get on your pleasures.**”*

That’s why it is important to know the word of God and we learn what God has promised, what pleases Him and we are to pray in accordance with that. It is learning God’s priorities from His word for our lives and the world around us - then making those our priorities in prayer and for living. Doing so we can freely speak to God about such things for our lives. I don’t necessarily mean just set times of formal prayer, but we can cultivate alongside those formal times an attitude of prayer, where any and everything can be talked about with our heavenly Father.

Yes, there are times when we pray for something and we believe, feel it will be answered, even if it is something remarkable. Here 2 truths come together - Mark 11:24 “*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*” **AND** Romans 8:26-27 “*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.*” The Holy Spirit prompts us, urges us to pray specifically and believingly on a matter, a person, a situation - where the mind of God is brought to our heart and mind with a force and an assurance by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is not the norm, it is not to be demanded or expected, but occurs at times in our lives. Yes, it is always in accord with God’s revealed will in His word, but is something unusual, an extraordinary making known of His will to our hearts and minds in

prayer. That is God's work and He takes initiative in such - it occurs extraordinarily in the lives and experiences of believers.

For both the routine, the ordinary and extraordinary we are to ask in confidence and believing. To pray and mean "*according to your will*" is not a copout for failure in prayer, but it is right and honest as we do not know what God's ultimate will is in a situation we are praying about e.g. our prayer for someone's healing, salvation, or safety etc. It is possible we may be short sighted, self-centred and God has bigger things to do in and through these situations and lives. When we pray, we ultimately submit to God's will in any given situation, for our heavenly Father really does know best and we pray for grace to learn and to grow as we pray, as we have answers to prayer.

### **3. Heard and Answered.**

It is said God always answers prayer. "Yes" is an answer. "No" is also an answer and so is "Wait". God always hears true prayer - prayers prayed by His children, for His glory, in accord with His will. Some of these prayers will be for the salvation of others, for help, strength, for comfort, for grace, a need to be met for the praying one or for others. It does not mean that God will answer in the way we expect and we cannot, even in the back of our minds, have a series of ways we would expect God to work to answer our prayers and certainly not even have our own timetable for these answers! God hears true prayer and answers in His own way and time and God surprises us - Jeremiah 33:3 *'Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.'* In Daniel 10, Daniel prayed and fasted (*serious prayer times*) for 3 weeks and after 3 weeks he had an angelic messenger appear in a vision and he was told his prayer was heard from the 1<sup>st</sup> day, but cosmic spiritual warfare was going on and Daniel was in the battle by prayer. Because of this, his

experience of his prayer being answered was not immediate. If you are anything like me, we will like instant answers to easy prayers. God wants us to learn to persevere, wrestle in prayer - especially as we take our part in the spiritual battlefield as a prayer warrior.

We can always rightly pray for God to be glorified “*hallowed be your name*”. For the work of God to prosper here and around the world “*Thy kingdom come*”. For *God’s will to be done* in our and all people’s lives and all these *on earth as in heaven*; then we are able to pray for our needs... which requires much more care and wisdom!

It is good for us to note answers to our prayers. Thankfully, God is wisely loving and wisely merciful and does not bother with some of our stupid, selfish, off-line prayers, but we are to be quick to thank God for what He has done and how He has answered our prayers. It will surprise us as to how, also how often these have been answered and it should further encourage us to go with confidence to Him in prayer, expecting Him to answer our prayers according to His will.

Our heavenly Father has given us every encouragement to pray and it should encourage us to more often and confidently use the honour and privilege of prayer.