

Confidence in Prayer

1 John 5:13-15

Pastor Tom Anderst

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Last week was potentially a very significant Sunday in the life of our church family. We noted that according to the Hemorrhaging Faith study, two thirds of young adults who attended church as a child no longer do so. And half of those who leave no longer identify with the Christian tradition in which they were raised. We recognized that Jesus did not call us to go and make decisions for Christ but disciples of Christ. We identified a gap that must be bridged after initially connecting to Christ to growing and maturing in Christ. We recognized that every Christian is called to grow as a disciple and a disciple maker of Christ. We talked about fathers, parents and grandparents taking seriously their role to disciple their children and grandchildren in Christ. We looked at a picture of components of a disciple's life. We declared that it is totally unacceptable for us to remain as a come, be baptized and listen in one place community. We want to step forward to become a more intentional disciple making community of Christ followers. If you were not here last Sunday or you were here but didn't listen, I would encourage you to go online and listen to last week's message so you get a fuller sense of where we're headed. I also invite you to pick up a copy of our next step picture.

Last week over 100 of you indicated your desire to pursue growth as a disciple of Christ and/or a disciple maker of Christ. There's room for more. If you did not respond last week or have only heard about this today, I invite you to respond and take the next step.

I said it is "potentially" significant Sunday because if we don't do anything with our intentions, it will just be another Sunday. But if we turn to God and act on these intentions, it can be very important. We also talked last week about the reality that this will not be easy. There will be times when we don't feel like continuing or don't want to persevere. One of the key ways we keep going is by connecting to God through prayer. Today's text from the Bible provides some great encouragement about prayer. So if you are struggling with your prayer life or you find it hard to pray at times, I pray this will encourage you.

The last time we were in 1st John we saw God's provision of three witnesses to the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God – water, blood and Spirit. We interpreted these to mean Jesus' baptism, Jesus' crucifixion and the Holy Spirit. And then we saw John bring eternal life into the discussion when he said "And this is the testimony – eternal life and this life is in His Son. He concluded by saying "whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son does not have life." Now John will relate eternal life to our prayer lives.

1 John 5:13-15

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

John nears the final sentences of his letter. He has written to strengthen their faith or belief. He writes to hold them up and encourage them to keep faithful. Now he writes some final words of encouragement – kind of like a mother just before her child goes out the door. You remember how your Mom’s did that or Mom’s how you do that today. “Don’t forget your jacket. Did you remember your homework?” We all rolled our eyes at our Moms yet ultimately they helped us keep on track. Well here John gives some parting instructions. But first he provides one more great assurance.

Verse 13. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.” Christian do you know that you have eternal life? Are you assured that you have eternal life? John implies that it is possible for Christians to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and NOT have assurance of eternal life.

This might even be what you’re used to. You may have been taught or convinced that it’s presumptuous or arrogant to assume that you have eternal life. Certainly if we take God’s great gift of salvation and treat it casually or carelessly, then it may very well be arrogant.

But John writes to assure them because the people who left their churches and claimed this special knowledge had shaken up those who remained. But “if they believe in the name of the Son of God,” they have eternal life. Believing in the name of the Son of God does not for John mean a simple mental affirmation of facts. It’s not like “Do you believe that Spring will come?” Yes “Okay, then go on with your day.” Believing for John means total surrender to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

If you believe in that way, you can know you have eternal life. And eternal life is not only life forever beyond the grave. Jesus defined eternal life for us in John 17:3 where he said “And this is eternal life – that they may know you “God the Father” and His Son Jesus who was sent. So we can taste eternal life now by knowing Jesus and the Father more deeply. We have assurance of eternal life not because of what we have done. It’s because of what Christ did on the cross and through the resurrection. So putting all your trust on that and in Him assuredly means eternal life.

But what does this assurance of eternal life have to do with prayer. Verse 14 – “And this is the confidence that we have toward him that if we ask for anything according to his will he hears us.” So assurance of eternal life can lead to a confidence in prayer that Jesus hears us. We begin to grasp this when we think about who we’re praying to. When we pray, we’re not asking for favors from some low level official in a government bureaucracy. We’re not trying to get our request from a border guard that can be bribed. We’re coming before the Holy God of the Universe. We’re coming to the same majestic and Mighty God that Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6 and cried out “woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips.” This God is so holy that by a simple glimpse of him, he remembered his unholy speech.

It is no small thing when the Almighty God of the Universe listens to our prayers. It’s like a personal meeting with the Prime Minister of Canada or President of the United States where they are fully attentive to what you say. We have access to the Almighty God of the Universe who not only tolerates our presence but attentively hears and listens.

But if we aren’t sure we’re OK with God or that God is OK with us, we might not pray or our prayers will be much less confident. “If you can do anything will you help us?” But if we are assured of eternal life because we throw our trust and very lives onto Christ, then we will have confidence when praying that God hears us. **Assurance of eternal life leads to confidence in prayer.**

Notice John uses the word anything. So does this mean that we can ask for whatever we want and God will give it to us? A little boy was saying his bedtime prayers with his mother: “Lord bless Mommy and Daddy and then he shouted “GOD GIVE ME A NEW BICYCLE!!!” His Mom said “God is not deaf son.” The little boy said “I know Mom. But Grandma is in the next room and she’s hard of hearing.”

Notice John says “If we ask anything according to his will he hears us.” We have to learn God’s will. We’re like children when they first start to color. They have two problems. First, they might choose colors that don’t really fit with the picture so maybe they color a person with blue skin. Second, when the colors are chosen, they have a difficult time keeping the colors within the boundary lines. But as they mature and keep on coloring, they learn to keep within the guidelines and choose appropriate colors resulting in a recognizable picture.

As children of our Heavenly Father, our prayer life begins by resembling a child’s coloring. At first we don’t know what to pray for nor do our prayers stay within the guidelines of His will. As we mature we begin to pray for the right things and stay within His will. So, we don’t pray God help me in this sin. John doesn’t give us freedom to ask God

to fulfill our selfish human desires. But we can pray things like help this person grow in Christ; may your kingdom advance; may that person grow in holiness; may you grant wisdom and discernment. Your kingdom come; your will be done.

Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or for bending His will to ours. It is the way to submit our will to His. Every true prayer is ultimately a variation on the theme 'your will be done'.

But does this mean that God will answer yes to any prayer we pray according to His will? Verse 15 seems to indicate so at first glance. "And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him." Does that mean that anything we ask, that we are quite sure is in line with God's will, requires God to answer yes?

That's one possible way to interpret this. If we discern God's will and have confidence and enough faith, God will give us what we ask for. So if we just muster up enough energy and confidence and faith and really, really believe, God will answer yes. If he doesn't, then we didn't have enough faith. Have you ever heard that one before? So much damage has been done by preachers and teachers who go around claiming that if you just have enough faith God will give you whatever you want. So come to a healing crusade. If you have enough faith you will be healed. Except what about all those people who came to that meeting in a wheel chair and left in a wheel chair?

And what about Jesus in the garden before His arrest? Jesus prayed "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." If there's any other way, please free me from going to the cross. What about Paul? In 2 Corinthians 12:7 he writes "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord that it should leave me." What about Moses? He led the Israelites out of Egypt in the Exodus. He shepherded them for forty years in the wilderness. He lost his temper once in front of the people and God declared that Moses would not enter the Promised Land. But this bothered Moses. So in Deuteronomy 3:23 he writes "And I pleaded with the Lord at that time saying, "O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and might acts as yours? Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon."

But Jesus didn't get what he asked for in having the cup removed. He had to go to the cross. To Paul's request God replied – My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness. To Moses, the Lord replied "Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again. Go up to the mountain and look over the land but you shall not go into it.

On top of these Biblical examples, we have our own lives. Some of you have prayed for healing for yourself or others – and it didn't happen. Some of you have prayed for a situation to turn out a certain way. But it went the other way. So how does all this reconcile with 1 John 5:15?

The only way I can reconcile this is to conclude that **every prayer we offer according to Jesus' will includes submission to Jesus' ultimate will.** Jesus taught us to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done." Just after Jesus asked for the cup of the cross to be removed he added "nevertheless; not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26:39)." Then later he says in Matthew 26:42 "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."

One commentator writes, "Prayer is not a battle with God, but a response to God; its power consists in lifting our wills to God, not in trying to bring his will down to us. Another writes "John sees prayer primarily as a means of communing with God. Not communicating in order to force God's hand. God's simple hearing of requests is like receiving a favorable answer. The aim is not to put human prayer in the driver's seat of destiny. It is to assure the one who prays that God considers and acts upon all requests in a manner that maximizes His kingdom and His will.

Every prayer we offer must include submission to Jesus' ultimate will.

I remember experiencing this reality in the passing of my father. In some ways, my Dad's passing was expected. In other ways it was not. He died June 27, 2005. I visited him and my Mom in April and things were relatively fine. In May, I graduated from my program and Dad was well enough to be left alone. My Mom came and joined us in Boston for the graduation. Then in June he got sick – an infection. We thought this might be tough but he's come through every other infection. So we prayed, Lord please heal Dad and see him through this infection.

We lived in Ottawa at the time and Mom and Dad lived in Calgary. And we continued to pray and I talked with my Mom over the phone. Dad was admitted to hospital. I was pretty convinced he would come out. Then Mom told me they moved him to palliative care. That's painkilling soothing care. Most people who go onto that ward don't go

home. The doctor told my Mom that if I want to have some good days with my Dad, I needed to come out now. I couldn't quite believe it.

I thought there's still some hope. I had been called out once before and he came through it. I flew out and arrived at the hospital. Yes, he was sick but he was also conscious and talking. He still got up and walked with the walker. I think that was a Thursday. We still prayed for his healing. He seemed to be getting a little stronger. Then I stayed overnight with him.

That was when everything turned for me. It was a terrible night. He woke every hour or two calling for relief of his pain. They would have to top his medication. All he could say was "water, water." 7 times that night they had to give a medicine push.

The next morning when my sister and Mom arrived I shared if that's his life now, I don't want him to stay. My prayers changed – Lord I know you can heal him if you choose to. You can turn this around. But if it is your will to take him home, not my will but yours be done. Saturday, we watched a little baseball together. Sunday, he went into an unconscious state. Monday morning he was gone. After spending a little time with him, his arms were still warm – I went to the computer that they had for family and wrote subject line – Elmer Anderst – Home in Heaven. "Dad has gone to be with his heavenly Father today. We mourn at our loss but rejoice in what he has gained." I truly was at peace – Lord – it was my will; but yours be done and may you be glorified. And I continue to give God glory for the mercy He showed me in those last days. I was able to spend time with Him. I was able to support others. I did receive great support from others and the Lord. But it was his will and His time and God is God and I am not.

So ultimately every prayer that is offered according to His will includes your will be done. What might a confident prayer based on the assurance of eternal life look like? Let's try it.

Lord, you have given eternal us life – life forever but also life of the highest spiritual quality in knowing God and His Son Jesus. Our enjoyment of eternal life cost Jesus his life. Jesus, You suffered and died so that we might taste and experience this life. We have you Jesus and God the Father with us right now! So no matter what we face; no matter how complex our problems; no matter how difficult the situation – You are with us. We are not alone. Our eternal life depends on what Jesus has done – not what we have done. So we pray with confidence.

Therefore, in light of that gift – we pray. Your kingdom come – your will be done on earth; in our lives; our family's lives and this church's life like it is in heaven. May your kingdom come more fully into our lives. Will you reveal where we've been resisting you?

In this situation we find ourselves in, in this challenge we face, in the paths we travel, in the marriages in which we live, in the trouble with that person or a child, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God we thank you that you hear us – you listen – you pay attention. You are here.

Show us next steps that are according to your will. Grant courage and strength to move forward on the path you're calling us to. Grant supernatural strength to love that person that lives in our house; to have that conversation; to take that step; to tackle the problem; to disciple our kids. We present ourselves living sacrifices. We want you to transform us by the renewing of our minds with your Word. We come now to worship and fellowship with You at your table.