

The Prayer God Always Hears and the Sin He Never Forgives

1 John 5:14-17

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The title of this message is both wonderful and terrifying. *The Prayer God Always Hears and the Sin He Never Forgives*. The first part of this sounds great and the second part sounds not so great. We are tackling both of these because the text calls for it and they textually connect to each other. Answered prayer, and what the text calls a sin we shouldn't pray for because it is "a sin that leads to death." Intriguing, isn't it?

This is another example of our commitment here at Bethel not to duck the hard passages of Scripture but to see all of Scripture as inspired by God and there for a reason. This passage has been debated since the early centuries of the church and will take a little gray matter to decipher.

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 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. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death. (1 John 5:14-17)

Verses 14 and 15 deal with the prayer God always hears and verses 16-17 are about prayers for others. Prayers to God and prayers for others.

The Prayer That God Always Hears (Verses 14-15)

And this is the confidence that we have toward him...

The "him" here is God himself. Confidence before God is not something a sinner should expect. When we are in the presence of greatness, even great fellow human beings, we tend to fumble for words and get extremely self-conscious. Think of the most famous person you have ever met. Did you say anything? Did what came out make any sense at all? I remember when I was in high school I attended an event in which presidential candidate Jack Kemp was speaking. He came around and shook hands and as he shook my hand I said, "You have some very fine looking daughters." What? We tend to say some of the dumbest things when we are in the presence of people that we know are greater than ourselves.

How do we feel when we are in the presence of Almighty God? It is only our irreverence and stupidity that allows us to be cavalier. "Hi God." Or do you hear people try to be funny in prayer? They are not praying to God, they are praying to the people around them who they hope are laughing along.

To be in the presence of Almighty God, if properly understood, would shut our mouths up. When we realize who God is, the right response is to talk less, not more.

Yet John says that this is the confidence, the courage, the boldness we have. *That if we ask...* John is talking about prayer. Verse 13 is assurance of right standing before God.

Verses 14-15 are confident in prayer: *that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 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.*

Here we have an assurance from the apostle regarding our prayers. Just like today, Christians back then wondered, *Does God hear my prayers?* Or what about the universal experience of praying for something or asking God to do something and he doesn't do it in the way we want, or the timing we want, or perhaps does nothing at all? Does God hear our prayers or not?

John is closely following the teaching of Jesus on this matter.

- *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:7)*
- *If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. (John 14:14)*

To the casual reader, this sounds like I can ask God for whatever and he will give it to me or do it for me, like a child on Santa Clause's knee. Or perhaps like an event I attended once years ago in Indianapolis. I had a free night and a well-known TV prosperity gospel teacher/healer guy was holding meetings at Market Square arena. I decided to go just to see what it was like. The place was packed. The star of the show as at center stage, dressed in all white. The crowd was whipped into a frenzy and at one point he shouted, "Ask God for anything you want!" The music blared and then everyone danced and cheered.

That's an extreme example of abusive and selfish confidence in prayer. James 4 tells us God doesn't answer our prayers because our requests are motivated by greed and self-interest.

This brings us back to this verse. The first part we can understand if we understand atonement and grace. A sinner can have standing before God by virtue of Jesus' death on our behalf. By faith in Jesus, God declares me righteous in his eyes which positionally puts me before him as righteous. Still, the angels are righteous and they cover themselves in reverence before God.

How can we be confident before God? Jesus is our advocate, our righteous high priest, who represents us to God. So there is our source of confidence, but what about *that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us*, and *We know that we have the requests that we have asked of him?*

The key to understanding this is that while we can ask God for anything, the prayers that he always will answer are prayers *according to his will*. Let's be honest, most of our prayers are prayers according to our will. *God do this. God do that*. I think God understands our immaturities and our fears. However, maturing in our prayers means understanding that prayer's primary purpose is not God aligning with my will but me aligning with his.

This is listening in prayer. Don't think that God talks to me audibly or you will probably not hear a thing. Prayer and meditation are means by which God's will, as known by his Word, transform my will.

For me to pray according to God's will requires me to know God's will. God's Word is God's will. I urge you to spend time reading, meditating, memorizing God's Word. I would especially commend to you passages like the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6, the Ten Commandments, the prayers of Jesus (like Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 and his

prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane), and the prayers of Paul, often found in the first chapter of his letters. In these places, we learn how to pray according to God's will.

I find the Lord's Prayer so helpful and often use it as the outline for my prayers. *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.* God's will is to make his name holy in the world and in my heart. *Your kingdom come, your will be done.* Get my focus off what's best for me. *Give [me] this day [my] daily bread.* My trust is in you for everything I need. *Forgive [me my] debts as [I] also have forgiven [my] debtors.* I am in need of receiving grace and giving grace to others. *Lead [me] not into temptation but deliver [me] from evil* (temptation and sin are everywhere and I must strive for holiness). *For thine is the kingdom and the power forever, amen.* God is the ultimate and must be my ultimate today.

That sounds a lot different from, "Ask God for anything you want!" The first step in prayers God answers is to ask God for what he wants, not what I want. Even Jesus did that in the garden, *"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."* (Matthew 26:39)

Therein is a great example. I do think we can ask God for anything as long as the context for our asking is a bottom line, *God I want what you want.* Since God's will and purposes always stand, when I ask according to his will, I get what I want every time or I can rest in the knowledge that my ultimate desire of God's purpose will be done always.

The Sin That He Never Forgives

The more difficult passage is verses 16-17. *If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.*

Two questions immediately come to mind: 1) how can there be sins that lead to death and sins that don't lead to death, and 2) why should I pray for one and not the other?

What it definitely doesn't mean

Physical death

John isn't saying that there is sin that means the judgment of immediate death. This is obvious because the promise of praying for this person is that God gives them life. Unless that means actual physical resurrection, the death is spiritual or eternal death.

Some sins are mortal and some are not

The Bible is clear that all sins are mortal. *The wages of sin is death.* (Romans 6:23) There are faith traditions that try to put sin on a scale and say that some are venial (forgivable) sins; some are mortal (unforgivable) sins—just make sure you don't do those or you will go to hell.

So people feel free to sin as long as it's not a really bad sin. That is not what this is teaching and that approach is nowhere taught in Scripture. As an example, I have run into very sad situations in which a family has suffered through a suicide. There is a teaching out there that it means for sure that the person is not saved. The Bible doesn't teach that, but if you get this teaching wrong, such pain can ensue. It is better to say that all sin is mortal and all sin rightly causes eternal death.

What it does mean

We should pray for our brothers and sisters

This whole letter has emphasized Christianity as a horizontal experience and how important it is to love one another. This means that none of us live as if the others don't matter. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. There are no Lone Ranger Christians and part of living in love with one another is caring about the moral choices we are making. The Bible urges responsibilities we have in this respect:

- Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)
- Speak the truth in love to one another (Ephesians 4:15)
- Confront one another (Matthew 18:15ff.)
- Lovingly discipline erring members of the church (1 Corinthians 5:1ff.)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)

We should pray for our fellow Christian who is in bondage to a sin

It is the last responsibility that John is addressing. He has said we can go confidently before God, and when we pray according to God's will, our prayers are answered. What do we know about God's will regarding our brothers and sisters? 1 Thessalonians 4:3 NIV says, *It is God's will that you should be sanctified*. So when I see a brother or sister deceived by sin or in bondage to sin or perhaps, just being plain stupid in some sin, John says, pray for him! What do we know about the sins sinned by genuine believers? Are those sins going to end in eternal death? No. They were forgiven in Jesus and Romans 8:1 NIV says, *There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*.

So the sin not leading to death is any sin committed by a genuine Christian. God will answer and give them life, which I take to mean that God will bring them to repentance that they may live out the newness of life. Verse 12 tells us, *whoever has the son has life*.

There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. (1 John 5:16)

Accordingly, a sin that leads to death is any sin committed by an unbeliever. To this John says (but doesn't forbid), don't pray for that. We look around the world and see people in bondage to sins all around. What should we pray for them? *Lord, help them overcome their addiction to alcohol! Lord, help them overcome their pride!* I wouldn't say it's wrong to pray for that, but what really needs to happen is not for them to overcome a sin, but for their sins to be forgiven.

God never forgives the sin of those who do not believe in his Son. In a sense, the unforgivable sin is the sin of unbelief. So for our brothers and sisters, we pray for sanctification. For our unbelieving neighbors and coworkers and fellow students, we pray for justification.

Our prayers are a means for God to bring repentance to the genuine believer

The exciting promise here is that we have an important role in each other's lives. A church our size seems to always have Christians teetering on the edge of falling. Temptation has overcome them. Perhaps they have sampled the sin. Their hearts are moving away from God's will and toward the tantalizing pleasures of whatever. We need to pray for one another, that God would grant repentance and life.

Even when a Christian makes willful and rebellious decisions, we should continue to pray that God would grant them repentance and restore them. Our hope in our prayers is that they are genuinely saved, which time will tell.

Over the past few months, our leaders have rejoiced in three significant situations where God has granted this kind of apparent repentance. Let me share one of them with you. Some details are delicate so I'll speak vaguely. A man was a member of our church and decided to walk away from his marriage. This was ten years ago. Our church followed Matthew 18 and was sadly forced to remove him from our membership. Over these years, those close to him continued to care about his soul and pray for him.

Some months ago, God began to work in his heart. He began to read Christian books and there was a stirring in his heart. This led him to desire to make things right, including here at Bethel. He and I talked and this led to him meeting with the elders and reading a letter of repentance and asking to be restored as a member. Here is part of his letter:

Pastor Steve, it is my desire to be reunited with Bethel Church. Ten years ago I was asked to leave the church for leaving my wife and I was unrepentant. What brought me to that point was my disregard for anything. I was very self-centered and full of sinful pride... My problem was I had spent no time in the Word or on my spiritual growth. I had lost touch with God and the Holy Spirit's voice. I only cared about myself and not about all the people I hurt. God never gave up on me and he never left me alone. I was never truly happy trying to live out in the world. What I've learned through daily reading of God's word and reading Christian books is that the only happiness is in the grace of God through his son Jesus Christ. I asked God to forgive me for my sin in not trusting Him and my sin of faithlessness. I'm leaning on God's grace through the blood of Jesus Christ...I know this is my heart, to serve him daily and be a witness of his saving grace.

We were delighted to restore him to full membership and share the specifics with those who walked this journey with him.

God doesn't give up on his people and his people shouldn't give up on each other. I think we will get to heaven and find out that God answered the specific prayers of people, including his family, that he would be restored.

Let's pray for one another, especially our dear ones who are in a sin. Pray that it would not be sin that indicates no spiritual life but a fleeting sin followed by a sincere repentance.

A visitor at a fishing dock asked an old fisherman who was sitting there, "If I were to fall into this water, would I drown?" It was a weird way of asking how deep the water was, but the old fisherman had a good answer. "Naw," he said. "Fallin' into the water doesn't drown anybody. It's staying under it that does."

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