

Introduction

I'd like to begin by asking you a question. What are the five most significant prayers that you've ever prayed? To clarify the question, when I say "prayer" this morning, I mean specifically, asking God to do something for or to give something to others or us. One of my five was this one 11 years ago, **"God, when my son Moses gets out of the Marines, please give him a job that would pay a livable wage and that he would enjoy."** What about you? What are your five?

Whatever they are, let me ask you another question. How many of the five did God hear and answer? If you're a disciple of Jesus, 1 John 5:13-15 tells us. It was **"all of them"** and that's what I'm going to preach about today. God hears and answers all of our prayers.

In verse 13, John explains why he wrote this letter. It was to assure his readers about eternal life in all of its aspects, which, according to verses 14 and 15, include prayer. Those verses assure us that two things are true when we pray.

God Hears Prayers

First, in verse 14, God hears (listens to) all of our prayers. A young Christian who was praying about a serious issue in his life, said, **"I sometimes wonder if God even hears me."** Of course he hears him - and us. He listens to every prayer that we ever pray. He's able to do that because of a quality of His that we learned. He's eternal.

Before I understood that quality of His, I sometimes struggled in my prayer life. I'd sometimes pray and wonder if my prayer was getting lost in the shuffle of all the others that were being offered at the same time. I didn't feel a personal connection with God as a result. My grandsons, Malachi and Eli, sometimes try to talk to me at the same time and I can't listen to either when they do. That's how I used to feel in my prayer life

with God. How can He listen to what I'm asking Him to do or give, when a million others are asking Him at the same time.

But I now know better. The explanatory phrase is "at the same time." Our life comes to us moment by moment. One moment appears and there is room for very little until the next moment appears. That is our experience as creatures in time. But God is eternal and not in time. His life doesn't consist of moments following one another. So, if a million people pray to Him at 10:00 p.m. tonight, He doesn't have to listen to each prayer in the brief moment of time we call 10:00 p.m. 10:00 p.m. and every other moment of time from the beginning of the world are always the "present moment" for Him. Consequently, He has all of eternity to listen to every prayer that you or I or anyone else prays.

Do you realize what that means? God has more than enough time to hear our prayers. Imagine something. You are the only being that He created and the only one, therefore, to whom He gives His concern. And when you pray, He listens attentively to literally every word that you say. In reality, our experience with Him is just like that. He has infinite attention to spare for each of us. He doesn't deal with us "in mass." You and I are as alone with Him when we pray as if we were the only being that He ever created.

We have two automobile salesmen in our church. So I asked God to help each one to sell four cars this week. It was as if I was the only person who existed when I did. The eternal God listened attentively to literally every word that I said. He hears our prayers.

God Answers Prayers

But He not only hears them. He answers them as well. Answering is inherent in hearing. Imagine someone you love asking you to do or give something. If you hear, you will certainly answer and so does God. In that regard, it's common knowledge among Christians that there are four possible answers to prayer. Let's take a quick look at each of those.

The first answer is, "**No.**" God denies our request. He never does or gives what we ask. He says "**No**" when the idea of our prayer isn't right. That the idea of our prayer isn't right can mean one of two things.

One is that it's wrong. We ask God to do or give something that's immoral. An attorney prays his client will be awarded a larger judgment than he deserves. Or a woman prays she will win the lottery. Or sellers pray an inspector won't find a hidden defect in their home. God would say, "**No**" to all those requests because they're wrong, immoral.

That the idea isn't right can mean another thing. It isn't the best idea. It isn't morally wrong but it isn't the best either. God sometimes says "**No**" when He has a better idea, one that achieves a greater good. A friend of mine prayed that God would give him a specific location for a new store he was opening. Someone else got it instead. So he found another location, which, despite his initial reservations, turned out to be more suitable than the first one. God had a better idea.

A second possible answer to prayer is "**Slow.**" God does or gives what we ask but He does or gives it later, not now. There is a divine delay between the time that we ask and the time that He does or gives.

God says "**Slow**" when the time isn't right. He always knows when now is not the best time, when later is better than now. The Bible uses two phrases to express that reality, "**the fullness of time**" in Galatians 4:4, and "**the proper time**" in Titus 1:3. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that God's calendar is always right. His timing is always the best timing. So, we pray and ask Him to do or to give something. Then in the fullness of time or at the proper time, He does or gives it.

When Jill and I married, we planned to adopt a hard to place child. When we thought the time was right, we began praying for God to give us one. To make a long story short, we tried to adopt for four years but failed, with opportunities for three children falling through. But then suddenly, unexpectedly, the agency called us on a Tuesday to pick up a 2 1/2-month old baby on Thursday. It was my son Aaron. My belief is that,

for some reason, God wanted us to adopt Aaron, who wasn't born yet when we began praying. God says "**Slow**" when the time isn't right.

There's a third possible answer to prayer, "**Grow**." God doesn't do or give what we ask when we ask it. He gives us what we need the most instead, personal growth. His primary concern isn't that we get what we want when we want it. It's that we develop and mature so that we're ready to reign in heaven. Sometimes, He doing or giving us what we ask would reinforce negative qualities or prevent the growth of positive qualities in us. So, He doesn't do or give it.

That implies when God says, "**Grow**" It's when the person isn't right. He says, "**Grow**" to the person who is selfish and needs to grow in unselfishness or the person who is timid and needs to grow in courage or the person who is *vain* and needs to grow in humility or the person who is dominating and needs to grow in submission or the person who is impulsive and needs to grow in responsibility, and so on.

We come now to the fourth and final answer to prayer, "**Go!**" God does or gives what we ask when we ask it. He says, "**Go!**" when everything is right. When the idea, the time, and the person are right, He does or gives what we ask when we ask it.

Let's go back to that prayer of mine: that God would give my son Moses a job that would pay a livable wage and that He would enjoy. He did just that, creating a whole set of circumstances that led the Veterans Services Commission to hire him. His hand was clearly in it. Moses works there because God did what I asked Him to do. He said, "**Go!**"

That then is a helpful model for understanding God's answers to prayer. He says "**No,**" "**Slow,**" "**Grow,**" or "**Go.**" But in reality, it's more complicated than that and here's why. We always pray in a larger context that we don't see. In that unseen context, God answering our prayers sometimes involves changes in people, the conflicting needs and desires of people, complex sets of circumstances, or forces and conflicts in a spiritual realm that lies completely outside of human affairs, as in Daniel 10. God's aim is always the greater good for the greater number of

people but those factors can seriously complicate achieving that. I knew two unemployed disciples of Jesus, for instance, who both prayed for the same teaching position. God answering our prayers is a much more complicated matter than we realize, but nonetheless He does just that. He hears and answers.

The Conditions

That's His promise but there are conditions attached to it. The opening line of verse 13 reveals one of those. In it, John identifies to whom he wrote the contents of his letter, including verses 14-15. It's **"to you who believe in the name (person) of the Son of God (Jesus)."** His point is a simple one. The promise in verses 14-15 that God hears and answers prayer is only for those who believe in Jesus. The New Testament defines what it means to believe in Jesus. We become disciples of His. We make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says.

That reveals the first condition of God's promise to hear and answer prayer. We must be disciples of Jesus. Suppose Bill Gates writes a check for one million dollars and gives it to me. I'm all excited until I discover it's made out to someone else. God's promise is just like that. Just as I can't draw on Gates' check, non-disciples can't draw on God's promise. It's for disciples only. So let's become one.

The second condition is found in verse 14 and the phrase, **"according to His will."** In his classic book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law defines what that means: **"We readily acknowledge that God alone is to be the rule and measure of our prayers. We are to pray only in such manner, for such things and for such ends are suitable to his glory."** That is an outstanding definition of praying according to God's will. We make Him and Him alone the rule and measure of our prayers. Doing that has two aspects.

One aspect is the manner in which we pray. That manner is the ways in which the Bible teaches us.

The word "**confidence**" in verse 14 reveals one of those ways. That word in the Greek means literally "**freedom of speech.**" Last week, I preached about the United States Constitution and the incredible freedoms it gives us. One of the most precious of those, in the first amendment, the freedom of speech. Well, just as the Constitution gives us freedom of speech in our societal *lives*, so God *gives* us freedom of speech in our prayer lives. The Constitution allows us to say what's on our mind. God allows us to pray what's on our mind -to ask about the things that really matter to us.

That illustrates what the Bible does. It teaches us the ways in which to pray. So, we learn and then pray in those ways. Andrew Murray wrote a short but classic book that explains what the Bible teaches better than any I know, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. Reading it an excellent place to start.

Making God and God alone the rule and measure of our prayers has another aspect- the motivation with which we pray. Our prayers are primarily about Him and only secondarily about others and us. The first two requests in the Lord's Prayer define our motivation more precisely. We want God to be hallowed (esteemed) by others. We also want His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven - in totality. So, we pray accordingly, directing our prayers to those aims.

When I asked God to *give* my son Moses a job, I was concerned about Moses. I wanted him to have a good means of making a living. But I was more concerned about God than him and prayed accordingly. I asked Him to give Moses the job in a way that would cause Moses to hold Him in high regard. I also asked Him to make it a job that would not inhibit a familiar friendship with Jesus. I asked those two things because God not Moses was the primary motivation of my prayer.

Conclusion

I close with a benediction that Richard Foster wrote: **"May you now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, receive the spirit of prayer. May it become, in the name of Jesus Christ, the most precious preoccupation of your life."** I desire those two things for you and me: that we receive the spirit of prayer and make it the most precious preoccupation of our lives. Why? Because God hears and answers.