

Teach Us to Pray
I John 5:13-17

Over the first few weeks of this New Year, we've been looking at the means of grace, the ways in which God normally brings His grace into our lives. On New Year's Day, we celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a visible and tangible way of coming into spiritual contact with Christ. Last week, as we celebrated the sacrament of infant baptism, we rejoiced in God's gift of the Church, the covenant community. And today we turn our attention to prayer, the way God has given us to communicate directly with Him, the One Who created us for His glory.

Now, we all pray – we've said the Lord's Prayer together this morning, a prayer that Jesus taught His disciples in our Responsive Reading. But lest we become complacent about prayer, let's think about what John is saying in these verses from his first epistle: John says if we ask God anything according to His will, God hears us. And if God hears us, then we know that we have the requests we have asked of Him. John is so sure that God answers prayer, he says we should consider that our asking is as good as receiving – John says "we have the petitions," we have whatever it is that we have asked for.

That's a rather sweeping statement, but it's really the same thing Jesus says in our responsive reading from Luke's gospel, isn't it? "Ask and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Jesus doesn't seem to be setting any limits on the blessings that God will pour into our lives through prayer.

And Jesus doesn't stop there, does He? In fact, most of our responsive reading is an encouragement not just to pray, but to keep on praying, to persevere in prayer. The example Jesus gives us is that of a man who has had unexpected company show up at his house late at night. In his desperation, he goes next door to get something to serve his guests. Because of the late hour, his neighbor is hesitant to go through the hassle of waking up everyone in his household just so he can accommodate his friend. But Jesus says that because of the desperate man's perseverance, because he keeps on knocking at the door, eventually his reluctant friend will help him out.

So what's the point of this story? Jesus' argument is simply this: if we are confident that even our unwilling friends will meet our needs if we keep on asking them, how much more should we expect God to answer our prayers if we'll only persevere? After all, Jesus goes on to say that sinners like us know how to give good gifts to our children. So how much more is God willing to give us what we really need?

And if we were to read this text from Luke in the original Greek, it would give even more meaning to Jesus' words. For when He tells us to ask and to seek and to knock, He is using the Greek present tense, the way the Greeks indicated continuing action. In other words, Jesus is

really saying, “Keep on asking, and you will receive. Keep on seeking, and you will find.” Keep on praying, persevere in prayer, and expect God to bless you.

Now, it’s obvious that this sort of teaching could be easily misunderstood, and even abused. Perhaps you’ve heard of the “Health and Wealth” gospel so many TV preachers are peddling. “Just lay your hand on the TV – and send in a donation – and God will give you a Cadillac!” Others, with perhaps more genuine piety, insist that if there’s any problem remaining in our lives, it’s only because we haven’t prayed about it, or haven’t prayed with the right kind of faith.

But let’s look in the mirror for just a minute – have we received everything we’ve asked for in prayer? Maybe you have prayed for a specific job or a promotion that you didn’t get. Maybe you have prayed for loved ones to be healed, only to see them go on to be with the Lord. Maybe you’ve prayed for a relationship to be restored, only to see it fragment beyond repair. Some people have lost hope, neglecting prayer in the face of such disappointments. Some have gone so far as to turn away from the Christian faith.

So, what do we do with these passages of Scripture? How can we persevere in prayer, in our personal experience, God doesn’t always give us what we ask for? Can we really believe what Jesus and John are saying?

We can, if we’ll take a deeper dive into both passages. For our prayers don’t just need to be steadfast. They also need to be in accordance with God’s purposes – they need to be in agreement with God’s will. That is, after all, what John tells us in verse 14. Only prayers that are in line with God’s plans have any hope of being answered.

Now, this is only common sense. We know very well we shouldn’t expect God to answer our prayers if they were for something silly like wanting to fly off the church steeple. We know we shouldn’t expect God to give us selfish sorts of things, the Cadillacs that all those TV preachers are peddling. But we also know that all of our prayers aren’t silly or selfish. So, what about our disinterested prayers, prayers for healing for our loved ones? What about our prayers for broken relationships or for justice or for peace? Why doesn’t God give us those sorts of things?

Well, the problem with prayers that God doesn’t choose to answer, at least in the way we think He should, isn’t just that those prayers are somehow sinful or selfish. No, the problem may be that they are limited in vision. Sure we may earnestly ask for a blessing for ourselves or our loved ones, a blessing that may in and of itself be a good thing. But as we persevere in prayer, we must remember that God can see a lot more of the picture than we can.

So if we are to pray according to God’s will, as John tells us we should, we must remember that sometimes God says no today, so that He can say yes tomorrow. God may say “no” today, so He can do something even greater tomorrow. Remember what Jesus said in our

responsive reading? God, our Heavenly Father, knows how to give good gifts to His children. That means we need to trust that He knows what we need and when we need it much better than we do. In short, our faith doesn't need to be in the power of prayer, but in the loving, all-knowing God to Whom we pray.

Okay, so if we need to persevere in praying for things that are in accordance with God's will, what do we do about all those unanswered prayers? Well, John gives us some advice concerning spiritual concerns, beginning in verse 16. He says we should pray when we see that our Christian brothers and sisters have fallen into sin.

Now, we are accustomed to praying that God would forgive our own sins. This sort of confession should be a regular part of our prayer life, just as it is part of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught us in our responsive reading. But here, John tells us that we can pray that the sins of other people might be forgiven as well. If we see a brother, a Christian, sinning a sin that doesn't lead to death, we can ask God, and God will give life to that sinning brother.

Now again, we believe in the power of intercessory prayer, don't we? We are ready and willing to pray for our friends and our loved ones when they are sick, aren't we? And haven't we seen God answer such prayers, sometimes in miraculous ways? Well, John tells us plainly that the power of such intercessory prayer extends not only to physical concerns but to spiritual ones as well. Through prayer, we have the power to be the agents, the instruments not only of other people's healing but of their forgiveness as well.

Now, praying such prayers doesn't give us license to think of ourselves as somehow better than those for whom we pray. Even as we pray that God would reveal others' sins to them, we should of course pray that He would do the same thing for us. If we pray that God would cleanse others of their sins, of course we should pray that He would do the same thing for us.

But what if our prayers for our friends' spiritual healing go unanswered? Well, I think that's what John is trying to explain in verses 16 and 17. All wrongdoing is sin. All sin is treason against God, and all treason deserves the death penalty. But because of the grace of God, all sin doesn't have the same effects – all sin doesn't lead to death. Because of the grace of God, some sinners are given new hearts that are able to respond to God in trust, confessing our sins, accepting forgiveness solely because of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. For those who experience the grace of God in their lives, for those whose sins don't lead to death, God promises that our prayers will somehow help them to come to this point of forgiveness, that our prayers will somehow contribute to their receiving life instead of the death that all sinners so richly deserve.

But just as there are some folks who die even after we've prayed for their physical healing, we cannot deny that there are, in fact, sinners whose sins do lead them unto death. There are sinners who never do end up responding to God's grace and love with faith. There are sinners

who continue walking in the darkness, in the blindness of sin, scorning the very idea of light. For such people, the sad truth is that praying for them just won't help.

But of course there are very few people who, while they continue in this life, are so obviously hardened against the gospel. And so, even though the second part of verse 16 says that there is no sure and certain promise of salvation for everyone, that doesn't mean we shouldn't pray honestly and earnestly that as many people as possible would fall under the promise of the first part of verse 16. In other words, we need to pray with confidence that God would forgive our own sins as we trust in Christ for our salvation. And we need to pray with hope for our Christian brothers' and sisters' forgiveness and cleansing just as we pray for the conversion and salvation of the world. And we need to trust God to answer all our prayers in His own way, and in His own time.

For why do we pray such prayers? Why do we keep on praying, even when our prayers don't seem to be answered? Because of the undeniable fact of which John reminds us in verse 13: the whole reason that he is writing this letter is to remind those who trust in Christ that we already have eternal life. John wants us to believe this ever more firmly, trusting in Christ ever more completely, so that as we are more and more filled with the life and Spirit of Christ, we might pray with ever more power as our prayers are ever more in line with God's will. And as we see the world more and more through God's eyes, can we doubt that not only our prayers for ourselves but also our prayers for our Christian brothers and sisters will be more discerning, more loving, and thus more life-changing? Can we doubt that the eternal life transforming us from within will be ever more used of God to transform the world around us?

Beloved of God, if you are trusting in Christ, the Son of God, you already have eternal life. You already have the Spirit of Christ within you. So let's keep on praying. Let's pray with perseverance that God would reveal more and more of His will to us. Let's pray that God's will would be carried out in His way and in His time in our lives and the lives of our loved ones. Let's pray for forgiveness. Let's pray for cleansing. And let's pray with the confidence of children of God, a God whose great delight is to hear the prayers of His children and to give good gifts to us, a God Who died that we might live eternally. Let us trust Him and let us keep on praying.