



1 John 5:14-15
Praying Gods Will

There are a lot of things to pray about in the world. We have earthquakes in Ecuador, flooding in Nairobi and Houston, an angry and polarizing race for president, terrorism and refugees, and all the things that go on in our daily lives from losing your keys, to losing your boyfriend, to losing your job. The world is full of pain, confusion, and uncertainty at times, so we pray.

Or, at least we try to. It seems like a good idea, or maybe a last resort. But how do we do it? How do you talk to God? How do you talk to someone you can't see? Do you just shout up into the sky and hope He hears? Do you whisper quietly and try to be still? Do you have to know certain words? How is this thing supposed to work? And, how do you know if God even hears you?

Well, we'll find answers to some of those questions this morning as we turn to the Scriptures. We've got something like two mini-sermons held together here by these verses – so first we'll finish talking about God's Will and how we can know it, and why it's so important to know it, especially when it comes to prayer, but then we'll also look at five reasons why God might not be answering your prayers, even if you're praying according to His will.

Read with me, will you?

1 John 5:14 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. **15** And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

We looked at this passage last week and saw it promises we can have confidence God hears us. Not, "I hope God hears" or "I think He hears" not "We'll see how things turn out" no, "**this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.**"

But there's that big if, right? "**IF we ask anything according to His will.**" So what does that mean? What is God's will? Well, as we said last week – and you can go back and get last week's sermon on the podcast or through the website – God has a will, He has a plan, He has a desire for this world and things that happen in it, and for each of our lives.

Did you know that? Do you believe that? Do you think it's true that God has a plan for your life? That this life isn't just random or pointless; that there is more than just chance and chaos? Do you believe, really and truly believe, that God has a course mapped out for your life?

Well, He does. God has a purpose for you. Your life isn't meaningless, your suffering isn't pointless. YOU matter. You're important. And everything that hurts in your life, everything, is an indication that something has gone wrong. Death is wrong, depression is wrong, loneliness is wrong, anxiety is wrong, stress is wrong, bondage and habits that are destroying you are wrong, sickness is wrong.

The Bible tells us all those things are the result of sin – of things not going according to God's plan, His will.

And now here the Bible tells us that we can have confidence that if we're praying for things that are right, for things that build up instead of tear down, for things that help instead of hurt, we can have confidence that God hears us.

So think about that: not only does God have a plan, a purpose a direction for your life, He is also inviting you into conversation and security. He has time on His calendar for you; He wants to hear from you. And that process of you, talking to God, is called prayer.

If we can simplify things as much as possible: prayer is really just you talking to God, a child talking to their father, it's personal communication. And that is really important to understand because it's what makes the difference between wishing and praying.

Wishing is just that – throwing my hopes up toward heaven and waiting to see if things change. It's what I want to see happen and I'm hoping the universe or the powers that be, or 'god' will grant my wish.

But prayer is something entirely different; it's addressed to someone. It's addressed to God. And who He is affects what I say. This is why His will is so important when it comes to prayer. We can't ask God to give us something He has already said no to. We can't ask God for things that are going to hurt us or hurt others. We can't ask Him for things outside His will. There are limits to the kinds of prayers God will answer.

So how do we know His will? Well, one way is to simply look at what Scripture has to say. We looked at four passages last week that said very clearly: this is the will of God. So, we can find God's will clearly stated in the Bible. And when His will is clear there – go with it, pray along those lines, don't expect Him to answer prayers that violate those things.

But there are other times when God's will isn't obvious, there are other situations that come up and we don't know exactly what or how to pray. What do we do then? How do you know God's will in situations where He doesn't directly speak to you in an undeniable way? That's an important question to be able answer as you navigate life, so let me give you a few steps.

First, you begin by getting your heart in the right place.

George Muller is a man worth knowing about if you don't already. In the 1800's he was famous in the Christian church in England and was best known for a running a large

orphanage on faith and prayer in a town called Bristow. His book, *The Autobiography of George Muller* is a short, but very encouraging read that I guarantee will impact your relationship with God.

He once wrote down six steps to knowing God's will. Here's number one:

1. I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever that may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.

We could say it like this today: discernment is tied to desire. The more you desire to do God's will, the clearer it will become for you. 90% of knowing God's will is having a surrendered heart that is willing to do whatever God wants done. This is why we spoke last week about every true prayer being a variation of the theme, "Thy will be done."

If we are willing to listen, God is willing to speak, if we want to know Him, He wants to be known. Listen to what He says in:

Jeremiah 33:3 'Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.'

Or how about:

Psalm 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will guide you with My eye.
9 Do not be like the horse *or* like the mule,
Which have no understanding,
Which must be harnessed with bit and bridle,
Else they will not come near you.

It reminds me of waiters in a fine restaurant, they communicate with each other using eye signals and subtle hand signals that make their service seem perfect and almost prophetic, showing up with what you need before you ask. That's possible because they're paying attention to each other, they're already tuned in, they're watching for signals, they're expecting communication.

The horse or mule however, can be stubborn. They have to be tamed, and even then we have to use tackle and prods to get them to do what we want. Wild horses don't just come sauntering up to weary travellers and offer them a ride.

In this Psalm God says, "If you keep your eyes on Me, if you're expecting communication, if you're ready and willing to do what's next, I'll guide you."

Here's another one that some of you have already memorized:

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding;
6 In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.

What does that mean to acknowledge Him in all your ways? It means to look for His will, His way, in everything we do. If you want to be pleasing to Him, if you want to live your life for Him, He wants to be found, and He wants to give us direction.

And finally:

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.

God doesn't get a kick out of hiding His will from you and then look down on you for not discovering it. So pray, and ask God to help you get your heart in the right place, and pray that He would show you what to do, what to say, where to go.

And then, as you pray, keep an eye on your circumstances – God may be showing you His will through opening and closing doors – the appearance or disappearance of opportunities in your life. Sometimes the reason we can't figure out God's will is because it's something we would have never even thought to ask or imagine and we won't understand until it comes along. This is another reason why it's so important to follow step one and get your heart right with Him – He might want to show you new things that you wouldn't have come up with or asked for on your own.

So, check your motives, pray and ask God to show you His will, look around at the circumstances in your life, and then, here's another step: Seek Godly council. Ask other Christians what they think.

Romans 15:14 Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.

God gives us other Christians to help us through life, the Bible says the Holy Spirit gives Christians spiritual gifts like words of wisdom, words of knowledge, and discernment – these are spiritual insight, understanding, and judgment with a divine perspective to help us understand God's will for a situation. So, if you're having a hard time understanding or discovering God's will, ask another mature believer, God may want to use them to guide you.

Here are few proverbs for you on the subject as well:

Pro 15:22 Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.

Prov 11:14 *Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.*

But one word of caution here: be careful who you go to asking for advice and counsel – the very first Psalm warns us not to go to the ungodly for advice. After all, they're headed in a different direction in life – they're not pursuing God's will, so don't ask them for guidance on how to live a life that pleases Him. Go to other Christians that you respect.

There's much, much more that could be said on this topic of knowing God's will, so if you have questions, please ask one of the pastors or send us an email or set up a time to get together and talk – knowing God's will is of the utmost importance in your life and if you have questions, we want to make sure you have answers.

But we've been talking about knowing God's will last week and this week for a reason and that is, so that we can have a better understanding of this passage in 1 John:

1 John 5:14 *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.*

It's easy to take something like this out of context and make it about whatever you want – you may have even heard someone say, here's proof that God will give you whatever you ask of Him. But that's not what it says, is it? No, it says that if we are praying according to His will, if our heart's desire is to know His heart, then we know that He hears us and will answer.

OK, you say, but sometimes I pray, and I pray things that I think are according to His will and I still don't get what I want. What's up with that?

Well, let me give you five things to consider:

Number one – there may be a delay to our answer. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told people to ask, seek, and knock. And what He was saying was actually to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking until the answer came. Sometimes we need to persist in prayer. I don't know the reason why, but I do know that God doesn't immediately answer every prayer in exactly the way we hope He would. But He's God, not a genie in a bottle, so He can do whatever He pleases – remember, this is prayer, not wishing.

In the book of Daniel though we get a glimpse into what might be happening when the answer to our prayer doesn't come quickly. An angel visits Daniel and says that he had been sent immediately when Daniel began to pray, but he ran into spiritual opposition, demonic opposition, and that delayed him.

Friends, we know, and we have to remember, that there is a real devil, with real demons, and there are real human beings who want things other than what we are praying for, and at times they will oppose us and that can cause delay and frustrate our prayers.

Other times in the Bible we see that God waits to do something in one person's life because he's also doing something in the lives of others and sometimes person A has to wait for person B's life and circumstances to sync up before their prayer is answered. I'll give you an example: you may have to keep praying for a spouse while God works on that individual because they're not ready for you yet. And until they've gotten to the place where God wants them to be, He's not going to bring them to you. So, if you're feeling impatient, pray that they would hurry up and obey God and mature spiritually so the two of you can finally meet and get on with your life together. ☺

Number Two, the second reason the answer to your prayers might not be coming, is that it may be a time of testing. God didn't answer Job's prayers immediately because something greater was going on. God was actually giving Job the chance to glorify God by patient endurance. Or, I think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were living in Babylon when the king made a huge statue of himself and everyone was ordered to bow down and worship it. But these good Jewish boys said no, they wouldn't worship any God other than Yahweh. They said they believed their God was willing to save them, and even if He didn't, they still wouldn't bow down.

Now that's conviction, that's commitment, that's true worship. But you know what? God didn't deliver them. The king ordered them to be killed – they were thrown into a huge fire pit to be burned alive, and then God showed up, as soon as they hit the fire, He saved them and they walked out unharmed.

Hundreds and hundreds of years later Jesus told the Church of Smyrna in Revelation Three: "The devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested." Something bad was about to happen and apparently God wasn't going to stop it. If they had prayed, "God don't let me be thrown in prison!" that prayer would not have been answered. In that case, it was His will to let it happen. I can't tell you why, but I guarantee there was a reason that would make sense through eternity, I guarantee God was going to bring His ultimate purposes to pass through it all.

Friends, I know it's hard to hear, but maybe the reason God isn't answering your prayer is because He's testing you. Will you be faithful to Him no matter what, or are you a mercenary worshipper – are you part of God's paid staff – that as long the good outweighs the bad you're in, but if times get tough you start looking for a new position. Friends we don't just worship God because of what we get out of it. We worship Him because He is worthy. And sometimes, He allows difficulties to come our way because it's something He needs done, or something that He knows will help us grow. So trust Him, and ask Him to escort you through it if He's not going to get you out of it.

Number Three, the third reason why our prayers might go unanswered, and that is: sometimes unconfessed sin gets in the way.

Ps 66:18 If I regard iniquity in my heart,
The Lord will not hear.

Remember what we said earlier, the most important thing we can do is to seek to get our heart in line with God's. We want to know His will *so that* we can pray for His will to be done. We don't just want a genie in a bottle that will grant our wishes, we want a Father who has a plan for our lives, and we want to live a life that is pleasing to Him.

So, sometimes God refuses to answer our prayers because we're in no state to receive the answer. And maybe if God gave you what you're praying for, it would just take you farther away from Him. You can't ask God to give you a better life with which you're just going to disobey Him. So, if there's something you're praying about and you're not seeing the answer, take the time to consider – is there some sin in my life that may need to be addressed? There's no need to obsess about it, if this is the case, and you ask the question, I believe God will make it clear. But then you'll need to accept that and confront it, so consider it as a possibility.

Number Four, God might not be answering your prayers because you're in conflict with other Christians. Jesus said:

Matt 5:23 Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Does anyone have anything legitimate against you? Is there anything you need to ask forgiveness of? Is there anything you need to make right? Now, again, I don't think you need to obsess over this – if this is the case, I think you'll know if you just spend a minute or two thinking about it. God wants you to be reconciled with other people, and if you want what He wants more than anything else, He'll show you what needs to happen.

Number Five is actually a sub-category of Number Four, and it is: Men, conflict with your wife hinders your prayers.

1 Peter 1:7 (RSV) Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.

This is another verse we could say a lot about – what is that whole bit about “the woman as the weaker sex?” – we don't have time for that right now, that's not what we're looking at, but it should give you confidence to know God is saying that if a man does not love, cherish, and consider his wife, if he doesn't bestow honor on her, his prayers may be hindered.

Brothers, I know a lot of us are busy. I know the commute and the traffic are miserable. I know the project is demanding, I know your co-worker is a jerk. I know you've got a

million things to do and you can't get ahead of it all. But have you considered your wife? Have you honored her?

Valentine's Day was six weeks ago - you can't coast off of that anymore, it's time for something new. I don't know how long it's been since your anniversary, but I know Mother's Day is next week. Are you considering her? Are you bestowing honor on her? And not just on the big days, but have you told her how much you appreciate the shopping, the laundry, the fact that she cleans the floor behind the toilet, packs your lunch, and does a thousand other thankless, monotonous, and mundane tasks every day all while putting up with you and the kids and whatever else is going on?

Have you prayed for her? Have you prayed with her? Brothers, I'm only making a big deal about this because God makes a big deal about it. The Scriptures say clearly: God might not be hearing your prayers because of her. So lift her, love her, like Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her.

And single ladies – demand this. Expect it and don't settle. Don't enable some biological male to be a chronological boy. God made you to be a helpmate, so take a deep and strong look at who you're thinking about helping. What is he doing with his life? And is that worth helping? Ask that question before you commit.

Let's wrap all of this up by taking a look at one other very important thing John has to say about prayer. Only this time it's found over in his gospel. And this is really kind of a great summary of all we've said this morning:

John 15:7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

That's the key to it all – sticking close to Christ. It's the opposite of regarding iniquity in your heart, right? And it's in line with what we've been saying about desiring God's will.

The more you know God, the more you know His Word, the more you will know His Will and the better you'll be able to pray. The more you know someone, the easier they are to talk to, right?

We're going to take a moment and talk to God right now, and then we're going to celebrate communion. After that, Matt and the team will lead us in a song of worship, and then we're going to be a family – we're going to have lunch together and baptize some people who want to make a profession of faith in Christ. We've got a lot of good things going on this morning, and it's all because we have a very good God who loves us and wants to hear from us. A God who gives us confidence, that if we pray anything according to His will He hears us.

Will you join me in prayer?

John 4:14 If you love me, you will keep my commands.