

POWER IN PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

In our last study together in First John, Chapter 3, we looked at the problem of an accusing heart, i.e., a condemning conscience. What do you do as a Christian when your heart condemns you? As we saw, the usual result of a condemning conscience is a tendency to ignore God, to keep in the shadows and to distrust his love, to criticize his people and in many ways to manifest the fact that we have lost contact with the God who indwells us. The answer, as we saw in First John 3:19, was to reassure our hearts by a deed of self-giving love: "Little children, let us not love in word or speech," says John, "but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us," {1 Jn 3:18-19 RSV}.

We are to give ourselves to someone who is in need or help another in his problem, repay good for evil, or give back kind words instead of caustic, sharp ones. The result, John says, will be a sense of reassurance. If we are really in Christ, rivers of love and peace will begin to flow out from our hearts again, and it will be impossible to remain condemned. That reassurance, as we saw, is the first result of the practice of love. There are two more results that follow in this section, beginning with Verse 21 to the end of the chapter, and it is this passage that we take now:

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. {1 Jn 3:21-24 RSV}

You will notice that this is the other side of the case. This is the situation when our hearts do not condemn us. Here is the one who has solved the problem of a condemning heart, has resolved his situation before God, perhaps by the exercise of some gracious loving word or deed, and thus has received the assurance that he is "of the truth," that he is "in Christ." If your heart does not condemn you, then what happens? This is what is before us in this passage.

As Paul says in his letter the Philippians, "we are those who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh," {Phil 3:3b RSV}. That is the condition of the person whose heart does not condemn him. He is not looking at himself at all; he is looking at God and the greatness, the majesty, the glory, and the power of God. He is glorying in the availability of the Lord Jesus Christ. To "glory in Christ Jesus" is to not glory in anything that man can do or hopes to do, but to glory in what Christ can do in him. He has no confidence in the flesh whatever.

Now in practical terms, what is the result of that kind of experience? Well, John says, the result will be that "we will have confidence before God, and we shall receive from him whatever we ask." In other words, the result is the experience of a daily adventure of answered prayer, the excitement of actually seeing God working in your life and in the lives of those with whom you are in contact, the daily stimulation of asking and receiving from God. This is really the normal Christian life. This is what God intended us to experience every day.

Part of the reason why so many are finding Christianity to be boring and mediocre and often sterile is because they are not experiencing this kind of Christian living. Many young people have almost lost all hope that Christianity can ever do or be what its glowing terms describe. The reason is that they have

not entered into this kind of relationship, where each day, every day, they experience the glorious adventure of seeing a living God at work, answering prayer and giving to them things that they ask. But in this passage we have a beautiful picture of the normal life of a Christian. It is all centered in prayer, because prayer is the most characteristic and the most fundamental relationship that a Christian can experience. Prayer is the expression of dependence on a loving God, and the whole Christian life, as we have learned in many other passages, is to be characterized by a continuous attitude and spirit of prayer. "Pray without ceasing" {1 Th 5:17 KJV}, says the Apostle Paul. This is what exciting Christian living demands.

Now look at the earmarks of true prayer which John brings out in this passage: First, there is the spirit of prayer. "We have confidence before God" (and the word is, literally, "boldness"); we have boldness before God. If you have boldness before someone, it implies that you are in a close relationship with them, that you have a clear right to come before them. There is no fear of rebuke but a good understanding between you. Thus, to have confidence or boldness before God implies that you have a clear understanding of your right to come before him.

Occasionally I have strangers come to me and ask me to do a favor for them, in one way or another, in terms of counseling or advice. I've noticed that they usually approach me in a rather diffident manner. Quite often they call me "Doctor," even though I'm not even a nurse! They usually have a very polite tone to their voice, and some have even confessed to me later that they approached me with some degree of trembling and fear. I wonder what my reputation was in their eyes! But there are certain people who have no fear at all of me -- my children. They come to me with boldness; in fact, even brazenness at times. They seem to be perfectly confident that they have the right to come to me. I do not always grant their request, but they do not hesitate at all in coming to me because they feel they have the right to come.

That is what John is getting at here. Prayer is to grow out of such an understanding of the truth God has declared in his Word, that we have no questions about our right to come. We do not come on our own merit or position before him, for we know that we have no such ground. We come on Christ's merit. We come in his place. We come "in his name," and thus we can have boldness, just as he had boldness before the Father. All through that wonderful three-year ministry of his, note how many times he declared how perfectly at home he was in his conversations with the Father. He said, "Father, I know that thou hearest me always, because I do always those things that are pleasing to you," {cf, John 11:42}. He came, therefore, with boldness. Now that is the spirit out of which prayer grows.

But notice also the purpose of prayer, as John sets it forth here. "We have confidence before God; and we receive from him ..." That is what prayer is for. It is that you and I might be on the receiving end of God's grace, God's goodness, and God's glory. We receive from him. God is a giving God; he delights to give. He has all the resources of a superabundant universe from which to pour out to us. The cattle on a thousand hills are his {cf, Psa 50:10}. You know the figures that Scripture adopts in order to make clear to us how full are God's riches. His purpose and his plan are to give to us. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians says, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; that though he was rich, yet he became poor in order that we, through his poverty, might be made rich," {cf, 2 Cor 8:9 RSV}. This is God's purpose, to make us rich. Not in material things always, by any means, for that is not where true riches lie. Many a millionaire would give every cent of his money if he could have a little peace of heart or joy of spirit. But riches, true riches, God loves to pour out into human life. The riches of abundant life -- that is what Christ came to give. There is nothing more exciting than to see an invisible God do, in your life, visible things which only he could do; meeting your needs, satisfying your hearts, accomplishing your desires, doing what you could never do. And, as Paul adds in Ephesians, "exceeding abundantly above all that we could ask or think," {Eph 3:20b KJV}. Now that is not mere theological twaddle; those are words that the faithful God has committed himself to, for our supply. If we are poverty stricken it is only

our own fault, for God has designed a wonderful process by which we might receive from him. That is the purpose of prayer.

Now look at the scope of it: "whatever we ask." Not everything we ask, because sometimes, James tells us, "we ask amiss" {cf, Jas 4:3}, that we might consume it upon our own lusts. Prayer was never intended to be a means by which you could get a new Cadillac, or some other new toy your heart is set on. No, no. It is not for your own lusts. That lies outside the realm and scope of prayer. But within the realm for which prayer is intended there is no limit: "Whatever we ask." There is no limit to the nature or the type of request. It can be in the realm of the physical, the realm of the spiritual, the material, or the emotional. As long as it lies in the direction for which prayer is intended, it is whatever you need, whatever you ask. This is a great promise, is it not? For hours on end I could tell you tales of the supply of God in this manner; of the supply of coats, hats, shoes and food, etc.

One of the most amazing stories I know of in regard to prayer is the supply of four peculiarly-shaped bolts, designed for a certain piece of equipment, to some missionaries in a desert place in Guatemala. God supplied those unique bolts in a most amazing way amid circumstances where such supply would never appear even remotely possible. There are many well-authenticated incidents of the supply of needs in other areas such as changed attitudes, reversed decisions, restrained violence, and many others. The record of Scripture and of Christian experience is full of remarkable answers to prayer that God has granted, whereby he has simply changed a complete situation on many levels of experience: "Whatever you ask." It is not only about religious things that you need to pray. You can pray about anything. As Paul puts it in Philippians, simply, "Let your requests be made known unto him," {cf, Phil 4:6}.

John now suggests the conditions of prayer. This is extremely important, because God always gives his great prayer promises on the basis of certain clearly described conditions. No promise is unconditional and these conditions need to be carefully regarded. It reminds one of that little sign, one of my favorites, "When all else fails, follow directions." This is certainly true in this subject of prayer, we need to follow directions. And here it is -- "because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him." Those are the conditions; because we keep his commandments and do things pleasing to him.

Now there are many people who misread that badly. They read it as though it says in effect, "If you go to church, read your Bible, and witness to your friends, these are the things that are pleasing to God, and if you do all these things faithfully, he will answer your prayers." But that is not what it says, and that is not what it means. Activity of any kind is not necessarily pleasing to God. This is where we often make a mistake.

A lady came up to me a couple of weeks ago and said, "I don't understand why God doesn't answer my prayers. I go to church every Sunday. I read my Bible every day, but God doesn't answer prayers for me. What's the matter?" It was obvious that she was reading this as though going to church, reading the Bible and witnessing to others were the things that are pleasing to God and fulfill his commandments. Thus, she thought her prayers should be answered. It is a mistake to read this as though the things pleasing to God are religious activities. This does not refer to anything you do of itself, because nothing you do of itself is pleasing to God!

This is the mistake the Israelites made in the Old Testament. They thought that the bringing of sacrifices and offering them, the fulfilling of the ritual demanded by the Law of Moses were, in themselves, pleasing to God. But God sent the prophets to them to say, "No, they are not." "Away with your vain oblations. Your sweet-smelling incense stinks in my nostrils," {cf, Isa 1:13, 3:24 KJV}. Why? Because their lives were not in accord with these. It is not what you do, it is why and how you do it, that interests God. John makes this clear in Verse 23. Here we have the context of prayer.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us. {1 Jn 3:23 RSV}

He wants to make it crystal clear that it is not activities that are pleasing to God; it is attitudes. It is not the Ten Commandments that are in view here at all. John goes on to make that clear. It is the one great commandment which lies behind all ten: "the first and great commandment" {Matt 22:38 KJV}, Jesus called it. "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your strength and all your soul and all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself," {cf, Matt 22:37, 22:39 KJV}. The only way to love God acceptably is to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ. That is why John puts it in this way. Certain of the Jews once came to Jesus and said to him, "What can we do that we might work the works of God? You are working the works of God; what can we do that we might work the works of God?" {cf, John 6:28 KJV}.

And Jesus said, unhesitatingly, "This is the work of God, that you believe on him whom he has sent," {cf, John 6:29}. That is the place to start. You cannot do anything until you have done that. You cannot love God until you believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ; then you can love one another, as he has commanded us. Now it is not particularly the initial act of faith in Jesus Christ that is in view here. John is not talking about the act by which, by faith, you became a Christian when you believed in Jesus. That is included, but that is not primarily what he is after here. The word believe here is in the aorist tense which in the Greek means a single, decisive act. While it is true that is the kind of act by which you entered the Christian life, what John has in view here are those repeated decisive acts by which you count on Christ's power and authority to do whatever love for your neighbor demands of you. These two are blended together. "Believe in the name of his Son ... and love one another." It is all one commandment. What John is saying is, the condition by which prayer is answered, and answered abundantly, is that we make repeated decisive acts of fulfilling the demands of love toward another, depending upon the power of Jesus Christ within us to perform it. That is "believing on the name of the Son of God," counting on his authority, on his power. Notice there are two things in that. There is decision and direction:

Taking them in reverse order, there is the direction toward which prayer always moves, love for another. That is the context of prayer, the limits of prayer. That defines what is meant by the term, "whatever we ask." Whatever we need to fulfill this demand to love one another we can have. We are not to ask for things outside that, but if you really set yourself to love another then you can have whatever you need to fulfill it. "Whatever you ask," whatever your need may be. That is the direction.

The decision is the action you take to accomplish this, counting on Jesus Christ to come through and make it possible. God never moves your will to make a decision. You must do that. But when you decide to do what he tells you to do in his demand to love another, he then comes through with the power to make it possible. The result is that everything you do is pleasing to God. If it is all moving in this direction it does not make any difference whether it is little or big, whether it is costly or not, whether it is a glass of water given in the name of the Lord, or thousands of dollars invested in some enterprise, even though it is but a kind word spoken to a hungry heart, it is pleasing to him. It is not the activity; it is the attitude, the motive that prompts it, that makes all the difference. It is "by faith," counting on the living God within you to make it possible.

This was all illustrated to me recently when a couple from out of town came into my study. As they sat down, I noticed that the woman was particularly troubled. She was so distressed that she could hardly keep the tears from running down her cheeks. The man began to explain the circumstances. It seemed they had a son-in-law who was involved in a very difficult moral problem, and this dear woman found that this man was repugnant to her, absolutely repulsive, she could not stand him around. She loved her daughter and she hated the man for what he was doing to her daughter. She was eaten up with rankling

resentment and bitterness against him. Every thought of him burned in her mind and heart, and she could not put him out of her thoughts. Any time she had any contact with him she was utterly revolted.

All this was destroying her. She could not sleep at night, she could not eat. She was always tense, anxious, and there she was striking out at others in her home, caustic and sharp in her words. As we talked, all this came pouring out. She was not trying to be defensive and justify it, she just poured it all out. She said, "This is the case, and I don't know what to do about it. I can't stand this fellow." I said to her finally, "Well, you know this is not what the Lord wants of you, is it? He tells us that we are to love one another. You are to love this fellow who is so repulsive to you." She said, "I know that's what the Bible says, but I just can't do it." I said, "But that's the place to start, you see. You're saying that you can't, but really you can because God says you can. You feel you can't because, of course, out of your own strength and effort you can't. But God can because God does. God loves him already. He sees him, not as you see him, as an obstacle to your family's happiness; he sees this man as a man in the grip of an evil habit, an evil thing that is wrecking and ruining his life but for which he is not wholly responsible. God's heart goes out in compassion and pity to him, and he desires to deliver him. That kind of God lives in you, and he can love that man through you, if you will let him. All he is waiting for is your will set in line with his. If you will say, 'I want to. If you will make me want to, I'll do it, Lord,' that is what he is waiting for."

She said, "Well, God knows I want to love him, if I could." I said, "You tell him that, will you?" Together we bowed there and she poured out her inability to love. She confessed her sin. She admitted that she had refused to love him, and didn't want to do it. But she saw that this was contrary to the will of God and she asked God to love him through her. When we finished the prayer and they stood up to go she took my hand and said, "Oh, I'm so glad I stopped to see you. I feel better already." Now, I do not know what the result has been. I trust it has been victory on her part because it certainly is possible. But even then the peace of God was beginning to possess her heart again. The weary, strained, tense lines were fading away from her face. God was fulfilling what he had promised to do. Notice, now, how Verse 24 completes this whole picture:

All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. {1 Jn 3:24 RSV}

Jesus said, "If any man loves me he will keep my word, and my Father and we will come unto him and make our home in him," {cf, John 14:23}. Here John completes the whole picture. The activity of love, he says, results in a reassured heart, power in prayer, and anyone who begins to live on that level makes evident that He is living a Spirit-filled life, the life that God intended. God abides in him, and he abides in God, and this is the mark of it.

When John says, "By this," he is referring to all that precedes. "By this," i.e., by this reassurance of heart, by this evidence of answered prayer, by this flowing out of love to another in active deeds and thoughts -- by this we know that he abides in us and it all comes by means of the spirit of God who indwells us. As Paul says in Romans 5, "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us," {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}. That is the power of all Christian experience.

Now, do you see what John is after? You cannot bottle up the Holy Spirit in your life for your own enjoyment. There are some people today who are desperately trying to have the Spirit only because they are concerned about certain gifts that he might give, certain ecstatic experiences that they can go through and this is what they want. But you cannot use the Spirit of God that way. You cannot bottle him up. He must flow through you. If you try to keep him to yourself, your whole experience will stagnate and become mediocre, dull, sterile and lifeless. But if you let him flow through you, ministering to others in his name, by his power, then your own life will become refreshed and fragrant and fruitful -- by the

Spirit of God who dwells in you. Everybody else, looking at you, will see that you have discovered the secret of victorious Christian living, of the abundant life made available in Jesus Christ. Do you want that? Well, God is no respecter of persons. This is available for anyone, everyone, young or old, rich or poor, it does not make any difference; this abundant life is available in Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Heavenly Father, for this bird's-eye look at the wonderful provision waiting for us to step into and experience each day. We thank you for him, your Son Jesus Christ, who dwells within us. We pray that we may have the simple faith to believe him and to take decisive actions of manifesting love toward other people who are in need, physically or emotionally -- hungry-hearted, lonely people -- perhaps even our own children who need love, need to be accepted, need to have us stop our criticism and show concern and acceptance of them. Let thy love flow through us and, flowing through us, bless us. For you have promised, Lord Jesus, that if any man thirst he may come to you and drink, and out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water. We thank you, in thy name, Amen.

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