

A Person of Obedience

1 John 3:21-22

My first job out of college was “conference director” at King’s Arrow Ranch, a Christian camp in Lumberton, Mississippi. I worked alongside a guy named Stewart Jordan (a.k.a. StuJ), my best friend in college. StuJ and I lived with three other guys in a house out in the country. It was an unsanitary, chaotic, exciting living environment. Every morning StuJ and I would get up early, make some coffee, walk across the back yard to a garage that had been converted to an office. There we would sit at our desks in silence, drink coffee, and meet with God. One morning we were having our time with God and StuJ says, “Rat, could you please stop slurping your coffee?” “What?” “You slurp your coffee every time you take a sip.”

Sure enough, StuJ was right. I’m sure I’d been doing it for years, but I had no idea I slurped my coffee. I’m sure it was annoying for all sorts of people, but I didn’t realize it. We call that a “blindspot”: something that (for a variety of reasons) you don’t see. But after somebody points it out you, if you’re attentive, you see it ALL THE TIME.

I need to confess that I have had a biblical and practical blindspot in relation to prayer, specifically the connection between obedience and answered prayer. I had read the Bible from cover to cover numerous times, but I never really looked in the connection for myself. But through a series of conversations and spiritual readings I started thinking about the connection between obedience and a vibrant prayer life. When I read through the Bible this past year, I started noticing it all over the place. The connection is really undeniable.

Today as we continue our sermon series on intercession, we are going to discuss the importance of obedience in the life of a person who prays well. First I want to establish from Scripture that ***a person of prayer is a person of obedience***. I want us to see that Scripture plainly teaches that our obedience is one factor in whether or not our prayers are answered. Second, we’ll talk about ***why this is a reasonable condition for answered prayer***. If we think God is arbitrary or unreasonable when He requires obedience, we’ll resist Him instead of inviting His working in our lives. Third, we will look at ***an example from Scripture that ties obedience to prayer*** in a very pointed way. Finally, we’ll talk about ***our response***.

We’re taking four weeks to discuss the type of person who prays well. We saw from John 15 that ***a person of prayer is a person of the word***. Last week we saw from James 1 that ***a person of prayer is a person of faith***. Today we are going to see from numerous Scriptures that ***A person of prayer is a person of obedience***. (John 3:21-24, Psalm 66:18, Isaiah 1:15, Zechariah 7:13, 1 Samuel 14)

A Scripture that explicitly teaches this is 1 John 3:21–24. The book of 1 John was written to give believers assurance (or confidence) of eternal life. Assurance is different than security. Our “security” is based solely on the work of Christ on cross; His death is the only basis for our salvation. But our “assurance” is our internal confidence that we have indeed experienced salvation. If we observe faith, love, and obedience in our lives,

we have tangible evidence that we have eternal life. John also teaches that we can have confidence in prayer; this confidence in prayer is really a subset of our assurance of salvation. He writes this in 1 John 3:21-22:

21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.

When your heart “does not condemn” you, you have a clear conscience; you aren’t weighed down by guilt. Of course some people have false guilt (they feel condemned for no good reason); and some people have no guilt when they should (their conscience is calloused and insensitive to sin). But here John is talking about a healthy conscience in the life of the believer. When we aren’t indulging in sin (whether it’s pride, anger, sensuality, greed, or unkindness), we have confidence before God, specifically in relation to prayer.

In verse 22 we read, “. . .and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.” John doesn’t say that keeping God’s commands and doing things that please God *earn* or *merit* answers to prayer. It’s not as if our good works are like coins we’re feeding into a vending machine, as if enough obedience obligates God to give us what we want. But John does say that a person of obedience can be confident that s/he will receive what is asked.

In the immediate context, “keeping His commandments” involves faith and love. Look at verses 23 and 24:

23 This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 24 The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

What John writes here is very consistent with Jesus’ teaching in John 15. Abiding in Christ isn’t merely a state of mind where we feel close to Jesus (although it can include that). We stay at home with Jesus when we actually live the way He taught us to live through the power of the indwelling Spirit. When we side with Jesus at every turn, we can have confidence in prayer. In a few minutes we’ll discuss reasons why this is so.

Consider, as well, Psalm 66; the psalmist invites us to learn from his experience in prayer.

16 Come and hear, all who fear God,
And I will tell of what He has done for my soul.
17 I cried to Him with my mouth,
And He was extolled with my tongue.
18 If I regard wickedness in my heart,
The Lord will not hear;
19 But certainly God has heard;

He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.
20 Blessed be God,
Who has not turned away my prayer
Nor His lovingkindness from me.

The psalmist's conviction was that if he "regarded" (NIV "cherished") wickedness in his heart, the Lord would not hear. He didn't say, "If I ever sin, God won't hear my prayer"; it's more the idea, "If I love sin and refuse to repent, the Lord will not hear." In Psalm 32 David said a similar thing: "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away. . .when I acknowledged my sin, You forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:3-5).

Numerous other Scriptures confirm that obedience is a condition for answered prayer. In Zechariah 7:13 God says of Israel, "When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen." When you start looking for this connection, you will see it throughout Scripture.

Scripture doesn't teach or imply that we need to be sinless to be pleasing to God. To the contrary, both the old and new covenants made provision for sins; God provided a way whereby we can be cleansed from our sin and grow in obedience. In the old covenant, when people sinned, they could repent and bring various animal sacrifices. In the new covenant, Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. When we sin, we repent and look back at the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and thank God that when He died He died for **all** our sin. Instead of skulking around in the darkness, we "walk in the light" (1 John 1:6-7); we bring ourselves and our sin out into the light of God's truth and holiness.

The Scripture's teaching that a person of prayer is a person of obedience is **a call to live a repentant life** whenever we become aware of sin in our lives.

Why is obedience a reasonable condition for answered prayer?

To answer that question, we have to wrestle with the reasonableness of obedience in the life of the believer in general. If we aren't convinced that obedience is a basic, reasonable expectation that God has of us, we'll have a hard time accepting that obedience is a condition of effective prayer.

I think that part of the problem is that obedience is sometimes discussed using logic that we don't really see employed in Scripture. Sometimes people make the argument that since we are declared righteous on the basis of Jesus' death and resurrection, not on the basis of our obedience, that obedience is somewhat optional; obedience is better than disobedience, but it's not essential for those who believe. But **Scripture** doesn't use that logic. Just because obedience doesn't **earn** salvation doesn't mean that it doesn't matter.

Jesus, John, Paul, and Peter each taught that obedience is a basic, essential desire and pursuit of everyone who believes in Jesus. In Luke 6:48 Jesus asked the question, "Why do you call Me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?" It's a contradiction in terms to say, "I believe that Jesus is Lord . . . but I'm not all that interested in doing what He

says.” I’m not saying that we never have internal battles with temptation and sin; I’m saying that in the deepest part of our being we side with Jesus and want to please Him. Obedience makes sense because Jesus is Lord.

As well, obedience makes sense because God is our heavenly Father. No responsible parent would say, “I really don’t care whether or not my children are obedient. I love them so much I’m going to give them whatever they want.” No, good parents care whether or not their children are obedient because their “house rules” (i.e., their “commands”) reflect what’s best for them. Good parents - **because** they care about this kids - discipline them and give consequences for disobedience.

When I was about six years old I said something I shouldn’t have and my mom said, “If you say that again, I’m gonna wash your mouth out with soap.” My six-year-old mind must have thought she was being metaphorical, but she wasn’t. I still remember what Dial soap tastes like; she lathered up her hand and rubbed it around on my tongue and the inside of my cheeks and the roof of my mouth. My mom washed my mouth out with soap **because** she loved me and because I needed to learn the importance of my words.

The Bible says similar things about God’s discipline. In Hebrews 12:10-11 we read:

10 For they [earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

God, as a good Father, will do whatever is necessary “so that we may share His holiness. . .” His discipline “yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” Here righteousness is “right living”; we are told that a life of obedience is a life of peace. This is very observable: an obedient person doesn’t feel miserable and trapped; an obedient person is peaceful and free. That’s why God is committed to our holiness.

Sometimes God might not give us what we request because doing so would **short-circuit His discipline** in our lives. It’s not because He’s stingy or grumpy; we saw last week in James 1 that God “gives generously and without reproach.” It’s that God has larger purposes in mind: He wants us to share His holiness so that we can enjoy Him and glorify Him more in both the seen and the unseen realms. Because God has significant assignments for every one of us, He does whatever it takes so that we might share His holiness.

Ultimately it is reasonable that **a person of prayer is a person of obedience** because God is a good Father. He’s not only listening to our words; He is listening to our lives. He is so committed to our holiness that sometimes He will not answer our prayers (or will delay answering our prayers) to get our attention and to move us toward repentance. We find throughout Scripture that when people are desperate for God to act, they often humble themselves before Him and repent and **then** bring their requests.

Unanswered prayer should get our attention and prompt us to examine our lives and ask whether or not there are areas of disobedience that need to be addressed.

We want to say neither more nor less than Scripture says about the connection between obedience and answered prayer. Unanswered prayer isn't always evidence of an unrepentant heart; but **sometimes** that is the case. And God doesn't require that we are sinless before we can bring petitions; but as children who respect their heavenly Father, we pay attention to His commands and we repent when we are disobedient.

A specific example of obedience tied to prayer: Husbands (1 Peter 3:7)

In 1 Peter 3:7 Peter instructs Christian husbands how to live with their Christian wives.

7 You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.

The command, "live with your wives ***in an understanding way***," could be translated "according to understanding." Husbands should tailor-make the way they treat their wives in a way that's compatible with what they understand to be true. Husbands need to understand certain theological truths; but they also need to understand core things about their wives (e.g., their fears and anxieties, their past joys and heartaches, their aspirations, etc.). This understanding should shape the way a Christian husband treats his wife. A husband doesn't need to understand "women"; he really needs to understand ***a woman*** (his wife).

The comment, "as with someone weaker, since she is a woman," is hotly debated. My view is that Peter is simply acknowledging that in most cultures (and in most generations) men tend to have most of the power; there are certainly exceptions, but men tend to have more power than women economically, politically, and physically. Husbands often use that power to dominate their wives. Peter is saying that that should not happen in a Christian marriage. Husbands should never use what they understand to be true about their wives to manipulate or dominate their wives.

Rather, Peter says in the last half of the verse, they should do the opposite and "show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life so that your prayers may not be hindered." An heir is someone who awaits an inheritance. A Christian wife - like her husband - will one day inherit everything that Jesus secured through His death and resurrection: eternal life, a place in the new heaven/earth, rewards, etc. In light of what she will one day inherit, a husband should honor his wife. If he doesn't, his prayers "will be hindered."

Since marriage is such a core relationship in a person's life, how a husband treats his wife affects his relationship with God. God will look on his prayers less favorably if he hasn't been honoring his wife, living with her according to understanding. He needs to remember that he has married a daughter of the One to whom he brings his prayers. If one of my son-in-laws mistreats my daughter, it will certainly affect the way I relate to

them. I hope you agree that that's appropriate and reasonable. That seems to be the idea here: God cares how Christian husbands treat their Christian wives because they are His daughters.

This is a tangible example of why a person of prayer must be a person of obedience. In all of our relationships and in all of our responsibilities God sees and cares how we live our lives. How we live affects our relationship with Him; this is only appropriate because we have been "bought with a price" (we belong to Him).

Our Response: If what we've seen today from Scripture really is true (that sin hinders our prayer, that God is a good Father who might withhold answers to prayer until we turn back to Him in repentance), we need to pursue obedience in a very intentional, honest, humble way. There is too much at stake to do anything else. If you care to notice, God has assignments for you that are impossible in your own strength. If you read the NT and if you notice what the people around you really need and if you notice what is happening in this nation and in this world, you will conclude that you need (and that **we** need) God to do what you cannot do (and what **we** cannot do). Because we can't begin to live out our calling without the wisdom and power of God, we must be people of prayer. Therefore we must be people who pursue obedience with all our hearts.

Psalm 139:23-24 expresses this mindset in a very direct way. Consider making this your prayer today. . . This is a prayer for people with blindspots (like you and me):

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.