

## Praying According to God's Will

1 John 5:14-15

In our sermon series on prayer, we've talked about asking God for the things that we care the most deeply about, the things that dominate our lives. We've seen that since God is good and generous, therefore can simply ask God for the things we want. Even when we don't get what we've asked for, we can be sure that God is still good and generous.

Today I want us to think about *what* we should be praying – *what* we should be asking for. On one hand, Scripture doesn't really restrict the scope of prayer; every issue is a legitimate topic of prayer. On the other hand, Scripture consistently delimits the content of prayer by insisting that believers pray "according to the will of God." Listen to John's statement in 1 John 5:14-15.

14 And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

The book of 1 John has emphasizes how people can know that they have eternal life. John writes that if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah who has come in the flesh you have eternal life. And if you have eternal life, it will be confirmed by your obedience and by your love for others. John wrote the book of 1 John "in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (verse 13).

Immediately after emphasizing the confidence we can have of eternal life, John emphasizes the confidence we can have in our prayer life. One of the greatest blessings of eternal life is confidence in prayer – assurance that our prayers are being heard. John has used this term confidence three times already in this book (2:28, 3:21, 4:17). Confidence is contrasted with uncertainty or shame. John is advocating living and praying in such a way that we don't need to be timid or ashamed in God's presence.

Here John is saying that we will have this type of confidence before God in prayer *if we ask for things according to His will*. The key to confidence is asking for things that are compatible with His will. Since this is such a core concept related to our praying, I want us to spend some time thinking about what "the will of God" actually is and how we should have a comprehensive experience with the will of God.

The expression *the "will of God" normally refers to the revealed will of God*. Sometimes the will of God refers to things that God has told us he will do. For example, when the Israelites were taken into exile to Babylon, God revealed that after 70 years He would bring them back to the land. It was the will of God that they return to the land after 70 years. Interestingly, God said in Ezekiel 36 that He would do this in response to Israel's prayers. In that circumstance, praying according to the will of God meant asking God to restore them to the land – something He had told them He would do. God gladly gave them what they asked when they prayed something so fully compatible with His revealed will.

More often, however, the expression the "will of God" refers to God's righteous demands for us and for this world. Throughout the Scriptures, God reveals His righteous demands –

what pleases Him. Sometimes these demands are explicitly called the will of God. For example, twice in 1 Thessalonians Paul writes, “This is the will of God. . .your sanctification” (4:3) and “giving thanks in everything (5:18). (See also 1 Peter 2:15.) More commonly, however is the implicit assumption that every righteous demand in Scripture should be received as the revealed will of God. For example, it is God’s will for His people to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly” with Him (Micah 6:8). It is the will of God that we “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:16). It is the will of God that we “love our enemies” (Matthew 5:44). And so the things that God demands/wants of us constitute “the will of God.”

Here is an important point of context for “praying according to the will of God”: we are supposed to have *a comprehensive experience with the will of God*. We aren’t only supposed to pray according to the will of God. We are also supposed to *know* the will of God and *do* the will of God. The reason we have the Bible is so that we can understand the will of God. God doesn’t want us to be in the dark about what He wants from us. That’s why we meditate on and study and teach the Scriptures – so that we can understand the will of God. Once we understand the will of God, we are supposed to *do* the will of God (John 4:34, Matthew 7:21, 12:50). Romans 12:2 says:

2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Through renewed minds and obedient lives, we are supposed to demonstrate the will of God to people. We are supposed to prove that the will of God is “good and acceptable and perfect.” A lot of people think that loving and following God is joyless drudgery – bad and unacceptable and flawed (Some of us grew up with Billy Joel’s famous line bouncing off the walls of our minds: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. . .”). We are supposed to prove that the will of God is good and acceptable and perfect. That won’t happen unless we have a very comprehensive experience with the will of God.

Here’s the point: as we progressively *know* and *do* the will of God, we also “pray according to the will of God.” *Praying according to the will of God involves allowing our knowledge and experience of God’s will to shape the way we pray*. We bring our experiential theology to bear upon our praying. We don’t thoughtlessly pray random things that come to our minds; we pray in a way that is compatible with the will of God as we understand it and as we have experienced it. John’s point in 1 John 5:14 is that when we pray in that way we have *confidence* before God that He hears us. When John says that God “hears” us, it means that He hears us favorably.

John clarifies when he writes, “if we know that He hears us . . . we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.” We have confidence that God will give us the things we pray for in accordance with His will. And so maturing in our prayer life involves shaping our prayers according to our understanding of God’s will. For some of us this will require new habits. We may have to invest some time and energy in formulating our prayers. But that’s okay because we’re talking about having confidence in prayer – something that really priceless.

For example, let's say you wake up tomorrow morning overwhelmed with all the things that you have to do. You have a list of things that you really need to get done: project at work or school, errands to run, correspondence, taxes, appointments, grocery shopping, cleaning, exercise, etc. Maybe you have so much to do that you pray, "God I pray that You would give me supernatural focus and energy today. I pray that when my head hits the pillow tonight I will have accomplished everything that's on my list." That's an ambitious thing to pray. But it may or may not reflect the will of God. How can we bring our experiential theology to bear upon a busy, hectic day?

Scripture has quite a bit to say to busy people with busy days. Luke 10, for example, records how Jesus was in the home of Mary and Martha. Martha was so busy serving Jesus that she neglected to listen to Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, sat at the feet of Jesus listening intently. It is the will of God to listen to Jesus in the midst of our responsibilities. Since you *know* that it's the will of God to listen to Jesus, you might actually block out some time (even if it's only 5 minutes) to read and meditate on Scripture. You actually *do* the will of God in this way. And then you could pray, "God, bring Your words to mind as I go through my day. As I set out to accomplish the things I believe You want me to do, help me not ignore Your voice." That is praying according to the will of God. You can pray that very confidently, knowing that God will hear and answer that prayer favorably.

As well, the parable of the good Samaritan illustrates how you are supposed to "love your neighbor as yourself": you are supposed to be interruptible so that you meet needs whenever you see them. Walking by on the other side of the road is not the will of God for busy people. And so you might pray, "God, as I work hard this day, I pray that I would not overlook the people who need to experience Your love this day. I have a list of things I think I need to do today, but I submit myself to You. Remind me to be interruptible." That is a way to pray "according to the will of God." You allow your understanding of the will of God shape your praying. Again, you can pray that very confidently, knowing that God will hear and answer that prayer favorably.

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm all for diligence and productivity. I think God wants us to be diligent (Proverbs 6 suggests that we learn diligence from the ant), and I think that God wants us to live productive lives (Matthew 25 records the parable of the talents). I'm simply pointing out that you can be diligent and productive, but if you ignore the voice of God and ignore your neighbor in need, you haven't accomplished the will of God for your day.

Another example. . . This past week we had to make a tough decision here at Faith. We had planned to send a team of 52 people to Reynosa, Mexico over spring break. We have had a partnership with a church in Reynosa for several years. But over the past year there has been increased violence in border towns such as Reynosa and Juarez. Recently there have been gun battles between the Mexican military and armed militias from the drug cartels. The leadership of the Mexico team as well as the elders took a couple of days this past week to pray about whether or not we should still take the trip.

Let me explain how our understanding of the will of God led our praying and our decision making. For starters, we prayed for wisdom. James 1 promises that God gives wisdom

“generously and without reproach” to those who ask in faith. Praying according to the will of God involved asking for wisdom.

We prayed in light of the fact that there are always risks in serving God – especially in cross-cultural outreach. When we send our career missionaries to dangerous places. They count the cost before they are sent; they are aware that missionaries sometimes don’t return to their homes. But, we felt that this outreach to Mexico was a bit different in that a short-term team involving youth doesn’t have the same “counting the cost” and “calling” that our career missionaries have. But we prayed in light of the fact that there are always risks involved in serving God.

We prayed in light of the fact that the U.S. government has issued a “Travel Alert” for Mexican border towns. Scripture tells us that one function of governments is to look out for the well-being of their citizens (Romans 13). This God-given function is something that we take into account when we think about doing and praying according to the will of God.

We prayed in light of the fact that the unity of the church is also the will of God. It would be possible to make the right decision in a divisive way. We had a sense that how we made the decision was important. We prayed for unity for the Reynosa team and their families. We prayed for our relationship with the church in Reynosa, knowing that it would be a disappointment if we didn’t go.

When we met on Wednesday evening to pray and discuss the decision, we sensed quite quickly that God had given us wisdom as well as unity. We had unanimity that we shouldn’t take the trip, but that we should seek ways to serve the church in Reynosa anyway. Mike Graham and Russ Soppe have communicated with the team and with the church in Reynosa. The team will be meeting this afternoon to discuss options of what they might do to encourage the church in Reynosa.

In retrospect, making that decision was something of a clinic in praying according to the will of God. We prayed for wisdom, we prayed for unity, and we prayed for what God might want to teach those on the Reynosa team. We also did some lamenting; it’s a sad thing that we live in such a violent world – we wish we didn’t even have to think about these things. I feel like our experiential knowledge of the will of God informed our praying.

I’d like to give a couple of simple suggestions for ***Learning to pray according to the will of God***. This is obviously a life-long pursuit.

***Meditate on Scripture with a view toward prayer.*** (John 15:7) In John 15:7 Jesus said:

7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

If the words of Jesus saturate our hearts and minds, we will ask for things that are “according to God’s will.” I guarantee, for example, that if the Sermon on the Mount dominates the meditations of your heart, you will pray differently than you would otherwise. My suggestion is that as you read and meditate on Scripture, ask yourself the question, “How should I pray in light of what I’m reading?” That’s simply another way of asking,

“How can I pray according to the will of God?” This habit has the potential of rejuvenating both our experience of the Word and our experience in prayer.

***Allow biblical prayers to inform your praying.*** (Psalm 51, Colossians 1:9-12, Ephesians 1:15-19, 3:14-19, John 17) When you think about it, the great prayers recorded in Scripture are examples of praying according to the will of God. They express a deep understanding of God and His ways. For example, Psalm 51 is full of David’s understanding of the will of God. After David confesses his sins to God, he prays:

8 Make me to hear joy and gladness,  
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.

12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And sustain me with a willing spirit.

David’s petitions are based upon his understanding that joy is the normal fruit of those who experience God’s salvation (Psalm 16:11, Matthew 13:44, Galatians 5:22-23). Sin brings discouragement and robs God’s people of joy. In the midst of his guilt, David prayed according to the will of God when he asked God to restore his joy.

If we want to learn how to pray according to the will of God, the great prayers recorded in Scripture provide a wealth of insight and instruction. Many people find great benefit in actually praying these prayers as their own – whether it be prayers found in the Psalms, the Lord’s prayer, or Paul’s prayers for the churches. (You’ll find a very partial list of these prayers in the bulletin.)

Let me remind you in closing that our vision for Faith involves a deepening of our prayer lives. Praying according to the will of God will necessarily involve a deepening of our prayer life because it will involve a deepening of our love for God and His will/ways. Instead of asking the question, “What do I want?” praying according to the will of God will involve asking the question, “God, what do You want?”