

Praying Boldly

by Ray C. Stedman

It certainly is not an accident that John closes his letter with an emphasis upon the subject of prayer. He has been writing about the life of Christ – the only life that can truly be called a Christian life. That life is characterized by truth, love and righteousness, and prayer is the perfect expression of all three of these:

- Love is prayer's motive,
- Truth is its expression, and
- Righteousness its goal.

There is a deep-seated instinct for prayer buried within each human being. Given enough stress, given the right circumstances, it will come out. That is why it is said, "There are no atheists in fox holes." Under the pressure of danger there is a deep-seated desire in man to cry out to God for help. I remember hearing of a sea captain who described the violence of a storm by saying, "God heard from plenty of strangers that night."

Perhaps there is no aspect of Christian faith that is so puzzling to many as that of unanswered prayer. Almost all the problems in prayer are a result of ignorance of the nature of prayer. Prayer is a mysterious thing to many, and, because they do not understand it, they make experiments in the realm of prayer. But these sometimes do not turn out, and many have lost faith in prayer because, not having a proper understanding of the nature and purpose of prayer, their prayers have gone unanswered. They conclude that prayer is a failure, and God himself is a failure.

I wonder what would happen if you or I were called upon to operate the tremendously powerful instrument behind Stanford called the linear accelerator, this mighty nucleus smasher, the most powerful instrument of its kind in the world? I have never been in the control room of this particular instrument, but I have been in the control room of

its predecessor, a much smaller instrument and I watched its operation. It seems to be a very simple matter: All one does is to sit there and press buttons. It all looks simple enough. But I have enough knowledge of the power of that mighty instrument and what could happen if it were misused to not care to take the chance of operating it myself. If you or I were called upon to operate it, what havoc we would create in very short order by our ignorance of the power and potential of that great machine. Yet it looks so deceptively simple.

This is the way it is in prayer.

Prayer is a simple thing. It does not appear very difficult or complex and it is available to the simplest of people. Even children can pray, and pray very successfully, very effectively. Yet the understanding of the nature of prayer is infinitely complex and requires some considerable knowledge before prayers are answered regularly. In this closing section of his letter John gives us certain basic, general principles about prayer, then he follows them with a specific illustration.

We have first the general principles in Verses 14 and 15:

And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. {1 Jn 5:14-15 RSV}

As we have suggested, for many Christians prayer is a venture, an experiment. There is nothing very certain about it. We often pray because we do not know what else to do. Who of us has not at one time or another said, "Well, things have gotten so bad there's nothing else to do but pray," as though that were the final and last resort. But you do not see that attitude in the Apostle John.

What is his reaction to this matter of prayer? “This is the confidence which we have in him,” he says, “that if we ask anything according to his will, we know he hears us.” There is a great and ringing note of certainty there. Prayer is not an experiment, prayer is a certainty with John, a sure thing. He knows it works, and he knows how it works. That confidence is expressed by the word he chooses, *boldness*. “This is the boldness which we have in him; we know that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”

Now you cannot read the New Testament without realizing that God delights in bold praying, and in bold people. Read the Epistle to the Hebrews and see how many times that word appears. “Seeing then that we have a great high priest ... Jesus the Son of God ... [who] was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin, let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need,” {cf, Heb 4:14-16}. And again, “we have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way...” {Heb 10:19 KJV}. This is what ought to characterize prayer. It should be bold, confident, certain.

This kind of certainty arises from the knowledge of two fundamental principles of prayer, which John gives us here: the certainty of hearing, and the certainty of having. Notice these. “If we ask anything according to his will, we know that he hears us.” Perhaps the major reason for most of the unanswered prayers of the world is they are not according to God’s will, and therefore they are not heard. John makes it explicitly clear that a prayer that is according to God’s will is always heard. Thus, at one stroke he demolishes all those concepts of prayer which imply that prayer is a means of getting God to do our will. Prayer is never that.

There are many people who regard prayer as some kind of mysterious device by which human beings get God to do what we want him to do, a kind of Aladdin’s Lamp which, if we rub it in the right way, will cause the great Genie of heaven to appear and give us our requests. God becomes a kind of heavenly bellboy rushing to our aid when we push the button of prayer. It is this concept which has resulted in some of the frightful perversions of prayer.

For instance, there are the faith healers whom you can see on television today, who make arrogant, blasphemous demands upon a patient and

longsuffering God, commanding him to do things which they insist are their right to ask, though it is very evident that God is regarded as a junior partner in their business relationship. But that is not prayer and never was prayer. Prayer is a means of obtaining the will of God, and is limited always by the will and purpose of God. If we pray outside the purpose there is no assurance at all that our prayers are heard, and certainly not that they will be granted.

Sometimes our prayers are not according to the will of God because our motives are wrong. Sometimes we pray, as James says, “amiss, in order to consume it upon our own lusts,” {Jas 4:3b KJV}. We want what we want, not what God wants.

Some time ago I ran across a wedding prayer that illustrates how subtly this can be done. This is a girl praying on her wedding day.

“Dear God. I can hardly believe that this is my wedding day. I know I haven’t been able to spend much time with You lately, with all the rush of getting ready for today, and I’m sorry. I guess, too, that I feel a little guilty when I try to pray about all this, since Larry still isn’t a Christian. But oh, Father, I love him so much, what else can I do? I just couldn’t give him up. Oh, You must save him, some way, somehow.

You know how much I’ve prayed for him, and the way we’ve discussed the gospel together. I’ve tried not to appear too religious, I know, but that’s because I didn’t want to scare him off. Yet he isn’t antagonistic and I can’t understand why he hasn’t responded. Oh, if he only we’re a Christian.

Dear Father, please bless our marriage. I don’t want to disobey You, but I do love him and I want to be his wife, so please be with us and please don’t spoil my wedding day.”

That sounds like a sincere, earnest prayer, does it not? But if it is stripped of its fine, pious language, what it is really saying is something like this:

“Dear Father, I don’t want to disobey You, but I must have my own way at all costs. For I love what You do not love, and I want what You do not want. So please be a good God and deny Yourself, and move off Your throne, and let me take over. If You don’t like this, then all I ask is that You bite Your lip and say

or do nothing that will spoil my plans, and let me enjoy myself.”

That is what that prayer is really saying. Prayer that lies outside the will of God is an insult to God. As the Psalmist has said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me,” {Psa 66:18 KJV}. Prayer must be according to God’s will, John says, in the direction God is going, with a view to obtaining the purposes he intends. As Romans tells us, the Spirit of God helps us in our infirmities by prompting our desires, by creating deep urges within us, unutterable yearnings, hungerings after more of the real life that satisfies, not only for ourselves, but for others. Thus, the Spirit is our Helper that we might pray according to his will.

Now “according to his will” includes a tremendous lot. Much of the will of God is already revealed to us.

As a boy in Montana, about the only reading matter we had in the long winter months was a Sears and Roebuck catalog. It was a limited reading selection but what a tremendous amount of things were included. It took us weeks to go through only one section of it. We could order anything we had the money to pay for, but it would have been utterly futile to have sent in an order for something that was not in the catalog. There was plenty we could order, but it was useless to ask for something they did not have. And so it is with prayer.

Within the will of God there are tremendous things, vast numbers of gifts, that he has provided for his own. The will of God includes all that we need. All that we really want is available to us and to our loved ones and friends within the will of God. There is nothing we need to pray for outside of it. Outside are only things that harm, injure and destroy us.

Perhaps we do not know exactly whether a request is the will of God for us or not, and the examples of Scripture make clear that it is not wrong to ask even for these things. But we must then always add, as Jesus himself added in the Garden of Gethsemane, “nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done” {Luke 22:42 KJV}, for prayer is designed only to obtain that which is within the will of God. Thus, John says, that if you know that what you are asking for is within the will of God, if you have found a promise of God in Scripture, or, in seeking

the mind of God there has come a deep and settled conviction in your heart from the Spirit of God that something is the will of God, then, knowing that this is the will of God you ask for it, you know that he hears. God always hears every prayer that is voiced within the boundaries of his will. This is the first certainty that forms the basis of prayer – we know we are heard.

Jesus could say, “I thank you, Father, that you always hear me” {cf, John 11:42}, because everything he did lay within the boundaries of the will of God.

That brings us then to the second certainty of prayer, the certainty of having: “If we know that he hears us,” John says, “then we know that we have obtained the request that we made of him.” Think of that! If we know it is according to his will, then we know it is heard, and if we know it is heard, we know that we have it. God has already granted the request. In other words, God never says “No,” except to that which lies outside his will. As Paul says to the Corinthians, “All the promises of God in him [Christ] are yea, and Amen,” {cf, 2 Cor 1:20}. There are no negatives, it is all “yea and Amen.” Is that not a wonderful thing? Do you dare to believe that? “No good thing will he withhold from him who walks uprightly,” {cf, Psa 84:11}.

God plays no favorites and has no special pets. He has intimates, but anyone can be his intimate who desires to be, and moves along the program he has outlined. He has intimates to whom he gives much more than others, but he has no favorites, and no limitations as to who can enter into these things. Anyone can who will, but the secret of prayer, as John suggests here, is to take, to believe that God has granted everything we ask within his will. The secret is to take. “You have it,” John says. “We know that we have obtained the request made of him.”

Now he is not trying to kid himself or to pretend that God has given him something that it is all right there and if he will just open his eyes there it will be. There is no kind of psychological gimmick here. What he is saying is that when we pray, and the request is made in the will of God, then the answer is absolutely sure and it is only a question of God’s timing as to when it appears. It is up to God when that answer will come, but the request has been granted and therefore we can give thanks. We can take from him and thank him for that which has

been given, expecting it to appear in God's time. Remember that Jesus warned, "The times and the seasons are not for you to know," {cf, Acts 1:7}. Time is the only uncertain aspect about prayer. There are often delays in God's fulfillment of answers. This matter he reserves to himself. But as to the ultimate giving of the things requested, there is no uncertainty whatsoever.

Jesus made clear that God is not like a reluctant neighbor who needs to be wheedled, cajoled and enticed to give something. He gives eagerly, gladly, willingly. As Jesus said, "Ask, and it shall be given; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you," {Matt 7:7, Luke 11:9 KJV}.

Many prayer meetings are often pools of unbelief. Listen to the prayers in these meetings and so many times they are uttered in a wheedling, begging tone of voice, as though the petitioner felt he had to get God's arm and twist it a bit and persuade him reluctantly to come through. But this is not prayer, not biblical prayer. God is never like that, says Jesus. "What father of you, if your son comes and asks for fish, will give him a serpent, or for bread, will give him a stone?" {cf, Luke 11:11}. You would not do that, and God is much better than you. If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father respond to your needs in prayer? That is the true basis of prayer.

John concludes with this because prayer is the simplest expression of our life in Jesus Christ manifest in a practical way. We are to be constantly praying, constantly making demands upon God on this basis, knowing that he hears us and grants it, and all we need say is, "Thank you, Lord." Notice, carefully in reading the Gospels, that is what the Lord Jesus is always doing. Everywhere he goes it is simply, "Thank you, Father. Thank you for this, thank you for that. I know that you have heard me, I know that you have done this. Thank you." His life was one of continual giving of thanks, and that is what we are expected to do: "giving thanks in all things, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you," {cf, 1 Th 5:18}.

Now John comes to the specific illustration of this, in a passage that troubles many, Verses 16 and 17:

If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal. I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal. {1 Jn 5:16-17 RSV}

Now do not let curiosity over this mortal sin (or rather, much better, "the sin unto death"), keep you from seeing the relationship of these verses to what he has just said. These two verses are an illustration of a request that is in the will of God, as contrasted with one that is not in the will of God. That is what he has just been talking about, urging us to pray only concerning that which is the will of God. He then gives us these two illustrations, one which is in the will of God, one which is not. The "sin which is not unto death" is the kind which permits a concerned brother to ask God for deliverance from that sin for an erring brother and the will of God is to grant that request. The "sin which is unto death" is the kind to which God has already determined upon a certain response and no prayer is going to change his mind. Therefore, it is useless to pray. That is why John gives this illustration.

Now let us come to the moot question, what is this sin unto death? There are three major explanations that exist of this passage and particularly of this phrase, "the sin unto death."

1. The first view regards it as some specific sin which is so terrible as to be unforgivable, as suicide, murder, idolatry, even adultery. This view (which has been held by many through the Christian centuries) early gave rise to the Catholic distinctions between mortal and venial sins. This is, perhaps, why the RSV translates this "sin which is mortal" and "sin which is not mortal." There is absolutely no question but what that translation is wrong. It should never be translated "mortal sin" for it has nothing to do with the question of salvation. There is no warrant in Scripture whatsoever for distinguishing between mortal and venial sins; i.e., sins which can be forgiven (venial), and those sins which can never be forgiven (mortal). Scripture makes no such distinctions. As a matter of fact, this sin is not any one specific sin. The Greek makes very clear here that this is simply sin in general. It is not a sin which is unto death; it is simply sin which is unto death.

Any specific sin can become sin unto death. Therefore, it is not a specific kind of sin that is in view and that interpretation simply cannot stand.

2. There is a second view which links this with the words of Jesus concerning the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Remember that on one occasion he warned that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. The death which is mentioned in this passage in First John is taken to mean spiritual death and is then associated with the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is, of course, a description of what we generally call apostasy; i.e., an apostate is someone who has made a profession of faith in Christ but begins to drift away and ultimately comes to the place where he actually blasphemes the name of the Lord Jesus and the things of Christian faith, denying them and turning his back upon them to go into a completely apostate state. Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 and other passages make clear that such an apostate is in a terrible situation. He has committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the flagrant rejection of the testimony of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ, and that is unpardonable.

But it is equally clear that kind of sin can never be committed by a genuine born-again Christian. It is only committed by those who have made a profession of faith but have never entered into new birth in Jesus Christ. But the word here is “if any one sees his brother committing what is not a sin unto death,” and the word, brother, is reserved for other Christians. It is so defined in Chapter 5, Verse 1, of this very letter. John says that “every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and every one who loves the Father loves the child.” That is, such a one is my brother; he, like me, is a member of the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, it seems likely that the sin unto death mentioned here is limited to Christians, and cannot refer to apostates.

3. That brings us to the third view, which I believe is the correct one, which views death here

as physical death: “If any one sees his brother committing what is not a sin unto [physical] death, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not unto [physical] death. There is sin which is unto [physical] death.” There is sin which a Christian can commit which will result in God taking him home in physical death. John goes on to say, “I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not unto [physical] death.”

Now there are certain examples of this “sin unto death” given in Scripture which, if one studies them through carefully, will reveal the element that turns ordinary sin into sin which is unto death. “All wrongdoing is sin,” says John. All unrighteousness is sin, let us not misunderstand that, but there is sin which has a certain element about it, a certain characteristic which will result in physical death, physical judgment. Let us look at some of the instances of this in Scripture.

- Moses, for instance, committed a sin unto death when he was commanded of God to speak to the rock in the wilderness and water would come forth to meet the needs of the children of Israel {cf, Num 20:8}. Previously he had been commanded to strike a rock and the water would come out, and when he did the water did come out. But on a second occasion he was told to speak to the rock. This change was important because the rock was a type of Christ and to strike it was a picture of the judgment of the cross. Now the cross is the way by which the refreshing water of grace first comes into our life as Christians, but after we have become Christians we are not to strike the rock (crucify Christ again) but to speak to it. We are to simply ask of him and out of the Rock will come flowing the rivers of living water we need. But Moses broke the significance of that type when in his anger, he struck the rock twice. Though God, in grace, allowed the water to come flowing out, he said to him, “Because you have disobeyed me and not sanctified me in the eyes of the people, you will not be allowed to lead these people into the land of promise,” {cf, Num 20:12}. Later on, when they came to the borders of the land, Moses said to God in effect, “Lord, allow me

to go on in. Forgive this, and let me go on in” {cf, Deut 3:24-25}, and the Lord said to him, “Speak no more to me about this matter” {cf, Deut 3:26}, i.e., do not pray about this (just as John said, “I do not say you should pray about that”), “but get up to the mountain and I will let you see the land, but that is as far as you can go,” {cf, Deut 3:27}. Moses had committed a sin unto death. In his case it did not occur right away, but it occurred prematurely and before his work was really completed.

- A little further on in the book of Joshua you find that Achan commits a sin unto death. As the children of Israel crossed the Jordan and surrounded Jericho they were told that when the city became theirs they were not to touch anything in it, they were not to take any of the possessions of the inhabitants of the city, or to covet anything, for it was all cursed of God. But when the walls came tumbling down and they came into the city, one man among them, Achan, saw a beautiful garment and a wedge of gold, and he coveted these and buried them in the dirt beneath his tent. For this judgment came upon Israel. In their next battle they met with utter and complete defeat. Searching out the camp, in obedience to the Word of God, Joshua found that it was Achan who did this. He was brought out with his whole family, and by command of God they were put to death. That was a sin unto death.
- In the New Testament, in the fifth chapter of Acts, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, pretended to a devotion that they did not really possess, and wanting a reputation in the eyes of other Christians, they lied about the money they received for certain land. As a result, they were immediately put to death by God when their lie became evident. They were taken out, one by one, and buried. They, too, had committed a sin unto death.
- Also remember what the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians about their conduct, saying, “Some of you are drunken, some are selfish, pushing your way in and eating before others, showing no concern for others, and above all not discerning the meaning of this table, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause,

many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” {cf, 1 Cor 11:28-30}, i.e., have died. Now what does this mean? It meant that certain ones had committed sin which was unto death.

But note that in all these examples it was not the same sin, by any means. It was simply sin which results in the judgment of physical death. What then, is the element that turns ordinary sin into this kind of sin? I think if you look at these examples together you will see what it is. It is the element of wanton, presumptuous action in the face of clear knowledge that it is wrong. It is willfulness, a willful presumption to pursue something when you know God has said it is wrong. This is sin unto death, and the result is physical judgment.

Now it does not always come suddenly. It did with Ananias and Sapphira, it did with Achan, but it did not with Moses, and it did not with the Corinthians. With them it came in stages: first it was weakness, then sickness, and finally death. Perhaps much of the physical weakness that is apparent among Christians today may arise from this very cause. Not all physical weakness comes from this, not all premature deaths arise from this, but some very likely do. It is persistence in a determined course of action when you know that God has said it is wrong, that creates sin unto death.

Now let us look again at what John has said. “If any one sees his brother committing sin which is not unto death,” i.e., sin which arises largely out of ignorance, sin where someone is simply doing something which they may have a vague idea is wrong, but they have no understanding of the implications of it, no awareness of how bad it is. This is the kind of sin we older people often see manifest among the younger. Young Christians often stumble into things they are not aware of, they do not understand what they are getting into, they do not realize the danger. Then, if you see your brother committing that kind of a sin, ask of God, and God will give life for those whose sin is not unto death. God will withhold the judgment of physical weakness and grant opportunity for the renewal of life.

You can see that in the Old Testament in the case of King Hezekiah. Remember that in a very unwise moment he allowed the King of Babylon to send visitors into his palace to investigate all that was going on, and to see the riches of the palace. The prophet Isaiah warned Hezekiah that these men

only wanted to see how much money he had and whether it was worth sending an army to take it or not. He said, "You have sold yourself into the hands of the Babylonians." As a result of that, King Hezekiah received a sentence of death from God. God told him to prepare himself, to get everything ready because he was going to die. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed, beseeching the Lord. As a result of that prayer of confession and repentance, God stopped the prophet Isaiah as he was going out the door, having delivered the sentence of death and said, "Go back to the King. I have granted him fifteen more years of life," {cf, Isa 38:5}. As a sign that it would happen, the sun dial in the garden went backward ten degrees. That is an example of God granting life for those who do not commit a sin which is unto death. Repentance reverses the judgment. Those who willfully determine to go on in a way that is wrong commit sin which is unto death, and when they do God says do not pray for that.

Paul, writing to Titus, says something very similar. In the closing part of that little letter he says, "As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is self-condemned," {Titus 3:10-11 RSV}. Here is a brother determined to go on his way. Therefore, there is no need to pray for him. There is nothing you can do but let God's judgment wake him up. Perhaps God in grace will deal patiently with him, give him a time of sickness or weakness, and that will bring him to his senses. But if not, God will take him home.

Dr. H. A. Ironside used to illustrate this as follows: Sometimes you see children playing outside, and when quarreling breaks out the mother says, "If you don't behave yourself, you will have

to come in the house." Her child says, "Don't worry, mother, I'll be good." But a little while later quarreling breaks out again, and the mother comes out and says, "Now that's enough. You've got to come in. I can't trust you outside anymore." The child begs his mother to let him stay out some more. "Oh, mother, I'll be good. I promise I will." But she says, "No, I gave you a chance. Now come on inside. I can't trust you out there any more."

That is what God sometimes says to us. Do we realize, Christian friends, that God's whole reputation is at stake in our behavior? Everything we do and say is reflecting the character and the being of God to the world around. No wonder he watches us so assiduously. No wonder he judges us so precipitously at times. If there be a willful determination to disgrace him in the eyes of others, as Moses did, God will say, "All right, that's enough. I can't trust you out there anymore. Come on home." And home we go.

Well, there it is, there is prayer. What a power prayer is!

If we see a brother committing a sin which is not unto death, out of ignorance, confusion, or weakness, then let us pray for him. God will give him life and straighten out the difficulty.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for the instruction of your Word. Grant to us the faith that we may be obedient to it and obey it not only in praying for others, but in avoiding these willful, presumptuous disobeyings of thy Word ourselves. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.