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WAY BETTER THAN A SIDELINE PASS

1 John 5:14-15

In December Toby and Anna moved into a house they bought in Oceanside. They had movers do most of the work, but they rented a U-Haul trailer for a few extra items. Toby asked me if I could help him that evening. He said he wanted my help returning the trailer. I was glad to help. That evening I went with him as he took the truck back to the rental company. The office was closed, so he was supposed to park the trailer and leave it. This was where the fun began. He was driving his pickup truck, and he had to back it through a relatively small lot in which there was already a number of trucks and trailers, into a spot where he could leave it. He needed my help directing him. Neither of us has experience towing trailers, but it didn’t seem that difficult. At least it didn’t until we tried it. Just the act of backing the trailer started getting frustrating very quickly. If you don’t keep the wheel perfectly straight the trailer starts to turn off line. We made repeated attempts to get it into the slot, but the stupid trailer began acting like it was alive with a mind of its own. The physics of how it should work seemed obvious. Turn the truck this way and the trailer has to go that way. But the dumb thing would go off in directions that should not have been possible. I started hoping they didn’t have cameras on that lot, likely a forlorn hope, because anyone watching these two idiots trying to corral that trailer into a spot would have soon been laughing hysterically at our ineptitude. There came a point where it seemed like we had tried everything, and I started thinking, “This is hopeless. We’re out here in the dark all on our own and we’re never going to get this trailer into that space.” It was a bad feeling. We were out there a long time. I finally said, “How heavy is this thing? Could we just manhandle it into that space?” Toby wasn’t sure, but lacking any other useful options, we tried it. We disconnected it from the truck and used two man power to roll it into the space. To our relief, it worked. At least we didn’t totally fail. Man would I hate to drive a big rig.

I hated that feeling of being powerless and helpless. Being powerless, being helpless is frustrating. There are times when all of us will feel like that’s where we are in life because we feel powerless to change the situation we are in, and it’s a place we absolutely don’t want to be. It makes life an ordeal, which means we are not going to experience life to the full.

Today I have good news for you. We are never truly powerless and helpless. There is a tool at our disposal that we can wield in any and every situation, that has the potential for changing everything. It is a huge component of having real life. Look with me at 1 John 5:14-15.

WE HAVE FREEDOM OF SPEECH

We saw in 1 John 5:4-5 that our faith in Christ gives us victory over the world, so that we win in life. In 5:11-13 John told us that through faith in Christ we know we have eternal life, and we can begin experiencing true life right now. These are huge and vital components of being fully alive. In these verses John tells us something else that is a crucial part of the recipe for a full life. It begins with having confidence in approaching God.

The Greek word translated “confidence” had political roots. It meant “freedom of speech.” It is about having the right to say what you think without being censored, a right that though guaranteed by our Constitution, is growing weaker by the year in our nation. But in the context of this section of John’s letter it means we have freedom to speak in God’s presence without fear. The word came to mean outspokenness or frankness of speech that conceals nothing and leaves nothing out. Eventually it took on the connotation of boldness, courage and confidence. John says we have the freedom to talk to God about everything and ask him for anything.

One of the many things I love about Laurie is her openness. You rarely have to wonder what she thinks, because she usually just blurts it out. At times she says things that are either confusing or hilarious because she might mangle a saying. At other times she says things that kind of shock you, and you say, “I can’t believe you just said that.” Those things happen because she has freedom of speech. She is so secure in who she is that she’s not afraid of saying something humorously wrong. If that happens she just laughs at herself. That security allows her to be open and free with people.

That is what John was referring to here. We have confidence in approaching God, meaning we are free to say to him whatever we think, to be completely open with him about everything because we are secure in our relationship with him. We don’t fear that he is going to think ill of us, or reject us or condemn us, no matter what we say.

Have you ever found yourself feeling reluctant to pray, or not feeling free to ask God for something in prayer because you are thinking, “I have no right to ask God for this because I’m not…” fill in the blank? Or “I haven’t been…” again, fill in the blank. When we are feeling that we are thinking our ability to openly talk to God, and our ability to ask something from him, is based on deserving it. As long as we think we have to earn the right to talk to God or to ask for something from him, we will never have freedom of speech with him. We won’t feel confident in talking to him at all, because we don’t deserve it, and we know it.

One day when our kids were young, I was washing our car in our driveway. I didn’t want to wash it in direct sunlight, so I pulled it up a little so it was in the shade. That meant the front of the car was just barely in the garage. My car washing was interrupted when Laurie told me there was a brief phone call in the house that I needed to take. I went in the house and dealt with the phone call. I was just finishing when I heard a noise that should not have been happening. The garage door was closing. This was back before roll up doors became the thing, so we had that big wooden door that swung up and down. I realized if it was closing it was going to swing down and hit the front of our car. I dashed out to the garage in hopes of preventing disaster, but I was too late. The door had come down on the car and dented it and was now going back up. Carissa was standing on the driveway with her eyes big. She said, “I didn’t do it. Toby did it.” I said, “Where is he?” She pointed down the street. When he saw what had happened he had taken off in search of a place to hide. I never got a good explanation of what had possessed him to push the button to close the garage door. I guess he just thought it would be fun to make the door go up and down and didn’t notice where the car was. I went and found him. He figured his life was over, that the punishment to follow would be extreme and likely not survivable. I didn’t levy a great punishment, but I did want to know, “Toby, what were you thinking?” I can tell you this. He knew that was not the moment to ask, “Hey, Dad, can I have some new roller blades?”

It is common for us to think prayer is a bit like that. We feel like we’ve just dented Dad’s car with the garage door, so our best bet is to hide for a bit. It certainly isn’t the time to ask him for something. But remember that John said in verse 13 that he wrote these things to “you who believe in the name of the Son of God.” It is important for us to remember that Jesus said in John 16:23, “If you ask the Father for anything in my name, He will give it to you.” Not only do we believe in the name of Jesus, but we pray, we ask in the name of Jesus.

Back when Toby was in college at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, we went up to visit him for a couple of days. We took him out to eat both nights we were there. One of the nights he asked if he could bring a buddy along, and we said, “Of course.” So his friend, Adam, came with us. At the restaurant we told Adam, “Please order whatever you want.” Adam was a terrific young guy. But there were a lot of great young people at that college. We didn’t invite them all along and tell them all to order whatever they wanted. He was not related to us. We did not owe him anything. We were happy to buy his meal, whatever he wanted, because he was Toby’s friend. In effect, he had that privilege because of who Toby was, not because of who he was. In effect, he had the privilege because he was there in Toby’s name. Had he not been Toby’s friend, he would not have been there at all.

We come into God’s presence and are free to ask for whatever we want not because we are so deserving, not because we’ve been good, but because of who Jesus is. We are there in God’s presence and we ask in Jesus’ name. Jesus totally deserves to be in the Father’s presence, and totally deserves anything he could ask of him. Because we are there in his name, that same thing is true of us.

On our worst day, when we have been an embarrassment, when we’ve been a bear to be around and have totally failed in living for God’s will, and on our best day, when we’ve done better than we ever have before, we are welcome in God’s presence and he hears our prayers for exactly the same reason. It is because of who Jesus is and what he deserves. Because we come to God in Jesus’ name we have complete confidence. We have freedom of speech with God because we are totally secure. That security is the necessary foundation of confidence and openness. This is a vital component of the best possible life. It means we can live freely, at peace, joyfully in God’s presence every moment of our lives. And it means that we can talk to him about everything that is happening. Just the act of talking to him helps us. But then being able to ask him to do something about the things that bring us stress means we are never helpless. There is always hope. So this makes a big difference in the way we experience life. It means life will be way more full.

But can we really talk to God about anything, ask him for anything at all?

WE MUST SUBMIT TO GOD’S WILL

John says one aspect of our confidence before God is that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us, and if he hears us then whatever we have asked of him he will give. In other words, God has the ability and the power to do anything that we might ask.

Some people say that prayer is about relationship with God, about us knowing God, and about us becoming what he wants us to be, and not about asking him for things. God does want us to love him, to live in his presence. Communication is at the heart of relationship. If there is no communication, there is no relationship. Trying to have a relationship without communication would be like trying to have a meal without any food. Yes, prayer is not just about trying to get God to give us things, it is about having a real, living relationship with him.

However, notice John said in these verses if we *ask* anything according to his will. He hears us, whatever we *ask*. We know that we have what we have *asked* of him. John is saying asking is a big part of prayer. It is God’s will that we ask of him. Our asking demonstrates faith in him, and that glorifies him. But what are we told we can and should ask of him?

This is where we have a little disappointment. We love the part at the end of verse 15 that says, “We know that we have what we have asked of him.” The phrase before is great, “whatever we ask.” This is exactly what we want. God will give us what we ask of him, whatever it is. We’ve hit the jackpot! But pay attention to that qualifying phrase John started that promise with. “If we ask anything *according to his will*.” That’s a big “if.” It’s where the disappointment comes in. It has to be according to God’s will. My problem is I want God to answer prayers that are according to my will. I want him to give me whatever I want. All of us like that idea. The biggest problem most people have with prayer is “it didn’t work,” meaning they asked and didn’t get what they wanted.

We don’t really want a God to pray to, we want a genie. Like the one in *Aladdin*, we want him to say, “You ain’t never had a friend like me. Mr. Aladdin, sir, what will your pleasure be?” We haven’t ever had a friend like God. But he’s not a genie, and that’s a good thing. We do not know what the future will bring, and so we don’t really know what we need. We only know what we think we want right now. We are like the child who throws a fit because he or she wants cake for dinner and those unloving parents won’t allow it. What that child really wants is to be healthy and strong, but they only see the desire of the moment. The parent has to see what the child really needs and wants and give them that instead of the insistent demand of this instant.

When I was in college, the girl I first dated for any length of time eventually dumped me. She didn’t even use the “it’s not you, it’s me” cliché. She was quite clear that I was the problem. I prayed that God would bring her to her senses. I asked him to change her heart so that she would call me and say, “Rick, I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ve been so stupid. I know now I can’t live without you.” Turned out she could live without me. A year later she got married to a guy named Hank. God didn’t give me what I asked. And boy am I glad. A few years later a young woman named Laurie showed up in my world. The young lady in college was a lovely lady, a fine person. But I have to be honest here. She was no Laurie Myatt. That’s not a knock on that girl. There is no one like Laurie. God gave me a wife that is literally far beyond anything I ever dreamed of. Thank you Lord, for saying no to my childish prayer earlier.

So the promise is God will give us whatever we ask for that is according to his will. But how do we know if something is according to his will? There are some things that we can pray that we know for a fact are his will. He tells us a number of these things in his word. If we ask God that he would give us more love for him, that is according to his will. He has said loving him is the most important thing in life, so if we ask it, he will answer. We can pray, like Jesus did, that he would glorify himself through us. That’s his will. He will answer that.

However, many of the things we pray have to do with events and circumstances in our lives, and there we don’t have such clear direction. Laurie and I have been praying that Michael might get reassigned by Delta to an aircraft based in LA. He is currently assigned to fly out of JFK in New York, and that’s going to be a nightmare. We are praying that Toby would get an attending physician job here in San Diego when he’s done with his residency later this year. We really want these things to happen, but we don’t know for a fact they are according to God’s will. So we can’t know for a fact that God will give us what we are asking. We found out late this week that our prayer for Michael was answered!

Since we don’t know if these things are according to God’s will, should we not be praying for them? No, praying for them is fine. There is a pattern for us to follow in praying about the circumstances of our lives. We see it in Matthew 26:39. It was the night Jesus was going to be arrested. Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Jesus wanted badly to not have to go through the horror that was ahead. So he prayed and asked the Father to let him pass on the coming events. He was asking the Father to do something in the circumstances of his life. But then he said, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” He prayed according to God’s will. He told the Father what he wanted, but then he said, “What I want more than that, is your will.”

Sometimes we experience unanswered prayer and we think that maybe there’s something wrong with us, maybe I don’t have enough faith, or maybe God really isn’t there, maybe he really doesn’t answer prayer at all. We should always remember that Jesus experienced unanswered prayer. The Father loved the Son beyond our comprehension, but his will was for the Son to drink of the cup that awaited him. So he said “No” to Jesus’ prayer. He did so 3 times.

The apostle Paul also experienced unanswered prayer. In 2 Corinthians 12 he talked about a thorn in his flesh, something that was a constant grief to him. He asked God repeatedly to take it away. But the Father did not do that. Instead he eventually told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Paul lived on with that thorn in his flesh.

The great biblical scholar, the late John Stott, wrote, “Every true prayer is a variation on the theme, ‘Thy will be done.’” It’s about whether we will submit to God, whether we want his will most of all or some other thing in our circumstances. Praying according to his will means saying to God, “I want your will more than I want the thing I have asked for.”

Remember we have confidence in God’s presence. That means we can ask for anything and everything before him. But we must always do it saying what Jesus said, “Yet not my will, but as you will, Lord.” The great news is that God invites us to come talk to him about everything in our lives. He wants us to talk to him boldly, brazenly, openly, holding nothing back. Yeah, but this thing that is on my mind is trivial, it is not big enough to pray about. Hold on. What in our lives is “big enough” to God? Everything in our lives is small to him. That’s why in Philippians 4:6 Paul said we should be anxious for nothing, but in everything we should make our requests to God. If you stress about it, pray about it instead, and leave it to God to sort out. Just make sure you say, “Not my will, but yours, Lord,” as Jesus did.

I live with a great follower of Jesus. She prays about whatever is on her heart. I have seen her pray about a parking space in a stressful traffic situation and about weather that threatened a vacation one day, and many others, large and small. And often God answers those prayers. I have a vivid memory of the vacation day she prayed about the weather. I remember sitting on that beach, looking up and seeing blue sky and sun directly overhead, but in every direction around us there were clouds and rain. There was just this break right over us. It was weird. We stayed on that beach for several hours, and it was sunny there the whole time. As we headed back to our car it started clouding up and the rain started falling as we drove away. Maybe that was just a coincidence. It probably was. I still find it hard to imagine God changing weather patterns just so the Myatts can have a nice time on the beach. But I’ve never forgotten that incident. There have been others of a similar nature.

On Friday I was struggling with what to do about getting a COVID shot, which members of my family have been urging me to do. Unfortunately, obtaining an appointment to get the shot has been a nightmare. I toyed with going down to Petco Park because some were available there. But I didn’t want to spend the whole day doing that. So I prayed. I asked God to make it possible, if it is his will, for me to get an appointment somewhere up in North County. That afternoon Laurie and I did some grocery shopping at Von’s. Out of the blue their pharmacist tracked me down and asked if I wanted vaccination. They had some available and he apparently thought I looked like a likely person to need one, so I got my Covid shot then and there. Be bold, be open, ask instead of stressing, but always seek the will of God above everything else. Always submit your requests to his will.

WE HAVE REAL POWER

At this moment you might be thinking, “Wait a minute. You’re saying prayer is great because if we ask anything according to God’s will he will do it. But if it is according to his will, isn’t he going to do it anyway, whether we pray or not? So our prayer is irrelevant. Doesn’t that mean prayer is a big Nothing Burger?” Pray or don’t pray, God will do his will.

As you know, Laurie and I lived through every parent’s nightmare of the death of a child. Joel, our second child, was born with a congenital heart defect. What followed was a brief life of about 4 months, full of hospitals, doctors, procedures, anxiety and an awful lot of prayer. We prayed for that little boy with intense fervor every day. We had people all over the country praying for him. A couple of people told us that the Lord had assured them that he was going to be all right. And then, just when it seemed he was getting better, he died quite suddenly. Laurie and I had to wrestle with a ton of pain and a lot of confusion. There were a lot of questions that we had to work through. One of them for me was, if God is going to do whatever is his will, what is the point of praying? There was the very real question of prayer being a Nothing Burger.

Why pray? If God is going to do what he plans to do no matter what, why should I pray? Yes, there is an effect it has on me. It enables me to be more at peace, to know God, to relate to him and to align with his will. But the Scriptures insist that somehow, prayer makes a difference. James 5:16 says, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” In the next verse James uses Elijah as an example. He says he was a human being just like us, but God used his prayer to affect weather patterns in a powerful way. He used his prayers to dramatically change things in this world.

Yes, but Elijah was a prophet. He was truly a righteous person. But I’m not a righteous person. I don’t have faith like he did, and I’m not as holy as he was. This gets back to why God hears our prayers. What does it mean to be righteous? It means to be approved by God, to be declared right by him. Read the book of Romans and you will discover that the way you become approved by God is by having faith in Jesus Christ. When you believe in him you are declared right by him, you are righteous before him. That’s why James referred to the prayer of a righteous person. In Christ, you are that righteous person, and your prayer is effective and powerful.

How does prayer work? Here is my answer. I don’t have a clue. Somehow, God says he uses our prayers as part of his plan to carry out his will in this world. He says our prayers are powerful, they make a difference, they bring about his will in some way. How that works is many quantum levels above my pay grade. We live in what we consider a “scientific” culture, meaning we want to know how everything works. We want to understand the system. That’s a good thing. It has greatly improved our quality of life and surely will continue to do so. But when it comes to God, there is still awe and mystery involved. Finite beings are never going to fully comprehend everything about an infinite being. If they could, he would not be infinite. Meaning we have to accept some mystery about how God does things, about things like prayer.

In the end, we have to live by faith. We have to accept that some things belong to God and not to us. So we trust what he tells us. And what he tells us is that prayer is powerful and changes things in this world. In his book, *And When You Pray*, Ray Pritchard wrote about two friends of his who were missionaries. They had kept a record of their prayers going back to 1971. They tracked how many of their prayers were answered. They found that over those decades of many hundreds of prayers 89% of them had been answered “yes,” 2% were answered with a definite “no,” and 9% were in the “not yet” category.

I read that book years ago, and after reading that story I decided to do what those people did and keep a record of my prayers and how they were answered. In preparation for this talk I went through that record and tallied up what happened to those hundreds of prayers. I was surprised to discover that my results were remarkably close to the results that couple had. Just like in their case, 89% of my prayers had been answered “yes.” In my case, 6% were clear “No” answers, and 5% were in the “Not yet” category. That’s a lot of prayers that have been answered “yes.” 89%.

Yes, that’s a good grade, but isn’t that usually a B plus? Shouldn’t we expect God to get an A in answering prayer? Hold on. Remember that some of my prayers were in the “not yet” category, meaning they still await an answer one way or the other. If you take those prayers out of the statistics, we find that 93.3% of my prayers that have had an answer, have been answered yes. That is a solid A. I think that’s worth making an effort to do, don’t you?

CONCLUSION

PRAYER IS RELATIONSHIP, NOT PERFORMANCE

I read recently about a man who decided he would set aside an hour a day to pray, and especially to pray for his family. His kids all ended up serving in ministry full time. Then one by one, his grandkids also all went into ministry, except for one. That one decided he wanted to go into psychology. But somehow, that ability turned into ministry. That grandson’s name was James Dobson, whose ministry has literally impacted millions of people all over the world.

That man faithfully and diligently prayed for an hour a day for many, many years, and the results were profound. When I read that I feel like I’m a prayer school dropout. I am not as dedicated in prayer as that man. I wish I were. I am not alone. I know that prayer tends to be a big guilt producer for most Christians, because we feel like our prayer life is anemic, at best. Prayer is not about doing it right, about putting in enough time so that God will approve of us. We have his approval in Christ, and nothing we do is going to add to that.

I’ve run into many Christians who give others a formula for praying. Here are the things you have to do. Let’s remember that God invites us into a relationship. If you try to run a relationship on the basis of formulas, rules and requirements, that relationship is going to run aground. Michael Molinos wrote 300 years ago that many people came to him frustrated because they were so distracted in prayer. They had trouble concentrating. He wrote, “Don’t be upset or discouraged…Your imagination may ramble over an infinite number of thoughts, yet, I assure you, the Lord has not left…The distraction of the mind, which is not intended, does not rob prayer of its fruit…You have a desire to pray and to that end you went before him. Faith and intention are always enough.”

I love hearing from my kids. Yesterday Toby texted me that the Dodgers have signed Trevor Bauer, a great pitcher. Not good news for Padres fans like us. The news wasn’t good, but it made me happy that Toby wanted to communicate with his old dad. I don’t care what it’s about. I just love hearing from them. That’s how God feels about his children.

PRAYER IS A PRIVILEGE, NOT A DUTY

As I said, we tend to feel guilty about prayer. We should pray more, we should be more dedicated, we should pray better prayers. We try to do better, but somehow it kind of falls apart then we feel even more guilty.

November 6, 2004, Laurie and I were visiting our friends, the Rileys, in Corvallis, Oregon. That night Oregon State played a memorable football game in heavy fog against USC. Visibility was so poor you could not see from one end of the field to the other. At times you couldn’t even see across the field. Laurie and I were given sideline passes, so we could go down on the field and watch the game from there. I didn’t say, “Oh, great. Now we have to go down on the field where it’s cold and damp, and stand there trying to see what’s going on. We could be up in a nice, warm box, where it is cozy and we could sit down. But, no, we’re supposed to go stand on the sidelines in the cold.” Having those passes was a privilege. It was so cool. The game was a close one and it turned on a dramatic 65 yard punt return for a touchdown by Reggie Bush, that started right in front of us. The passes were not a duty, a requirement. They were a privilege that we could use or not use as we chose. If we wanted to go up in the nice warm box and watch from there we could. What we had was an opportunity, not a duty. And that’s just what prayer is. It is an incredible, powerful opportunity, not a duty.

Prayer is better than a sideline pass. It is a throne room pass. We have the opportunity to go right into the presence of God and talk about all of life with him. We can use it or not. It is not a law, a requirement, it is an opportunity. You are not more righteous if you pray more than others, or less righteous if you don’t. Your righteousness, your approval from God comes from what Jesus has done, not from what you do. So let’s revel in this great opportunity and use our passes right into the presence of God.