The Return of Prayers

1 John 5:13-15

(Series on 1 John: No. 16)

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TEXT COMMENT:

We have concluded the main argument of John's letter and his treatment of the 'tests of life' by which to judge the genuineness of our own or anyone else's profession of faith in Christ and claim to have eternal life.

Almost as a bonus, as it were, John now adds a second assurance that belongs to the true believer in Christ; in addition to the assurance of his everlasting life, he or she who walks by faith, obedience, and love before the Lord has also the assurance of access to God in prayer and of God's promise to hear and answer his or her prayers.

A marvelous text for a new year's sermon, placing before us this perpetually and supremely important matter of prayer.

It is proper to say that prayer, being the most perfect act of faith, is the true measure of our faith; we have as much faith as we have prayer. If we have a living confidence in what God has said, if we have a genuine conviction of his presence and his promises and of the unseen world, we will not hesitate to enter that world, to lay claim to those promises, and to draw near to God, all which we most perfectly do in prayer. That is why many Christian authorities over the centuries have held that the ultimate test of any Christian life is the amount of time that a Christian gives to prayer.

All of this would be, of course, very discouraging to me were it not for the fact that these same authorities are so ready to acknowledge their own tragic failure to pray as they ought.

Prayer is a practice every Christian regards as very important and a practice virtually every Christian finds to be painfully difficult. It is a work to which we find ourselves
almost always backward. I know very well myself what Thomas Shepard was speaking of when he confessed: 'There are times when I would rather die than pray.' Can you not also, brother or sister, say the same?

It is very easy to pay lip service to prayer, but it is an altogether different thing to pray, really pray, pray as a Christian knows he or she ought to pray. Eugene McCarthey remembers that President Eisenhower urged all Americans to spend the first 4th of July of his Administration in prayer for the Nation, and on that day, Ike went fishing in the morning, golfing in the afternoon, and played bridge all evening. [G. Will, Pursuit of Virtue, p. 33]

And so it often is with us. We talk prayer much better than we actually pray. Indeed, it would be a matter of shame to almost all of us, were it to be made known to all how much time we actually spend in prayer, how often in a day we pray, and how faithfully we remember to God those things which ought always to be in the prayers of Christian people.

How well and how accurately did Alexander Whyte speak of each one of us when he said: 'There is nothing in which we need to take so many lessons as in prayer. There is nothing of which we are so utterly ignorant when we first begin; there is nothing in which we are so helpless. And there is nothing else that we are so bad at all our days.'

And no wonder. Prayer is pure faith. It is an act of pure faith. There is nothing of sight, nothing of sense in it. It is suspended entirely upon our belief, our conviction that God is there, that he will hear and answer as he has promised. There is nothing physical or earthly to sustain us in this most spiritual of all works. Every Christian knows how much, as a person of sight and sense, he struggles to live by faith. In nothing is it required that we live by faith more completely than in the practice of prayer. It was for this reason that Martin Lloyd-Jones said that 'Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.'

That is why, no doubt, the Lord returns to the matter of prayer so regularly in his Holy Book, and why he so often speaks of prayer in such encouraging, inviting, and appetizing ways. He certainly does here in these few verses we have read.

He is seeking to awaken in us if we have never had such a resolve before, or to refresh in our minds and hearts a deep commitment to prayer, to the practice of prayer, and to the life of prayer. He wants us to be men and women like David, whom the Scripture calls (Psalm 109:4) 'a man of prayer'. He wants us to be like Elijah, ordinary folks who move mountains with our prayers.

But to become so we cannot remain half-hearted about prayer; it must become a surpassing commitment of our lives; prayer must no longer take the backseat to
anything in our lives, to anything at all. And this is so for two reasons; the same two reasons the Bible is always urging upon us and which John urges upon us here.

I. First, we must make a concerted, determined commitment to prayer and to the life of prayer; we must place prayer in the very first position among the interests and the objectives of our lives, because of prayer’s unparalleled, unsurpassed, and irreplaceable power and effect as an instrumentality of achievement in the Christian life.

Prayer makes things, makes the most precious and important and holy things, happen; and nothing else makes such things happen so much as prayer.

God has appointed prayer as the means by which he conveys his blessings to his children. He would have his children depend upon him and not upon themselves, and so he has ordered that only as they pray to him will his blessing, his help, his provision be provided in ever larger measure.

Now here John says this in a classically biblical way. He says that 'if we ask God...he will hear us...'. In the Bible, again and again, God is addressed as the 'one who hears prayer', by which is meant, not that he takes notice of the fact that we are praying, or that he picks up the sound of our petitions, or that he know that we are praying and what we are praying for; but, rather, that he answers prayer, gives us what we ask, and responds with favor to our requests.

John indicates here that this is, in fact, his meaning, because he goes on to say the same thing again in v. 15, and there puts it this way: 'whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.'

This is the means to every good end in any Christian's life. Luther said of the reformation of the church in the 16th century: 'Prayer must do the deed.' And exactly the same thing can and must be said of every change that must be made, every need that must be met in your life. Prayer must do the deed! Without me, Jesus said (John 15:5), you can do nothing; and a few verses later he was only saying the same thing positively instead of negatively when he said: 'the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.'

Spurgeon once said that the most important event in the history of Scotland was when John Knox went upstairs to pray. And I am only being true to the universal witness of Holy Scripture when I tell you that the most important event in your life is when you close the door of your closet, fall to your knees, and really pray, pray as John Knox prayed, who once defined prayer as simply: 'an earnest and familiar talking with God.'

When you read these two verse from John, and the many other such striking statements
of prayer’s power and effect: "ask and you will receive;" "you have not because you ask not;" "ask whatever you will and it will be done for you;" and the like, how can we deny that, as William Cowper put it in his famous hymn on prayer:

Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.

Prayer is the grace and the wisdom and the power of the Almighty God at the disposal of man!

Now every one of us needs to take with a far greater seriousness than we do, the plain meaning of John's words in vv. 14-15. And it is not as if only here do we hear such words and receive such a promise. Over and again the Lord says the same thing. Prayer really brings God's answer, help, blessing, provision.

It was exactly his determination to take seriously what the Lord God has said in his holy Word that led Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan theologian, in his great work, *The Return of Prayers*, to be so bold and daring as to say:

'When we have put up a faithful prayer, God is made our debtor by [his own] promise, and we are to take notice of his payment, and give him acknowledgment of the receipt of it.'

So confidently does the Christian speak who has heard and believed 1 John 5:14-15. He expects his prayers to be answered!

**II. Second, we must make a determined and systematic commitment to prayer, we must place prayer as first among the aims and objectives of our Christian lives, because true prayer, faithful prayer, prayer which is acceptable to God and which obtains these dramatic and wonderful results is only that prayer which is offered rightly, faithfully, carefully, biblically.**

A great deal that passes for prayer in the church and, alas, often in our own lives, is not prayer at all, and we should not think that pseudo-prayer, inauthentic prayer will have such potency before God as here John says prayer will have. This tremendously potent force and instrument is not without requirements and qualifications which make it a very difficult work to manage, and therefore, no half-hearted, disinterested, uncommitted approach to prayer will ever yield that pure and proper prayer to which the astonishing promises of Holy Scripture are made.

You are no doubt aware that there are many in the church today who are emphasizing the sweeping promises which God makes to prayer with virtually no attention to the qualifications which Scripture is careful to make. I heard a minister on TV not so long ago preach a sermon on Mark 11:24, where Jesus says: '...I tell you, whatever you ask
for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.' That statement of the Lord sounds very much, does it not, like 1 John 5:15. In the sermon, this minister argued that, given what Jesus said, one should never pray for anything but once. For if you pray and believe absolutely, whatever you ask for is yours. Period. And, if you then pray for it again, that would be tantamount to admitting that you did not believe you had received it the first time. In this way, prayer is a mathematical calculation, a mechanism to be managed in a certain way to generate the best possible results. And the calculation is very simple according to this thinking. But John, even here in v. 14, has alerted us to the fact that it is not that simple after all. Prayer must meet conditions to be effective; at least one condition he mentions specifically--it must be according to God's will.

In Scripture, prayer is an intensely spiritual and personal thing. It is a communion between the heart and the Lord who knows the heart. It is a coming to the Holy Lord, the Almighty, and, consequently, prayer must partake of those things which please God and are acceptable to him. Take the Bible's teaching on prayer together and it is clear enough that many things can disqualify prayer and other things must characterize prayer if it is to be the true, genuine prayer which avails with God.

There are, as a matter of simple fact, a great many unanswered prayers, unheard prayers in the Bible: prayers which did not eventuate in the blessings which were requested of God. God tells Moses and Jeremiah on separate occasions not to speak to him anymore on behalf of Israel, because he had made up his mind to punish her. Paul asked for relief from his thorn in the flesh but it was not given. Our Savior asked that he might be spared the cross, but it was not to be. The Lord says outright that there are prayers and pray-ers which he will not hear. So, it is not so simple a matter to pray and to be heard as some today would have it. There are qualifications to be met. For example:

To be heard, John says here explicitly, prayer must be 'according to his will'. That is how Jesus taught us to pray as well, both in the Lord's prayer, where we ask the Lord that 'his will be done in earth as it is in heaven' and in the Lord's own prayers, especially his Gethsemane prayer: 'not my will, Father, but thine be done.' No true prayer could ever be offered in the vainglorious attitude of thinking that we know better than our Heavenly Father what is best to be done and to be given. No authentic prayer could ever be uttered from a heart which thought that God had handed over to us the running of the universe when he made us promises to answer our prayers. No, every true prayer will always be a variation on the theme: 'thy will be done.' As seems best to you, Abba, let it be done to me.'

Then, to be effective, prayer must be offered with, as the author of Psalm 24 puts it: 'clean hands and a pure heart.' John has already said virtually the same thing in 3:22:
'we receive anything that we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.' Let no one think that he can live in rebellion against the Lord and yet come to Him, ask and receive whatever he wants. No wise parent so rewards disobedience in his children.

Then, there must be a purity of motives. James reminds us bluntly that we often do not receive what we ask for because our motives in asking are impure. When we ask God for his blessings so that we ourselves might gain in reputation, when we ask for what we intend to enjoy sinfully, when we pray so as to be known as a praying person by other Christians, in each of these ways we discredit our prayers with God who sees right into our hearts. We are to pray, the Scripture says over and again, 'in Jesus' name' or 'for Jesus' sake.' Now what does it mean to pray for Jesus' sake? Well, if you will consult your OED as I did mine, you will find that 'sake' means 'benefit' or 'cause.' Are you praying to advance not your cause but Christ's cause? Are you praying for Christ's benefit, not only your own? Is what you are asking for asking for truly being asked in Jesus name, which is only another way of saying the same thing; asking for what Jesus would want done himself were he praying the prayer instead of you?

And then there is the requirement of sincerity and earnestness. True prayer is sincere, heartfelt. In Lamentations 2:18-19 prayer is defined as 'pouring out one's heart like water in the presence of the Lord.' Hannah so prayed with her whole heart that Eli thought she was drunk; Jacob's prayer was a wrestling with the Lord all night through; and many more like examples only confirm what Alexander Whyte said: 'The more passionateness any man puts into his prayer, the more space and the more praise the Bible gives to that man.' Sighs and tears often accompany the prayers of the Bible as a mark or sign of genuine feeling and sincerity. James calls our attention to Elijah, whom, he reminds us, prayed earnestly that it would not rain. We do not come to God on our feet, the wise Augustine wrote, but upon our affections. Which is to say, if you do not really care whether you receive what you ask or not, then do not bother asking God for it.

Then, there is the requirement, the condition of patience and importunity. Biblical prayer is repeated prayer and prayer in which one waits for the Lord to act in his own perfect time. "I waited for the Lord,' writes David in his 40th Psalm, 'and he turned to me and heard my cry.' It is simply a biblical fact that God requires us often to pray long in order to receive what we ask. As Richard Sibbes artfully put it: '...God's manner is to keep many blessings from his children until they have begged them, as delighting to hear his children speak.' How often in Scripture God's children are represented as praying long and many times for a blessing or are even instructed by the Lord to expect to have to do so.

I recall reading not so long ago, in the Journals of Jim Elliot, this entry from October of
his senior year in college: 'Prayed a strange prayer today. I covenanted with my Father that he would do either of two things--either glorify Himself to the utmost in me, or slay me. By His grace I shall not have His second best. For He heard me, I believe, so that now I have nothing to look forward to but a life of sacrificial sonship or heaven soon.' It was some seven years, I reckoned before that prayer would be heard and Jim Elliot discovered that God would do what he asked in a way far beyond what he had asked or thought: glorifying himself through Jim Elliot to the very utmost by slaying him for the Gospel's sake. Such is the seven years or even longer of waiting in prayer which God often requires of us.

We could say more about the conditions of authentic prayer: but, consider just what we have so far briefly mentioned: prayer must be offered in a spirit of humble and cheerful submission to the perfect will of God, with a repentant heart and backed up by an obedient life, from pure motives, with an earnest sincerity, and patient steadfastness. Prayer need not have these vital signs to perfection, but they must really belong to the prayer, it must have some of each of these for its pulse.

Then, no wonder such a holy man and such a mighty man of prayer as Robert Murray McCheyne should have said: 'A great deal of my time is spent in getting my heart in tune for prayer.'

There are all kinds of prayer in Holy Scripture and ought to be all kinds of prayer in your life and mine. There are set prayers and extemporaneous prayers; there are studied prayers and arrow prayers which dart to heaven in an instant of need; there are long prayers and very short prayer. But we ought to strive to make all of our prayers authentic, Christian prayers, the expression of a real faith in our God, the utterance of our heart's desire to the Lord, an earnest talking with the God we wish to bless fully as much as we desire his blessing.

We ought therefore to make, each one of us, a massive and unqualified commitment to prayer, to the practice of prayer, to the work of prayer, for these two reasons: because prayer alone can so avail to bring from God's hand what we most want and need as his church and his children; and because prayer is such a work that cannot be done with half a mind and half a heart. It requires deep and difficult things of us if it is to be offered aright.

As the new year begins, what better time, brother and sister, to make new resolves before the Lord in this most important part of your duty and your privilege as a child of God. Do such things as these:

Determine before the Lord that you are going to take steps forward in prayer. Do what many wise saints have done before you. Establish a goal; say 30 minutes or 20 or, perhaps, in your case it can be only 15 minutes of private uninterrupted prayer each
day. If you can manage at first only 15 minutes; you can go over your day for repentance and for thanksgiving at least in a general way, you can pray for yourself and your sanctification -- all can be done to some degree if you must begin with but 15 minutes a day. Use a clock or a stop watch. And if you must along the way confess, as Saint Teresa confessed in her autobiography many centuries ago, that while in prayer she would often glance at her sandglass to see if it were almost run down, so that she could get up off her knees with a good conscience; what is that? It is better to be struggling to stay down than not to be making the effort at all. God will reward you. And all the more if you will promise him, perhaps by a vow, that you will not fail to hold yourself to account, that you will keep a record of every day of the coming year, whether you have met your goal or not; that you will not permit yourself to grow inattentive to this supremely important matter of your prayer; that you will rather require of yourself a strict accounting of your obedience.

Or, begin a serious study of the Psalms, which, after all, are the Bible's manual of prayer and will teach you how to pray so as to pray to perfection. I remember Dr. Clark recommending to Covenant College students the memorization of the Psalms as an effective means of eliminating many of the defects of contemporary prayer, including, he said, crudity of language, a lack of reverence, and a superabundance of petitions.

Or, take up to read and to study the very best books on prayer and apprentice at the feet of the masters this most sublime of the arts, such books as Alexander Whyte's Lord, Teach Us To Pray.

Or, say to the Lord that in the coming year you will make a careful record of your prayers and of the 'return' of those prayers as the Lord answers or does not answer. That you will not commit the sin you have so often committed of an unbelief which in a perfunctory way sends requests up to God but never expects or looks for the answers he has promised to send down.

Or, and I wish that many of you would, by God's grace, see and sense the great importance of this: commit yourself to faithful attendance on the church's prayer Wednesday evening each week; that corporate prayer which is not only a fundamental part of apostolic Christianity, without which any Christian life is defective, but which will inevitably be a constant witness on prayer's behalf to your own soul, a training ground of prayer for you and your children, exercise in prayer which will strengthen you for more and deeper prayer alone; as well, of course, as a significant amount of prayer in its own right.

Whatever you do, any or all of the above, say to the Lord this day and as the new year dawns, as Rutherford told us to say: 'I shall rather spoil twenty prayers than not pray at all...'
Determine that you will be, by God’s help, much, much more a man or woman of prayer when 1990 draws to its close than you were at its beginning.

If you are content to remain characterless and unrecognizable among the multitude of Christians, then you may, with the multitude, escape Gethsemane with all of its long lonely and painful hours in prayer. Only, count the cost as you make up your mind. For, if you will not strive in prayer and for prayer and for more and better prayer, for a true pouring out of your heart in the presence of God, then you must not expect to be found able to suffer very much, or to do very much for Jesus Christ or for his church in this world or expect a great measure of his blessing or his presence. And if you do not suffer for him and work for him, you must not expect to reign much with him either.

Brethren, if prayer is anything at all, it is everything. And that is exactly what the Word of God says about prayer. It is everything; absolutely everything.