

POWER IN WEAKNESS (1 John 5:14-17 May 30, 1999)

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This is the confidence which we have before 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 the requests which we have asked from Him. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and *God* will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not *leading* to death.

It is Saturday afternoon. You decide to go out witnessing. After a few moments thought you decide that one group who **really** needs the gospel are the punters out at the track every weekend. You head on over to the Doomben racetrack, pay your way in and head for the main betting ring to share the gospel just before the running of the Doomben 10,000.

But just as you approach the ring you nearly collapse in shock. There laying a sizeable wager with a rails bookie is a member of *Grace Bible Church!* He is confident that no one who knows him would be there. What be the *first* thing you would do?

- a. Slink out the gate to avoid any confrontation.
- b. Confront him there and then.
- c. Go find Andrew Zerk and hand the problem to him.
- d. Do something else.
- e. Do nothing.

What would you do?

We are taught and trained throughout our formative years to make decisions. We tend to be men and women of action. When there is a problem, we do something. This comes so naturally and so overwhelmingly to us that we forget the words of Jesus – Apart from Me you can do nothing.

Yes – When we see a brother in sin or if we fall into sin ourselves, there are steps we should take. However, it doesn't matter what we do unless our **first** step is to seek the Lord's assistance. Without God, our efforts, whatever they might be, will be a waste of time.

The Apostle John understood this. He understood it very well. He had lived the reality of divine power through prayer for over sixty years. He knew that our efforts for the Kingdom only bear fruit when powered from above.

As he neared the end of his first epistle, he began to tie his thoughts together. Within his beloved churches of Asia Minor, a problem had arisen. Men and women were influenced by Gnostic thinking. They denied the basis of the faith – the deity of Jesus Christ, His becoming a man, His death for our sin and His resurrection.

John made it clear that these people were never saved. And because they were not saved, they had no spiritual resources to live holy lives, to obey God and love each other. In short they did not have the fruit of salvation.

However, there is another group that can sometimes look like these unsaved. Men and women who **are** saved, but who are struggling to bear the fruit of their salvation. Men and women struggling to live up to the calling God placed upon their lives.

The reality is that every single child of God finds themselves in this state from time to time. We fall into sin.

John specifically addressed this issue of believers who sin, believers who don't have the fruit of their salvation. He addressed it throughout his epistle.

In chapter 1 verses 8-10 he said:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

Believers sin. Believers can look like the world. That is reality. So how can we separate out these two groups?

John answered that for us as well. In chapter 5 verse 1 he said:

WHOEVER believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him.

Faith in Christ is the watershed. Those who accept the teaching of Scripture concerning Christ – His deity, His death, His resurrection – they are saved. And this faith will lead to fruit.

But the wrinkle comes because of our still sinful hearts. Even after salvation, it isn't all smooth sailing. Even the best of Christians still struggle with the black snake that leaps up to poison them.

Paul in Romans 7:24 cried out:

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

So there are times when the believer can look just like an unbeliever. But the difference comes when we boil it all down, the believer trusts in the Christ of the Scriptures and the man of the world refuses to accept the truth about Christ.

So what is the Christian response to these two groups?

For the believer in sin – John entreats us – PRAY! Besiege God to strengthen this beloved brother. Yes speak to the brother, counsel him and provide support. But let the **first** thing you do be to pray for without prayer, nothing else matters.

For the unbeliever though – John says don't pray.

At first we might recoil at this – DON'T PRAY!!

But we only recoil like this if we fail to grasp the power of prayer. Prayer is so powerful we must beware how we pray.

Prayer is not something we tack on to the end of our efforts. Prayer is not something to fall back on when all else fails. Prayer is the most powerful force in this universe because it connects man with God. Prayer unleashes the power of the divine.

Yet, most of us fail to grasp this truth.

In all my life, I believe that I have only met a handful of men and women who **really** knew how to pray. When you listen to them, they have obviously spent much time in the heavenly realm. Their lives reflect a deep love for God and the walk in His ways. They understand prayer. They understand persistence in prayer and wrestling with God. They have prayed much and seen God move in unimaginable ways. They know the power of prayer. As you listen to them pray, you just know that hell quakes when they turn heavenward.

And unfortunately I have met many who pray in merely earthly tones. It is perfunctory rather than heartfelt. It is hopeful rather than certain. It is expected rather than from love. It is clinical rather than weeping. It is one off rather than persistent. It is words not prayer.

Spurgeon said of this type of prayer:

I can at the prayer meetings readily tell when the brother is praying, and when his is only performing, or playing at prayer. You know how it is with some prayers – they are like an invoice, “as per usual”, or a list of goods with “ditto, ditto” every here and there. Oh, for a living groan! One sigh of the soul has more power in it than half an hour's recitation of pretty pious words. Oh, for a sob from the soul, or a tear from the heart.¹

Perhaps some of the best prayers I have heard have come from the mouths of the children in this church. Why? Because they just **know** that God hears and answers prayer.

I sit with my children and pray. We pray for dolls and babies and people. They pray in expectation. They *know* God hears. In fact at times they wonder what is taking God so long. In many ways, their childlike faith far exceeds that of their father.

¹ Cited in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) p. 33.

So why do these little prayer warriors change over time and turn out to be just like us? As we age, we come to learn the limits of this world. We run up against what seems to be fixed inviolable laws. We learn that in the normal course of life mountains don't move, seas don't part, manna does not fall from heaven. Our prayers begin to sound impossible. We forget that we pray to the God of the impossible and we start praying more in hope than certain expectation. Then our prayers become routine and expected rather than imbued with power.

The great Christians all understood that real prayer is childlike prayer. It assails the gates of heaven knowing with **absolute certainty** that their petitions will be heard and not just heard but also answered.

Real prayer begins by a conscious meditation concerning whom we pray to. Our prayers are not scattered to the ether. They rise to the very throne of God. They do not wait in line to go before the Lord. They are instantly heard. They are not nodded at by God and forgotten. They are acted upon that instant.

God delights to hear the prayers of the saints. He delights to act. More than that, the One who hears our cry is not impotent to act. There is absolutely nothing that is outside the power of God.

Jeremiah 32:17:

Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You.

Intellectually we know this. But practically, it just doesn't sink in. We haven't seen God move a mountain. We have prayed for a new job or a new boyfriend or for the salvation of a loved one. And God didn't answer.

So we respond by toning our prayers down. Our prayer life wanes. And we wonder why we don't see the power of God through prayer like George Muller saw.

Basically, the problem is that we don't have because we don't ask in faith.

When William Carey spoke to a group of ministers he challenged his audience from Isaiah 54:2-3. There he expressed his trust in the sufficiency of the Lord in these words:

Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.²

He saw great things because he asked great things. We don't have because we don't ask in faith.

But for what should we ask?

² As Cited in Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983, p. 115.

At the end of His epistle, John turned his thoughts to this subject. He had already outlined one of the benefits of being a child of God. Assurance of salvation. Now in chapter 5 verses 14 and 15 he outlines another benefit. God listens and answers the prayer of His children.

This is the confidence which we have before 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 the requests which we have asked from Him.

Because we pray to God. Because He delights to answer prayer. Because He can do anything. Therefore, we can have absolute confidence that He hears our petitions and answers them.

God is our heavenly Father. He does not turn a deaf ear to the cries of His children. The word translated confidence is the word $\square\square\square\square\square\square\square\square$, which literally means 'boldness.'

Later this year, I hope to visit Canberra for a few days. I will visit Parliament house and I have every confidence that I can get in and look around because it is open to everyone.

But, I have little confidence that I could rock up to the lodge and ask to see John Howard and ask him to find some land for us to build a church on. I couldn't even get an appointment with him if I tried. Pastors are a little too low on the pecking order to get to see Prime Ministers.

However, if John Howard's son turned up in Canberra from Sydney, he would be ushered straight in to see his Dad. Whatever his request, his Dad would listen and weigh it up.

In the same way, we can have boldness to enter the very throne room of the Almighty and pour our heart out to Him and He will always listen. For we are His beloved children.

However, we must not do as many charismatics, faith teachers and others do and turn this verse into a magic genie. To them this is a cast iron guarantee that anything you want, whatever your heart desires, you just ask God for it and He is **obligated** to provide it.

They ignore a very important little phrase here – *according to His will*.

God has revealed His will in Scripture. It is that God would be glorified through the advancement of the kingdom, the saints becoming Christlike and the lost hearing the gospel.

Ask these things and God delights to answer. Perhaps not in the way we might want or the timing we might want – but God answers.

Ask for **other** things and you tread in dangerous territory. Is it the will of the Lord for you to be rich, or healthy, or without trials in your life?

You don't know this. Oftentimes poverty, ill health and trials are the will of God for your life to teach you lessons.

We don't know. You can pray that if it is the Lord's will He would alter these circumstances, but be prepared to accept the answer if it comes back no.

Paul prayed three times for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. It was not the will of the Lord that it be removed. In fact it was the will of the Lord that Paul be perfected in this weakness.

Because we are to ask according to His will, according to the plan revealed in Scripture, this is the control that enables God to make this promise – ask what we will and He will grant it.

The child of God does not pray for the selfish and worldly. He prays for what pleases God.

The child of God loves the Lord with all his heart, soul mind and strength and he loves his neighbour as himself. He delights to do the things that are pleasing in the Lord's sight.

This Godward heart then controls our prayers. We delight to do the things that are pleasing in the Lord's sight.

This means that we do not pray selfishly. Prayer is not a gift given to satisfy our desires and wants. Search the Scriptures, the prayers that are approved do not have the element of selfishness. They are Godward prayers.

John Piper describes what happens when we use prayer for selfish means. He writes:

Life is war. That's not all it is. But it is always that. Our weakness in prayer is owing largely to our neglect of this truth. Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den. God has given us a wartime walkie-talkie so that we can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world. Prayer gives us the significance of front-line forces, and gives God the glory of a limitless Provider. The One who gives the power gets the glory.³

Prayer is one of the great gifts we have in navigating our way through the treacherous reefs of this life. So when rightly understood, what a promise this is. Full, open and continuous access to God Himself. And a pledge that He will grant those requests which are according to His will.

Before Christ, access to God was limited. Only the High Priest could have access and only on the Day of Atonement. We can have permanent access, not because of our

³ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), p. 41.

holiness, but through the blood of Christ. Yet the time we are found on our knees is so pitiful. And when we get there what we pray for is so pitiful.

Our prayer life directly corresponds to how well we understand the truth of this verse. If we knew that prayer connected us to God, allowed us to seek His will, ask for help in this life, petition for the advancement of the kingdom, request strength to stand firm. If we understood that the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much, then we would ever be upon our knees.

Why does God delight to answer prayer? Because prayer shows that we understand that He is all sufficient and we are without resources. Prayer is so powerful because we cannot say that we have any part in the outcome. God must receive all the glory for what occurs.

When Elijah prayed and there was no rain for three years and six months – what part did he have? None! He didn't seed the clouds with a dispersant. He didn't heat the ocean to create an El Ninyo effect. The results were all of God, the glory is all to God.

Iain Murray put it this way:

As with truth that is preached, prayer has no inherent power in itself. On the contrary, true prayer is bound up with a persuasion of our inability and our complete dependence on God. Prayer, considered as a human activity, whether offered by few or many, can guarantee no results. But prayer that throws believers in heartfelt need on God, with true concern for the salvation of sinners, will not go unanswered. Prayer of this kind precedes blessing, not because of any necessary cause and effect, but because such prayer secures an acknowledgment of the true Author of the blessing. And where such a spirit of prayer exists it is a sign that God is already intervening to advance His cause.⁴

If I had to name the biggest single weakness in the Australian Churches today. I would nominate lack of prayer.

If I had to nominate the biggest single weakness in *Grace Bible Church*. I would nominate lack of prayer.

If we want to see holiness. If we want blessing. If we want to see revival. If we want life to the full. Then we had **better** start with prayer.

We can evangelise, go to Prague, look for another building, add programs – and God won't be in it without prayer. Without prayer they are done in our strength and there will be no eternal benefit.

In fact prayer should not be an add on. It should be the first thing we do and we should not stop doing it. We should pray without ceasing.

⁴ Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), p. 129.

There should be much prayer offered up in our private devotions. It should be the highlight of our day. Our prayer meetings before church, at homegroup, on Saturdays, midweek – they should be packed. You should desire to be there to pray.

The fact that there is an apathy toward prayer. A struggle to pray. A feeling that prayer is not that effective. These are signs of a church running on one cylinder. If we are serious about Christianity. If we believe there is a God. If we believe He answers prayer. If we understand the spiritual battle we are in – we would pray.

Revival starts with prayer.

In the late 1850's secular and religious conditions combined to bring about a crash. The third great panic in American history swept away the giddy structure of speculative wealth. Thousands of merchants were forced to the wall as banks failed, and railroads went into bankruptcy. Factories were shut down and vast numbers thrown out of unemployment. New York City alone having 30,000 idle men. In October 1857, the hearts of the people were thoroughly weaned from speculation and uncertain gain, while hunger and despair stared them in the face.

On 1st July, 1857, a quiet and zealous businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier took up an appointment as a City Missionary in downtown New York. Lanphier was appointed by the North Church of the Dutch Reformed denomination. This church was suffering from depletion of membership due to the removal of the population from the downtown to the better residential quarters, and the new City Missionary was engaged to make diligent visitation in the immediate neighbourhood with a view to enlisting church attendance among the floating population of the lower city. The Dutch Consistory felt that it had appointed an ideal layman for the task in hand, and so it was.

Burdened so by the need, Jeremiah Lanphier decided to invite others to join him in a noonday prayer meeting, to be held on Wednesdays once a week. He therefore distributed a handbill:

HOW OFTEN SHALL WE PRAY?

As often as the language of prayer is in my heart; as often as I see my need of help; as often as I feel the power of temptation; as often as I am made sensible of any spiritual declension or feel the aggression of a worldly spirit.

In prayer we leave the business of time for that of eternity, and intercourse with men for intercourse with God.

A day Prayer Meeting is held every Wednesday, from 12 to 1 o'clock in the Consistory building in the rear of the North Dutch Church, corner of Fulton and William Streets (entrance from Fulton and Ann Streets).

This meeting is intended to give merchants, clerks, strangers, and businessmen generally an opportunity to stop and call upon God amid the perplexities incident to their respective avocations. It will continue for one hour; but is also designed for those who may find it inconvenient to remain more than five or ten minutes, as well as for those who can spare the whole hour.

Accordingly, at twelve noon, 23rd September, 1857 the door opened and the faithful Lanphier took his seat to await the response to his invitation. ... Five minutes went by. No one appeared. The missionary paced the room in a conflict of fear and faith. Ten minutes elapsed. Still no one came. Fifteen minutes passed.

Lanphier was yet alone. Twenty minutes; twenty-five; thirty; and then at 12.30 a step was heard on the stairs, and the first person appeared, then another, and another and another, until six people were present and the prayer meeting began. On the following Wednesday ... there were forty intercessors.

Thus in the first week of October 1857, it was decided to hold a meeting daily instead of weekly. ...

Within six months, ten thousand businessmen were gathering daily for prayer in New York, and within two years, a million converts were added to the American churches. ...

Undoubtedly the greatest revival in New York's colourful history was sweeping the city, and it was of such an order to make the whole nation curious. There was no fanaticism, no hysteria, simply an incredible movement of the people to pray.⁵

I would dearly love to see revival in Brisbane. It starts with my praying and your praying. It starts with admitting our impotence and God's power. It begins with asking the Lord to advance His kingdom for His glory. God delights to answer this prayer.

Prayer is the most powerful force in this world. Therefore we have to be very careful how we utilise such power.

John continues his thought about prayer in verse 16:

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and *God* will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.

What does this verse mean? What is the sin leading to death? What is the sin that does not lead to death?

Throughout this whole epistle, John refers a number of times to life and death. Every time he is referring to spiritual life and spiritual death.

Look with me back at 1 John 3:14:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

⁵ J. Edwin Orr, *The Light of the Nations*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 103-105.

Passing out of death into life refers to salvation. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, but through the blood of Christ we come into spiritual life.

In this book, John has consistently pointed to the one sin that draws the line between the saved and the unsaved. The sin that leads to death is to deny the truth about Jesus. 1 John 4:3:

Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antichrist.

This is clear enough. But what is the sin that does not lead to death?

Notice that John calls this person a brother. They are saved. But despite his salvation, he still commits sin. He is not obeying God or not loving His brother. He is not showing forth the fruit that He should.

In other words this person is you or I. We have placed our faith in Christ. We have not wavered from our commitment to Him. But at times we have all failed Him in some way. We have sinned and acted like an unbeliever. But our faith in Christ did not collapse.

It happens to us all at times.

When you see a brother in sin – what is your duty? Yes, if it serious enough you have to go to him. Yes, if he doesn't respond go with witnesses. Yes, if he is still continuing in sin tell it to the church. But first and foremost – PRAY!

A prayer for holiness is one God delights to answer. And indeed, true holiness will not be found anywhere else than through the strength of God. We can challenge him all we want, but without the conviction of the Spirit and the strength of the Spirit, he will not repent and live in holiness.

SO what does this mean for us? Ask yourself the question – “Am I my brother's keeper?”

You bet you are! Every one of us has a responsibility to every other saint. When we see a brother in difficulty – bear him up, carry his burden, pray for him. Oftentimes he will be too weak to pray himself. And remember, the time is coming when you will need the strength of the saints in your own life.

Notice the effect of prayer. We ask on behalf of the sinner and through our prayers God answers and works through our prayers to give life to the struggling child of God.

It is this word 'life' that has caused much confusion. Many interpret this as the struggling one moving from death to life. He was unsaved but now is saved. He was unsaved and in sin, but not the sin of openly rejecting Christ – he is just your ordinary garden variety sinner.

But this view doesn't hold up. John calls this man a brother. In some sense he must accept Christ. And there is no such thing as an unsaved sinner who is not heading to

death. The wages of sin is death. Whether he openly rejects Christ or not he is heading to hell. Those who are not for Christ are against Him.

So why does John use this word 'life'?

We must understand that there are various facets to spiritual life from our human standpoint.

At the moment of salvation we receive eternal life. But, that does not mean that the rest of our life until our death is a waste of time. We are to live for God here and now.

We are to live holy lives. We are to be godly men and women. But the power to live godly in this life comes minute by minute from God. We cannot do it alone.

Paul put it this way in Philippians 2:12-13:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

You are to do it, but you can only do it with God at work in you.

When we pray – God grants life. Power to live this life as holy men and women. Power to bear good fruit. Every one of us needs this ongoing infusion of life. It is this that John is speaking of.

But, prayer is so powerful, that we must be careful what we pray for. John says we are not to pray for those who commit the sin leading to death – denying Christ.

Why? Why not pray that these apostates would be saved?

It depends on what we pray for. Let me ask you this – Judas was the Son of Perdition from eternity past. Could Peter or John have prayed with confidence for God to save Him once he betrayed the Lord? No!

Hebrews 6:6 speaks of those who have fallen away, and it is now impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

A very difficult verse. But clearly their hearts are hardened against God. Prayer would be casting pearls before swine.

In Jeremiah the sin of Israel was so great, God told him not to pray for them.

What does this mean for us?

Does it mean we do not pray for a Kylie Yeadon? No! But it means we cannot pray with confidence that she will be saved.

In all the Bible, we never find Christ praying for the salvation of a lost person. Indeed we never find anyone praying for the salvation of a lost person. We never even have a command to pray for the salvation of a lost person.

All the commands for prayer are for the saved. The closest we have is commands to pray for Spirit empowered workers to go forth into the harvest of the unsaved.

That is why John says pray for the saved brother in sin and don't pray for the apostate who has rejected Christ.

Prayer is incredibly powerful. We must be careful how we wield this instrument.

Although I have no explicit warrant for it, I do pray regularly for the salvation of my children and for others. But I pray in a measured way. I plead and beg, but I ask that the Lord's will would be done and His glory magnified in their lives. And I accept His decision.

Pray but be careful you do not use prayer in a way different to the way God designed it.

We know it is the will of God for saints in sin to be holy. We do not know the exact will of God in relation to each unsaved person. Therefore be careful how you pray, especially in the case of apostates who have hardened their hearts to the truth.

Finally, John ends with verse 17:

All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not *leading* to death.

Here John wants to give balance. He does not want us to think that any sin other than denying Christ is trivial and can be ignored. All sin is an affront to God. All unrighteousness in any form is heinous before God.

But, this does not mean that a true believer will be perfect. They will stumble. Others will pray and support them. And they will not depart the faith and end in spiritual death.

Brethren, John tells us that prayer is a privilege. Perhaps the greatest privilege in this life. It is power. Divine power. It is to be used for the Kingdom. Ask for strength to endure and live holy. Ask for strength for your brethren. Ask for God to be glorified in our church.

When we grasp this, really grasp it, we will pray without ceasing.

But realise the power of prayer. God hears and delights to answer. So be sure you pray for what is according to His will.

In closing I want to read a poem. I've read it to you before, but it sums up the truth of these verses so well.

PRAYER

Prayer is the mightiest force that men can wield,
A power to which Omnipotence doth yield,
A privilege unparalleled, a way
Whereby our loving Father can display
His interest in His children's need and care.

Jehovah's storehouse is unlocked by prayer,
And faith doth turn the key. Oh! would that men
Did fully prove this wondrous means, for then
Would mightier blessings on the Church be showered,
Her witness owned, her ministers empowered,
And souls ingathered. Then the Gospel's sound
Would soon be heard to earth's remotest bound.

All things are possible if men but pray;
And if God did but limit to a day,
The time in which He'd note the upward glance,
Or fix the place, or name the circumstance,
When, where, or why petition could be brought,
Methinks His presence would by all be sought.

But since He heareth prayer at any time,
For anything, in any place, or clime,
Men lightly value heaven's choicest gift,
And all too seldom do their souls uplift
In earnest pleading at the Throne of Grace.

Oh let us then more often seek His face,
With grateful hearts, remembering while there
To thank our Father that He heareth prayer.

Author Unknown