

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. <sup>14</sup> This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him. (1 John 5:13-15)*

### Prayer is about Faith

A teacher who used to serve our congregation liked to tell the story of something she said to her father, a pastor. She said, “I prayed so hard for this!” Of course, whatever it was, she didn’t get it. Her father answered, “You prayed so hard? So that makes it work better?” Do you understand the point he was making? Or are you more inclined to say what his daughter said, “I prayed so hard for this!”? I’ve heard members say things like that many times. I’ve heard them talk about praying and praying for something and not understanding why God didn’t give it to them. It was so important. What they asked for was such a good thing. They were so sincere and so dedicated in their prayers. But prayer is not about how hard I pray. It is true that the Bible tells us to be constant in prayer. In our gospel lesson for today, we heard Jesus compare us to a widow who wears a corrupt judge down with her asking. But the point of his story was not that our constant prayer wears God down. It’s rather that if even a corrupt judge can be brought around to help us, how much more will God who loves us act on our behalf? Real Christian prayer is not about how hard I pray or how sincere I am or how many times I offered it. If prayer were about any of those things, it would be about us. But prayer is really about God. We don’t trust in how hard we pray. We trust in the one who answers. So in that sense, the Apostle John teaches us this morning, **prayer is about faith.**

#### I.

Sometimes we Christians don’t pray very well. What I mean by that is that we don’t always pray trusting that God will hear and answer us. Sometimes, we treat prayer as the last resort, when really it should be our first resort. Sometimes we seem to just go through the motions in prayer. Sometimes even while we’re praying we think God isn’t going to do what we’re asking. God is looking for a different attitude when we pray. **Prayer is about faith that God hears us.**

John says, “**This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.**” The Greek word translated as “confidence” can even mean “boldness” in coming to God. In other places, God pictures us as his children coming to our Father with requests – prayers. Do your kids come and ask you for things? Do they ask to use the car? Do they ask for gas money? Do they ask for help with a mortgage? Would other people’s kids ask you for those things? Probably not. But your kids are bold to come and make requests of you because they know you love them. They have confidence that you will hear them out – and maybe even give them what they’re asking for.

We have confidence to come to God with all our requests. But notice that John carefully describes that boldness: “**if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.**” We Lutherans are taught from little on to pray “if it is your will.” What are we saying by that? To ask according to God’s will first of all means that we’re asking for things he approves of. Many years ago I spent a summer helping at a mission church in New York City. I taught a class on prayer there. There was a young couple who were members and, let’s just say that the husband had a lot of personality. We were talking about what a Christian prays for. He asked me, “If I see a pretty girl on the street, why can’t I pray, ‘Hey, God, give me some of that?’” At which point his wife slugged him and deservedly so. Now, he knew the answer, but he was making a point: we can’t pray for something sinful. That is never God’s will. Sometimes, it’s hard for us to see that. Sometimes we get so caught up in our feelings that we actually do pray for something that God clearly says is wrong. So John says that when we ask anything according to God’s will, he hears us. He’s not talking about saying magic words, “your will be done.” He’s talking about having hearts that are in tune with God. The more we understand what God says and commands, the more we’re going to ask for things that are right in his sight.

But we usually have another point in mind when we pray according to God’s will. We mean that we’re asking for something that matches up with God’s plan for our lives. Sometimes things that seem perfectly good to us just don’t fit with God’s plan. So our prayers should always come with the attitude that Jesus himself

showed when he prayed, “Not my will, but your will be done.” But faith always clings to the promise that God gives us: he hears our prayers when we come to him in faith in Christ.

He does hear our prayers. One of my earliest memories is standing next to my mom while she was on the phone, trying to get her to answer some question I was asking. I don’t remember what the question was. But I do remember that my mom ignored me because she was on the phone. It really, really bothered me. Of course, now, I totally understand that children demand constant attention and sometimes it’s good parenting to make them wait until it’s their turn. But I didn’t get that when I stood at my mother’s knee. We all want to be heard and listened to. Sometimes our pastors, our bosses, our politicians, even our parents and our spouses don’t listen to us. But God always does. Every time we come to him in faith, he hears us. He pays attention.

John says, “**And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.**” This is a difficult verse. If this was all we had in the Bible about the subject of prayer, we might think God promises to give us anything we ask for. That simply is not the case. You have to remember that we’re praying according to his will, so we’re talking about things that match his will. Jesus himself prayed that God would take his cup of sufferings away, but he also prayed that his Father’s will be done. St. Paul prayed three times that his thorn in the flesh, some kind of physical ailment that tormented him, be taken away. God said no. He told him, “My grace is sufficient for you because my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul had to live with his pain because God knew what was best for him.

The same is true for us. God knows what’s best for us and that’s what he always gives us. We can approach him knowing that he hears our prayers and knowing that he will deal with whatever we’re praying about. He is not going to ignore it. It won’t “slip through the cracks.” Sometimes, he gives us exactly what we want. The car starts to slide out of control and we pray for him to rescue us. When the car comes to a stop, everyone is OK. We got exactly what we prayed for according to his will and we got it right away. Sometimes, he tells us we have to wait. When I was 23, I got out of the army and I thought I was ready to meet a Christian spouse. And I prayed for that. But you know what? When I was 23, my wife was only 16. God didn’t let us meet each other for five more years. He did finally give me exactly what I prayed for, a Christian wife to share my life. But his will was to do it later than I thought was good.

Sometimes, God gives us what we ask for but according to his will means that it comes out differently than we were thinking when we asked. When I was seven years old, my mom dropped a bombshell on me: she told me that I was a twin. I didn’t know that because the other baby died in the womb. But I prayed that God would give me that brother back. Of course, that’s not what God did. My brother is in heaven. But nine months later, my mom gave birth to a baby boy. I believe that was God giving me what I asked for according to his will. Finally, sometimes God’s will is to just tell us no. I have stood next to the hospital bed of many Christians and prayed for relief from their pain and illness. Many times God has given it. But many times, he hasn’t. I’ve watched pain and suffering go on. I’ve watched him call Christians home to heaven. Even though his answer was no, he still gave them his full attention. And his answer was absolutely the best answer for those Christians. That is point. Come to him with confidence. Come to him with all the hurts and sorrows of your life. Come to him trusting that that he loves you and he will hear you and he will do what is best for you. That is his promise and his word never fails.

## II.

How do you know that all that is true? Because you know God’s biggest promise and how he kept it. You know Jesus, who left heaven itself to be your Savior. You know Jesus who had to pray because his life hurt and who trusted perfectly in God every time he prayed – and he did that for you. His perfect life of prayer replaces all our doubts and all our failures to pray. You know Jesus who died and paid for all the times we didn’t pray and for all the times we failed to trust that God was hearing and for all the times we didn’t like the answer God gave. You know Jesus whose blood has washed you clean before God, who rose to tell you that in God’s eyes, you are holy and perfect. You know Jesus who rose to tell you that you will rise and live with him and never again will you face any hurt or sorrow. You know Jesus. That is the key to prayer. **Prayer is about faith that you have eternal life.**

John started this whole discussion by saying, “**I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.**” We have to live down here for however long God gives us. This life is so much easier to deal with when we’re certain of God’s love, when we’re positive he hears us, when we know that in the end we are going to live with him. It is true that you can get to

heaven with only a mustard seed of faith. But with only a mustard seed of faith, life is going to be much harder. Doubt is painful. Fear is torture. So God comes to us when we're not hurting and we aren't in danger and he builds up our faith so that when those trials come, we have confidence in him. We can conquer fear with faith. We can find comfort and even peace in the certain love of our Savior while all the terrible things of this life are going on. In the end, that love brings us home to heaven.

John said that all those who believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ have confidence when they pray. That's who can boldly walk into God's presence and ask for anything and everything. God says something here and throughout the Bible that's really hard to accept today: he only listens to the prayers of Christians. He does not listen to or answer the prayers of unbelievers. Why not? God tells us that sin separates us from him. He specifically makes the point that sin keeps our prayers from his presence. That applies to our sins, too. But Jesus has taken all our sin away. In God's sight, we aren't filthy sinners who are damned to hell anymore. We are his children who are welcome to come in. Jesus died and paid for all the sins of all the world, but only believers rely on that. Only believers have the benefit of that payment. Only those who trust in Jesus are counted as his children and have the right to enter heaven. Thanks be to God that he came to us in the waters of holy baptism and gave us faith. He comes to us again and again in the word and in communion and he strengthens that faith. His promise to you and me today is that all our prayers get through. He will hear and answer them all.

In the end, prayer is an exercise in faith. We trust God's promises and we bring our problems to him. And we leave them there. My friends, when you pray, you can walk away knowing that God is on the job. He is going to take care of it. Even if his answer is no, he always does what is best for you. He loves you. Because our hearts are weak, he invites to come over and over again and keep offering the same prayers for the same concerns. He will hear and answer them over and over again. Because he loves us. Trust him. Take all that you wrestle with to him. And walk away knowing God is on the job. Amen.