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A0441 -- Oct. 10, 2004 -- 1 John 3:19-23 – Confidence in Prayer

Last week in 1 John 3:16-18, we saw What Love Is. John had already told us What Love Is Not in 3:10b-15. Love is not the spirit of hatred or spiritual envy that Cain had toward Abel, which resulted in murder. Instead, Jesus laid down the model of What Love Is. He did this by laying down His life for our lives. He laid down his whole human person, His soul, for us. This means a bodily substitution and a spiritual substitution. Christ laid down His whole man for your whole man. Therefore, He is the model of Christian love. What should be our response? We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. How do we do this?

Verse 17 answers that, if you have the world's goods, those things that help sustain physical life, and you see a brother in need and you do not respond, you don't have the love of God abiding in you. You have closed your heart against your brother. The word for **heart** was important, it was *splagchnon*, not the normal Greek word *kardia*. It refers to the bowels. God built into the human bowel system a physical response mechanism. When the bowels act up it is a signal to respond. When we see other Christians in physical need and our bowels act up and we don't respond, there are major consequences. There can be a flare up of the intestinal and stomach area because of our selfish greed. It signals self-centeredness and a failure for the love of God to abide in you.

Verse 18 confronts all Christians with this issue. Don't just say you will help sustain physical life; that is not following the model of Christ. It would not have done any good if Christ just said He would lay down His life for us. There wouldn't be any salvation for anyone. Instead, it had to be a space-time fact, something He actually did. Likewise, anyone can say they would help out, but the true test is whether they actually do help sustain physical life when the opportunity arises. Talk is cheap, it accomplishes nothing; but actions speak volumes, actions do accomplish things. When you act, you can be assured that the love of God is being accomplished through you.

19 ÎKai.Đ evn tou,tw| gnwso,meqa o[ti evk th/j avlhqei,aj evsme,n(kai. e;mprosqen auvtou/ pei,somen th.n kardi,an h`mw/n(

19 And by this we will know that we are of the truth, and we will assure our heart before Him,

By this must be cataphoric, it therefore refers to that which precedes in vv. 16-18. John is saying, **And by loving fellow Christians in deed and truth...we will know that we are of the truth.** John is not giving a test of assurance of salvation, but a test to see whether a Christian is practicing **the truth** in the area of Christian love. Am I loving other believers as Christ loved me? Am I actually helping sustain the physical life of a fellow brother? If I actively do help sustain my brother's life, then I know that I am **of the truth**. The phrase **of the truth** is similar to those phrases **of the devil** (3:8) and **of God** (3:10b). In both cases, it refers to the source of some action. When we sin, that sin finds its source in Satan, not the born-again self. When we fail to do righteousness, that failure does not find its source in God. Here, when we love in deed and truth, that action finds its source in **the truth**. In other words, if you are loving a fellow believer in the way described above, then you can know that those actions find their source in **the truth**. You are participating in **the truth** at that point.

The phrase **and we will assure our heart before Him** fits with v. 20 so that it should read, **and we will assure our heart before Him that, if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and He knows all things.** When we engage in Christian love, we know that **we are of the truth** and knowing that **we are of the truth...will assure our heart before God**. However, sometimes, when we engage in Christian love this is not the case. v. 20 says:

20 o[ti eva.n kataginw,skh| h`mw/n h` kardi,a(o[ti mei,zwn evsti.n o` qeo.j th/j kardi,aj h`mw/n kai. ginw,skei pa,nta

20 that, if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and He knows all things.

Our heart may **condemn us**. This is a common experience of all Christians. You volunteer to do something; to bring a meal to someone, to throw a surprise birthday party, etc. Your heart often makes you question your actions. Did I do enough? Did they like the meal? We hope we helped them, but **our heart condemns us**. This even includes the times when we question our motives. Were they pure? Or was I being selfish, wanting something in return? The **heart** does not always take account of our deeds of love in the truth. John tells us there

is a solution to this dilemma that I suspect troubles many women. The solution is that **God is greater than your heart and He knows all things**. Just because the **heart** does not take account of your deeds of love done in the truth, the omniscient **God** does. So, while your heart may condemn you by causing you to doubt your motives or sincerity, you should respond to this by **assuring your heart** that **God is greater than your heart**. He is omniscient and He knows your actions of love toward the brethren. Nothing escapes His eye. There is no reason to continue doubting or questioning your deeds of love in the truth. Instead, you ought to remember that God is omniscient and He knows all these things even though your heart may not. And you ought to trust God and His character over your own heart.

The words back in verse 19 **before Him** literally mean “in His presence” and, therefore, point to the time when we are studying God’s word and are in prayer. It is when we study God’s word that we realize the immensity of God’s love toward us, and it is when we are in prayer that we often question our ability to love others as Christ loved us. But, if we question our ability to love others as Christ loved us, then we may be led to expect no answer to our prayers. We have no confidence before God. Therefore, it is then that we should **assure our hearts before Him** by remembering that **God is greater than our hearts and He knows** what we actually have done in loving other believers.

21 VAgaphtoi,(eva.n h` kardi,a Îh`mw/nÐ mh. kataginw,skh|(parrhsi,an e;comen pro.j to.n qeo,n

21 Beloved, if our heart is not condemned, we have boldness before God.

However, hopefully **our heart is not condemned**, either because our heart does not question our love toward the brethren, or because we have been convinced to remember that God is omniscient. Either way, the result is that **we have boldness before God**. This is the second time John has mentioned **boldness before God** (Gk. *parresia*) in the body of the letter. The first time was back in 2:28, the theme of this section. In 2:28 we learned that as long as we are abiding in Him, we have **boldness before Him at His coming**. There is no reason to shrink back or try to hide if we are abiding in Him. Here it is **boldness before God** in prayer. As long as we are loving the brethren and **our heart is not condemned**, then **we have boldness before God** in prayer.

22 kai. o] eva.n aivtw/men lamba,nomen avpV auytu/(o[ti ta.j evtola.j auytu/ throu/men kai. ta. avresta. evnw,pion auytu/ poiou/menÅ

22 And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do what is pleasing before Him.

Whenever we love the brethren with an uncondemned heart, our **boldness before God** results in the proper orientation to prayer. We are free to boldly approach the throne of grace. Thus, **whatever we ask we receive from Him**. The reason God answers this kind of prayer is two-fold: *first*, **because we keep His commandments** and *second*, **because...we do what is pleasing before Him**. These two are, of course, connected because to **keep His commandments** is to **do what is pleasing before Him**. God is always pleased by our obedience to His commandments. We ought to remember that when we obey God's word (the Law of Christ; 1 Cor. 9:21), we please God. Just like a child who obeys his parents pleases his parents, when we obey our heavenly Father, we please Him. When we obey Him, it gives us **boldness** to approach the throne of grace and make requests. When a child obeys his parent, he has **boldness** to ask for things from his parents with an expectation to receive. When we obey our heavenly Father, it increases our **confidence** to ask of Him and expect to receive. Of course, the Christian who is actively obeying God's commandments **WILL NOT ASK FOR THINGS THAT ARE NOT PLEASING IN HIS SIGHT**. His requests will line up with the will of God for his life. The **whatever** is limited by the human conditions we must meet in prayer. So, the **whatever** does not advocate a prayer for anything and I will get it mentality. If you pray that way, then you are missing John's point. John's point is that the one who is actively doing the will of God will actively pray the will of God. God will never answer a prayer that is contrary to His will.

DOCTRINE OF PRAYER

The General Significance of Prayer

The general significance of prayer should be observed as one reads the New Testament gospels. For example, in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17), Jesus returns to the theme of prayer six times in these five chapters (John 14:12-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24, 26; 17:1-26). Incidentally, Dr. L.S. Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924 (originally known as Evangelical Theological College), considered these chapters of the Upper Room Discourse to be his favorites in the Bible. On September 20, 1950, in his Chapel address on campus, He said, "These chapters contain the purest Christian teaching we have anywhere in the NT." They are the "seed plot of all grace teaching." He also said that every essential of doctrine was to be found here at least in germ form. Notice the disciple's observation of Jesus in prayer in **Luke 11:1** "*It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.'*" They must have reasoned thus.

Here we have in the person of Jesus the divine ideal of humanity in the human sphere, and notice his complete devotion to the exercise of prayer. If He who is so perfect needed to pray, how much more do we who are so imperfect need to pray? Thus, the request, “*teach us to pray.*” By this request, the disciple is not asking Jesus to explain *how* to pray. He’s not asking Jesus to teach them a better method of prayer. Instead, he’s asking Jesus to teach them how to really attend to the powerful ministry of prayer. Teach us how to really devote ourselves to the exercise of prayer. The disciples are not interested in a method of prayer but simply the doing of it! You all know how hard it is to devote yourself to praying. It is not an easy task, yet, if the perfect Savior in His humanity prayed, how much more do we need to learn to attend to this ministry?

A New Ground of Prayer in this Dispensation

The dispensational feature of prayer has hardly been considered among theologians. Yet it is of paramount importance. Christ taught a lot about prayer under the dispensation of the Law, and He even taught about prayer looking forward to the dispensation of the Kingdom; but in the Upper Room Discourse, we find the particulars related to prayer in the dispensation of the Church. Here we are given an entirely new ground of prayer. With the death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit to take up residence in believers in Christ, a whole new ground of prayer was formed. That ground is the name of Christ. Church age believers are to pray “in the name of Christ”. Turn to **John 16:23-24** *"In that day you will not question Me about anything. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. ²⁴ "Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full."* Surely the disciples had prayed for things before. But what they had never done before was pray “in His name”. This is something new and distinct to the dispensation of the Church. Jesus is preparing them to carry on His ministry during the age of His physical absence, the Church Age. So, the new ground of prayer in this dispensation is to pray “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

A New Partnership in this Dispensation

John 14:12-14 *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. ¹³ "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it."* Here in John 14:12-14 we have the seed form of a new partnership we have with Christ in prayer, now that we are in the body of Christ, united to Him. He mentions the grounds of prayer in v. 13 as “in My name”

and he teaches us that those who believe in Him now have a new partnership with Christ in prayer. By so much it is inferred that when we ask in His name, He petitions the Father for those things that are in the will of God. Because the Son and the Father are one in essence, by so much it is inferred that no prayer reaches the Father that is not in unison with His will. And therefore, every prayer that reaches the Father through the Son is answered.

The **greater works** here are not greater in quality (e.g., the miracles of Jesus) but greater in quantity. Who could do a greater work than the resurrection of Jesus Christ? So, we are the askers and He is the doer. We pray, He answers. Prayer is not powerful in and of itself; it is the God who answers prayer that is powerful. Prayer today is tossed around as a powerful thing in and of itself. We hear about the power of prayer. But what do people mean by this? Most think of prayer as a psychological crutch. It makes us feel better if we pray and it therefore has a positive effect on us psychologically. But they do not think that there is really a personal Creator God who hears and answers prayer by transcending the so-called natural order. The Christian view, that is, reality, is that the Christian is a partner with Christ in the sense that we pray in the name of Jesus Christ and He actually does transcend into His created order and answer prayer. It is not a mere psychological game going on. So, we have a new ground of prayer and a new partnership in this dispensation. What else can we say about prayer? Well, we can say there are human conditions that must be met for prayer to be answered.

Human Conditions to Prayer Being Answered

Turn to **John 15:7** "*If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*" Two conditions are given here. First, His words must abide in you. What does this mean? It means we must first know the will of God for our lives. Another way to put this is we must know His commandments (v. 10). Once we know His commandments, we can meet the second condition of abiding in Him. Abiding in Him amounts to obeying His commandments. So, the two conditions here amount to knowing His commandments and obeying His commandments. "It becomes a matter then of finding and doing the will of Christ."¹ This involves studying the word of God and then doing the word of God. As knowledge of the word of God increases, our confidence to pray increases. The reason Jesus says that you may *ask whatever you wish* is that by meeting these two conditions, you will not pray for something out of accord with the mind of Christ and the Father. What Christian would want to pray something contrary to the will of God? To do so is to think that our plan is better than God's plan. What believer would want to thwart the plan of God? The plan of God is certain to come to pass. By so much it is inferred that

God will never answer any prayer that is out of accord with His plan. When a believer is vitally in touch with God the human will has lined itself up with God's will. Our will has conformed to His will. We have decided it is not best to have things our way, it is not best to think what I want to think, it is not best to do what I want to do. Rather, it is best to have things God's way, it is best to think what God thinks, it is best to do what God wants to do. Not my will, but God's will be done. The Christian life is not about getting done what you want to get done. It is about fulfilling the plan of God; being an instrument in God's plan by doing God's will.

Why Prayer is Not Answered

First, because the human conditions are not met. If you do not know His commandments, then you will have a hard time obeying His commandments, and therefore prayer, is not answered because you do not know how to pray in the will of God. Second, **James 4:2-3** gives some reasons prayer is not answered. *"You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures."* They amount to two reasons: v. 2a-b amounts to your trying to get things on your own steam (v. 2a-2b). Instead of trying to get things on your own steam, the reason you do not have is 1) because you do not ask (v. 2c-3a) and 2) when you do ask you ask with wrong motives (v. 3c). In other words, you either do not pray or you do not pray in the will of God.

The Proper Order of Prayer

This should be quite simple, but people have spent more time arguing about the order of prayer than they have praying. During the Church dispensation, we pray to the Father (John 16:23), in the name of the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit (Jude 1:20; Rom. 8:26, 27). We do not pray *to* Jesus. To pray *to* Jesus would be to abandon the proper chain of command. It would abandon Jesus' mediatorial post. We pray *to* the Father *through* the Son. To pray *to* Jesus is to abandon a most vital aspect of prayer—prayer *in His name*. Nor do we pray *to* the Holy Spirit, because to do so would be to abandon His much-needed help in praying! Therefore, the prescribed order is clearly to the Father, in the name of the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Relationship of Divine Will to Human Will in Prayer

Does prayer change God? Does prayer change God's plan? There is always the question of why should we pray if God's will is going to be done anyway? This is the age-old problem of the Divine will and the human will. We can be certain that God does condition some of His actions on prayer. However, it does not follow that those things that are conditioned on prayer are uncertain to come to pass. When human beings meet the conditions, i.e., praying to the Father, in the name of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit, while knowing His commandments and obeying His commandments, the human will is in agreement with the Divine will. Mighty and wonderful things result from prayer, but only things that are in accordance with the purpose and will of God. Why, then, should we pray? Because the prayer itself is the means by which God purposed to bring about His plan. In other words, the prayers that are answered were a part of the Divine plan just as much as the answer to the prayer. Prayer is the decreed means by which some of God's purposes are met. Apart from our prayers, the will of God could not be accomplished. But, at the same time, apart from the plan of God, our prayers could not be offered. God's sovereignty sets up prayer. If God were not sovereign, then why pray at all? God must be sovereign for prayer to have any meaning. Who prays to a God who cannot bring it to pass? When we pray, we are admitting that God is sovereign. Otherwise, we would not be praying. Instead, we would be trying to make it on our own steam. Consequently, when you are trying to make it on your own steam, you are at base denying the sovereignty of God.

Finally, in recent years it has been popular to say that "prayer is not for God, it's for us." Now, this sounds really catchy and lots of Christians buy into this. Biblically, this is nonsense. You cannot find that anywhere in the word of God. That is a selfish psychological view of prayer! Prayer is essential to fulfilling the plan and purpose of God. And the word of God explicitly states that prayer is not for us at all, it is for the Father's glory (John 14:13). The highest desire of the Christian should be to see the plan of God unfold and come to completion and to align his desires and will with God's, never to see our plans or our goals come to fruition.

23 Kai. au[th evsti.n h` evntolh. aurtou/(i[na pisteu,swmen tw/| ovno,mati tou/ ui`ou/ aurtou/ Vhsoy/ Cristou/ kai. avgapw/men avllh,louj(kaqw.j e;dwken evntolh.n h`mi/nA .

23 And this is His commandment: that we believe the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He gave us commandment.

Here John is summing up this section which began in 3:10b-23. He signals that it is a summary by using the word **commandment** in the singular. The command is two-fold: *first*, we are to believe that the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, is the effectual grounds for prayer being answered. The words, **believe IN the name of...Jesus Christ** has been added by the translators. In the Greek it simply says **believe the name**. Since the context is prayer, John is simply saying that we should **believe** that when we pray "in the name of Jesus Christ," that prayer is effectual. Granting the fact that we are following His commandment to **love one another**. Answered prayer comes while we are following the commandments of God, in particular loving one another. Jesus gave us this commandment in John 13:34. God's will can therefore be summed up as believing the name is effectual and loving one another.

CONCLUSION TO 3:10B-23

"The Christian who hates his brother acts utterly out of touch with God, exemplifies the murderous spirit of Cain, and is 'abiding' in the sphere of death (verses 10b-15). By contrast, the loving Christian takes Christ's own self-sacrificing love as the model by which he himself should love in actual deeds and in accord with the truth (verses 16-18). If he does so, he can quiet a guilt-ridden heart, achieve a superb confidence before God in prayer, and expect answers to his prayers precisely because he is pleasing God (verses 19-23)."ⁱⁱ Knowing God's commands and obeying God's commands is the only way to reach this level of sanctification in the Christian life.

ⁱ Chafer, L.S. *Systematic Theology: Vol. 5* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 163.

ⁱⁱ Hodges, Zane, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 169.

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