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TITLE:

The Conditions of Power in Prayer

TEXT:

1 John 3:22–24

SUMMARY:

The essentials of the power of prayer are given: child-like obedience, childlike reverence, childlike trust, and childlike love. If there is prevalence of these essentials, our prayers will not be unprofitable. We look at our lives when approaching God and rely on His Spirit to direct our prayers.

NOTABLE QUOTES

“Whatever may have been your previous condition of life, if now penitently you seek the Lord’s face, through the appointed Mediator, you will find Him.”

“We believe that the prayers of Christians are a part of the machinery of providence, cogs in the great wheel of destiny, and when God leads His children to pray, He has already set in motion a wheel that is to produce the result prayed for, and the prayers offered are moving as a part of the wheel.”

A sermon preached by Charles H. Spurgeon on March 22, 1873. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 19.

The Conditions of Power in Prayer

And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

1 JOHN 3:22-24

I THOUGHT OF ADDRESSING YOU this morning on the importance of prayer, and I designed to stir you up to pray for me and the Lord's work in this place. Truly, I do not think I could have had a weightier subject or one that weighs more upon my soul. If I offered one request to you, it would be this: "pray for us." Of what use can our ministry be without the divine blessing, and how can we expect the divine blessing

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unless the church seeks it? I would say it even with tears: “pray for us.” Be abundant in intercession, for only so can our prosperity as a church be increased or continued.

The question occurred to me: What if there is something in the church that would prevent our prayers being successful? That is a previous question that ought to be considered most earnestly even before we exhort you to pray. As Isaiah 1 teaches, the prayers of an unholy people soon become abominations to God. “When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear.”

Churches may fall into such a state that their devotions will be an iniquity. Even the solemn meeting will weary the Lord. There may be evils in our hearts that may render it impossible for God to regard our intercessions. If we have iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us.

According to our text, some things are essential to prevalence in prayer. God will hear all true prayer, but there are certain things God’s people must possess, or their prayers will fail. The text tells us, “whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.” Our subject is the essentials to power in prayer: what we must do, be, and have if we are to prevail habitually with God in prayer. Let us learn how to become Elijahs and Jacobs.

ESSENTIALS OF POWER IN PRAYER

We must make a few distinctions at the outset. There is a great difference between the prayer of a soul seeking mercy and the

prayer of a saved person. If you sincerely seek mercy of God through Jesus Christ, you shall have it. Whatever may have been your previous condition of life, if now penitently you seek the Lord's face, through the appointed Mediator, you will find Him. If the Holy Spirit has taught you to pray, hasten to the cross and rest your guilty soul on Jesus.

We must speak in a different way to the saved. You have now become the people of God. While you will be heard and will daily find the grace every seeker receives in answer to prayer, you are now a child of God and thus under a special discipline as such. In that discipline, answers to prayer occupy a high position. There is something for a believer to enjoy over and above bare salvation: mercies, blessings, comforts, and favors that render his present life useful, happy, and honorable, though not irrespective of character. They are not matters of salvation, but these honors are given or withheld according to our obedience. If you neglect obedience, your heavenly Father will withhold these honors from you. The essential blessings of the covenant of grace stand unconditioned; the invitation to seek for mercy is addressed to everyone. But other choice blessings are given or withheld according to our attention to the Lord's rules in His family.

To give a common illustration: If a hungry person were at your door asking for bread, you would give it to him, whatever might be his character. You will also give your child food, whatever may be his behavior. You will not deny your child anything that is necessary for life, but there are many other things your child may desire that you will give him if he is obedient but will withhold if he is rebellious. This illustrates how

far the paternal government of God will push this matter and where it will not go.

Understand also that the text refers not so much to God's hearing a prayer of His servants now and then, for that He will do even when His servants are out of course with Him and when He is hiding His face from them. The power in prayer here intended is continuous and absolute so that "whatever we ask we receive from Him."

Childlike Obedience

For this prayer, there are certain prerequisites and essentials, and the first is childlike obedience. If we are destitute of this, the Lord may say to us, "You have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen" (Judg. 10:13–14).

Any father will tell you that granting the request of a disobedient child would encourage rebellion in the family and render it impossible for him to rule in his own house. The parent must often say, "My child, you did not listen to my word just now, and, therefore, I cannot listen to yours." It is not that the father does not love, but because of his love, he must show his displeasure by refusing the request of his erring offspring.

God acts with us as we should act toward our rebellious children, and if He sees that we will go into sin and transgress, it is part of His kind discipline to say, "I will shut out your prayer when you cry unto Me; I will not hear you when you entreat of Me; I will not destroy you, but you shall have no more of the luxuries of My kingdom or special prevalence

with Me in prayer.” That the Lord deals this way with His own people is clear from Psalm 81:13–16:

“Oh, that My people would listen to Me,
That Israel would walk in My ways!
I would soon subdue their enemies,
And turn My hand against their adversaries.
The haters of the LORD would pretend submission to Him,
But their fate would endure forever.
He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat;
And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you.”

Why, if the disobedient child of God had the promise put into his hands—“whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matt. 21:22)—he would ask for something that would bolster him up in his rebellion. This can never be tolerated. Shall God pander to our corruptions? Shall He find fuel for the flames of carnal passion? A self-willed heart hankers after greater liberty that it may be the more obstinate; a haughty spirit longs for greater elevation that it may be prouder still; a slothful spirit asks for greater ease that it may be yet more indolent; and a domineering spirit asks for more power that it may have more opportunities for oppression.

Shall God listen to such prayers as these? It cannot be. He will give us what we ask if we keep His commandments, but if we become disobedient, He also will reject prayers. Happy will we be if, through divine grace, we can say with David, “I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will go about Your altar, O LORD” (Ps. 26:6).

Childlike Reverence

Next to this is another essential to victorious prayer: childlike reverence. Notice the next sentence: We receive what we ask “because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.”

We do not allow children to question the propriety or wisdom of their father’s command; obedience ends where questioning begins. A child’s standard of its duty must not become the measure of the father’s right to command. The weightiest reason for a loving child’s action is that it would please his parents, and the strongest thing that can be said to hold back a gracious child is that such a course of action would displease his parents. It is precisely so with us toward God, who is a perfect parent, and therefore we may without fear of mistake always make His pleasure the rule of right, while the rule of wrong may safely remain that which would displease Him.

Suppose any of us should be self-willed and say, “I shall not do what pleases God; I shall do what pleases myself.” Then what would be the nature of our prayers? Our prayers might then be summed up in the request, “Let me have my own way.” And can we expect God to consent to that? Would you have the Almighty resign the throne to place a proud mortal there? If you have a child in your house who has no respect for his father but who says, “I want to have my own way in all things,” will you stoop to him? Will you allow him to dictate to you? God’s house is not ordered so: He will not listen to His self-willed children, except to hear them in anger and answer them in wrath.

Remember how He heard the prayer of Israel for meat, and when the meat was in their mouths it became a curse to them (see Num. 11). Many persons are chastened by obtaining their own desires. We must have a childlike reverence of God so that we feel, “Lord, if what I ask for does not please You, neither would it please me. My desires are put into Your hands to be corrected. Strike the pen through every petition I offer that is not right, and put in whatever I have omitted. Good Lord, if I ought to have desired it, hear me as if I had desired it. ‘Not as I will, but as You will.’”

This yielding spirit is essential to continual prevalence with God in prayer; the reverse is a sure bar to eminence in supplication. The Lord will be revered by those who are near Him. They must have an eye to His pleasure in all that they do and all that they ask, or He will not look upon them with favor.

Childlike Trust

In the third place, the text suggests the necessity of childlike trust: “And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ.” Everywhere in Scripture, faith in God is spoken of as necessary to successful prayer. We must believe that God is and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him. The success of our prayer will be in proportion to our faith. It is a standing rule of the kingdom: “According to your faith let it be to you” (Matt. 9:29).

Remember how the Holy Spirit speaks through James: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

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But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5–7). The text speaks of faith in the name of Jesus Christ, which means faith in His declared character, in His gospel, in the truth concerning His substitution and salvation. Or it may mean faith in the authority of Christ, so that when I say, “Do it in the name of Jesus,” I mean, “Do for me as You would have done for Jesus.”

He who prays with faith in the name cannot fail, for Jesus has said, “If you ask anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14). But there must be faith, and if there is no faith, we cannot expect to be heard. Do you not see that?

Let us come back to our family similitudes again. Suppose a child does not believe his father’s word and is constantly saying that he doubts his father’s truthfulness. Suppose he is not at all shocked that he should say such a thing, but he rather feels that he ought to be pitied, as if it were an infirmity which he could not avoid. He does not believe that his father speaks the truth, and he declares that, though he tries to believe his father’s promise, he cannot. I think a father so basely distrusted would not be in a very great hurry to grant such a son’s requests; indeed, it is very probable that the petitions of the mistrustful son would be such as could not be granted even if his father were willing to do so, since they would gratify his own unbelief and dishonor his parent.

For instance, suppose this child should doubt whether his father would provide him with his daily food. He might then

say, "Father, give me enough money to last for the next ten years, for I shall then be a man and able to provide for myself. Give me money to quiet my fears, for I am in great anxiety." The father replies, "My son, what should I do that for?" And he gets for a reply, "I am very sorry to say it, dear father, but I cannot trust you; I have such a weak faith in you and your love that I am afraid one of these days you will leave me to starve, and therefore I should like to have something sure in the bank." Which of you fathers would listen to this child's request? You would feel grieved that thoughts so dishonoring should pass through the mind of your child, and you would not—and could not—give way to them.

Apply the parable to yourselves. Did you offer requests of the same character? You have been unable to trust God to provide your daily bread, and therefore you have been craving for what you call "some provision for the future." You want a more trusty provider than providence, a better security than God's promise. You are unable to trust your heavenly Father's word! In a thousand ways we insult the Lord by imagining "the things which are seen" to be more substantial than His unseen omnipotence.

We ask God to give us at once what we do not require at present, and may never need at all, because we distrust Him. Brethren, are you not to blame here, and do you expect the Lord to aid and abet your folly? Shall God pander to your distrust? Shall He give you a heap of cankering gold and silver for thieves to steal and chests of garments to feed moths? Would you have the Lord act as if He admitted the correctness of your

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suspicions and confessed to unfaithfulness? God forbid! Expect not, therefore, to be heard when your prayer is suggested by an unbelieving heart: “Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass” (Ps. 37:5).

Childlike Love

The next essential to continued success in prayer is childlike love: “That we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.” The great commandment after faith is love. As it is said of God, “God is love,” so may we say that “Christianity is love.” If we were each one incarnations of love, we should have attained to the complete likeness of Christ.

We should abound in love to God, Christ, the church, sinners, and men everywhere. When a man has no love to God, he is like a child without love to his father. Shall his father promise absolutely to fulfill all the desires of his unloving heart? Or if a child has no love to his brothers and sisters, shall the father trust him with an absolute promise, and say, “Ask and it shall be given to you”? Why, the unloving son would impoverish the whole family by his selfish demands; regardless of all the rest of the household, he would only care to indulge his own passions. He would soon seek the kingdom for himself.

Selfishness cannot be trusted with power in prayer. Unloving spirits cannot be trusted with great, broad, unlimited promises. If God is to hear us, we must love God and each other. For when we love God, we shall not pray for anything that would not honor God and shall not wish to see anything

happen that would not also bless our brethren. You must get rid of selfishness before God can trust you with the keys of heaven, but when self is dead, then He will enable you to unlock His treasures.

We must have childlike ways as well: “he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.” It is one of a child’s ways to love his home. The good child to whose requests his father always listens loves no place so much as the house where his parents live. Now he who loves and keeps God’s commandments dwells in Him—he has made the Lord his dwelling. He has become like God, and now his prayers are such as God can answer.

To dwell in God is needful to power with God. Suppose one of you had a boy who said, “Father, I do not like my home, I do not care for you, and I will not endure the restraints of family rule; I am going to live with strangers, but I shall come to you every week, and I shall require many things of you, and I expect you to give me whatever I ask.” You will say, “My son, how can you speak to me in such a manner? If you utterly disregard me, can you expect me to support you in your cruel unkindness and wicked insubordination? No, my son, if you will not remain with me and own me as a father, I cannot promise you anything.” And so it is with God.

If we will dwell with Him, He will give us all things. If we love Him as He should be loved and trust Him as He ought to be trusted, then He will hear our requests. But if not, it is unreasonable to expect it. Indeed, it would be a slur upon the divine character to fulfill unholy desires and gratify evil whims.

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He may give you the bread and water of affliction, but certainly He will not give you what your heart desires.

One thing more: we must have a childlike spirit, for “by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.” What is this but the Spirit of adoption—the Spirit that rules in all the children of God? The willful who think and feel and act differently from God must not expect that God will come round to their way of thinking and feeling and acting. The Holy Spirit, if He rules in us, will subordinate our nature to His own sway, and then the prayers that spring out of our renewed hearts will be in keeping with the will of God, and such prayers will naturally be heard.

No parent would think of listening to a willful child. Shall God grant us that which we ask for when it is contrary to His holy mind? Such a possibility is not conceivable. The same mind must be in us that was also in Christ Jesus, and then we shall be able to say, “I know that You hear me always.”

THE PREVALENCE OF THESE ESSENTIALS

First, if we have faith in God, there is no question about God’s hearing our prayer. If we can plead in faith the name and blood of Jesus, we must obtain answers of peace. But a thousand cavils are suggested. Suppose these prayers concern the laws of nature, then the scientific men are against us. What of that? I do not know of any prayer worth praying that does not come into contact with some natural law or other, and yet I believe in prayers being heard.

Some say God will not change the laws of nature for us, and I reply, "Whoever said He would!" The Lord has ways of answering our prayers irrespective of the working of miracles or suspending laws. He used to hear prayer by miracle, but as I have often said to you, that seems a rougher way of achieving His purpose; it is like stopping a vast machine for a small result, but He knows how to accomplish His ends and hear our prayers by I know not what secret means. Perhaps there are other forces and laws which He has arranged to bring into action just at times when prayer also acts, laws just as fixed, and forces just as natural as those our learned theorizers have discovered. The wisest men know not all the laws that govern the universe, nay, nor a tithe of them.

We believe that the prayers of Christians are a part of the machinery of providence, cogs in the great wheel of destiny, and when God leads His children to pray, He has already set in motion a wheel that is to produce the result prayed for, and the prayers offered are moving as a part of the wheel. If there be but faith in God, God must either cease to be or cease to be true, or else He must hear prayer.

Confidence in God

The verse before the text says, "If our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him." He who has a clear conscience comes to God with confidence, and that confidence of faith ensures the answer of his prayer. Childlike confidence makes us pray as none else can. I have often felt that it needs more confidence

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in God to pray to Him about a little thing than about great things. We fancy that our great things are somewhat worthier of God's regard, though in truth they are little enough to Him, and then we imagine that our little things must be so trifling that it would be almost an insult to bring them before Him. But we should know that what is very great to a child may be very little to his parent, and yet the parent measures the thing from the child's point of view. God our Father is a good Father; He pities us as fathers pity their children and condescends to us. He tells the number of the stars and calls them by name, yet He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. If you have confidence in God, you will take your great things and your little things to Him, and He will never belie your confidence. Faith must succeed.

Love Must Succeed

But next, love must succeed too, since we have already seen that the man who loves in the Christian sense is in accord with God. If you confine your love to your own family, you must not expect God to do so, and prayers narrowed within that circle He will disregard. If a man loves his own little self and hopes everybody's crop of wheat will fail, he certainly cannot expect the Lord to agree with such selfishness. If a man has heart enough to embrace all the creatures of God in his affection, while he yet prays specially for the household of faith, his prayers will be after the divine mind. His love and God's goodness run side by side. Though God's love is like a mighty rolling river, and his is like a trickling brooklet, they both run in

the same direction and will come to the same end. God always hears the prayers of a loving man because those prayers are the shadows of His own decrees.

Again, God will hear the man of obedience because his obedient heart leads him to pray humbly and with submission, for his highest desire is that the Lord's will be done. Hence his prayers are prophecies. Is he not one with God? Doth he not desire and ask for exactly what God intends? How can a prayer shot from such a bow ever fail to reach its target?

The difficulty is that we do not keep in rapport with God; but if we did, then we should strike the same note as God strikes—the note struck by prayer on earth would coincide with that which sounds forth from the decrees in heaven. Again, the man who lives in fellowship with God will assuredly begin praying, because if he dwells in God, and God dwells in him, he will desire what God desires.

And here, again, let us say, our text speaks of the Christian man as being filled with God's Spirit: "By this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." Who knows the mind of a man but the spirit of a man? So, who knows the things of God but the Spirit of God? And if the Spirit of God dwells in us, then He tells us what God's mind is; He makes intercession in the saints according to God's will.

It is sometimes imagined that men who have prevalence in prayer can pray for what they like, but I can assure you any one of these will tell you that that is not so. You may call upon such a man and ask him to pray for you, but he cannot promise that he will. There are strange holdings back to such men, when they

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feel, they know not how or why, that they cannot pray effectual fervent prayers in certain cases, though they might desire to do so. God gives a discretion, a judgment, and a wisdom, and the Spirit makes intercession in the saints according to the will of God.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Thus I think I have laid down the doctrine pretty clearly. Now a few minutes of practical improvement, as the old Puritans used to say. I only wish it may be of improvement to many of us.

The first is, we want to pray for a great blessing as a church. I think I should command your suffrages if I said we intend to pray God to send a blessing on the church at large. Very well. Have we the essentials for success? Are we believing in the name of Jesus Christ? Are we full of love to God and one another?

The double commandment is that we believe on the name of Jesus Christ and that we love one another. Do we love one another? Are we walking in love? None of us are perfect in it. I will begin to confess by acknowledging I am not what I should be in that respect. Will you let the confession go round, and each one think how often we have done unloving things and thought unloving things and said unloving things and listened to unloving gossip and held back our hand unlovingly when we ought to have rendered help and put forth our hand unlovingly to push down a man who was falling? If in the church of God there is a lack of love, we cannot expect prayer to be heard. Do you expect God to save sinners whom you do not

love, and to convert souls whom you do not care a bit about? We must love souls into Christ, for, under God's Holy Spirit, the great instrument for the conquest of the world is love, and if Christians will love more than Muslims do and Jews do, they will overcome Muslims and Jews, and if they show less love, Muslims and Jews will overcome them.

Next, are we doing that which is pleasing in God's sight? We cannot expect answers to prayer if we are not. Put the enquiry to yourselves all round. Let each church member answer that question. Have you been doing lately that which you would like Jesus Christ to see? Correct yourself. Unless the members of God's church do that which is pleasing in His sight, they bar the door against prosperity; they prevent the prayers of the church from succeeding.

The next question is, do we dwell in God? I mean, during the day, do we think of God? A Christian is not to run unto God in the morning, and again at night, and use Him as a shelter and a makeshift, as people do of an arch or a portico, which they run under in a shower of rain, but we are to dwell in God and live in Him, from the rising of the sun until the going down thereof, making Him our daily meditation and walking as in His sight.

Last, does the Spirit of God actuate us, or is it another spirit? Do we wait upon God and say, "Lord, let your Spirit tell me what to say in this case, and what to do; rule my judgment, subdue my passions, keep down my baser impulses, and let your Spirit guide me"? Let us pray God to make the wheat be the stronger. One of two things always happens in a church.

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Either the wheat chokes the weeds, or the weeds choke the wheat. God grant that the wheat may overtop the weeds in our case. God grant grace to His servants to be strong enough to overcome the evil that surrounds them, and, having done all, to stand to the praise of the glory of His grace, who also has made us accepted in the Beloved. The Lord bless you and be with you evermore. Amen and amen.