

Approaching God in prayer

12/4/20 dkm

Read: John 20, 1John 5

Text: 1John 5:13-17

Psalms: 23old, 27:1-4, 141:1-5a, 72old

As the apostle John draws his letter to a close, he makes clear his reason for writing. 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life' (5:13 NIV). He writes to believers in the church, people who are in fellowship with God and with one another. For most of his letter he has been defending the humanity of Jesus, but he also defends his divinity, calling Jesus the Son of God. According to Mosaic Law, two or three witnesses were needed to establish the truth, so John supplies three witnesses, as well as the witness of God himself. Those who listen to these witnesses, and to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, are assured of having eternal life in Jesus Christ. Such assurance brings peace and joy to our hearts (1:4).

A second reason for writing this letter was, 'concerning those who try to deceive you' (2:26). False teachers who had emerged within this church, and then left, were unsettling the church. Not only their doctrine but their lives were disturbing and dangerous. The immorality and selfishness that flowed from their heresy was bringing shame upon the church and upon the name of Christ. A similar 'libertine' doctrine seems to have entered the church at Corinth where 'a man has his father's wife' (1Cor 5:1).

1. Certain of eternal life

John wrote this letter so that believers in the church 'may know that you have eternal life' (5:13). These words remind us of the closing words of John's gospel: 'These [words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31). John wrote a 'biography' of the life of Jesus, not just for the sake of history but that those who read it might believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God and receive eternal life.

From personally seeing and hearing what Jesus did and said, and seeing him die and rise again, John believed in Jesus with all his being. He knew he had eternal life in Christ and he wanted you who are reading his words to similarly believe and have the assurance of eternal life. Are you satisfying the desire of the apostle John? Do you, like John, have assurance of being saved and of having a place in heaven? Do not listen to those who accuse you of being presumptuous. On the contrary, not to have assurance is to doubt the word of God. People call you presumptuous because they think that their good works contribute to their salvation, and are therefore uncertain if their good works will be good enough. This was the teaching of the church before the Reformation, and continues as the teaching of the Church of Rome, even though we read here in the Bible: 'that you may know you have eternal life' (5:13).

2. Confidence in prayer

The fellowship we enjoy with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ is active and ongoing. As a disease pandemic sweeps the world and curtails our meeting together under one roof, we realise the importance of communication within our fellowship. We are using telephones and computers to communicate with one another and learn one another's needs. But our fellowship with God has always been on the basis of not seeing God because he is in heaven- although John assures us that we will see Him one day (3:2). How do we communicate with our Father in heaven today? By prayer of course; by reading and listening to his word, and by prayer. Prayer is the life-line of the believer. No technology is required, just a believing heart focussed on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1).

It is no accident that John returns to the subject of prayer as he concludes this letter. He does not use the word prayer but writes of 'asking anything according to His will' (5:14). Is John asking the Father or Jesus? Jesus clearly taught his disciples to pray to, 'Our Father in heaven' (Mat 6:9), and he urged them to ask anything in his name (John 14:6). So we ask the Father in the name of Jesus who is

our mediator, the only mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5). We do not need a telephone for prayer but we do need a mediator; we need to pray in the name of Jesus.

John heard Jesus speak about prayer and believed him when he said, 'If you ask anything in my name I will do it' (John 14:14). John heard Jesus pray in Gethsemane. 'Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me; nevertheless not my will but yours, be done' (Luke 22:42). In this letter John has already referred to prayer, telling the believers they will receive whatever they ask for because they are keeping His commandments, in particular the commandment to love one another (3:22).

Prayer is not a 'psychological crutch' as pagans like to say, and as some Christians also think. Praying to the God and Father of Jesus Christ is not the same as praying to idols because John assures us that God hears our prayers- with certain provisos. Idols have ears but cannot hear (Ps 115:6, Isaiah 44:17). God may or may not have ears- Jesus certainly has ears- but the important thing is he hears us. Moreover, in praying to almighty God we know he has the power to give us what we ask for. He has power to supply all our needs, and he does (James 4:19) - it is our greeds that he may not supply. So let us not be delinquent in prayer but come before our heavenly Father with confidence that he hears us and is able to give us whatever we ask. Please remember that just as you consider it rude when someone interrupts your conversation, and we have rules about mobile phones, remember it is rude to interrupt prayer when the minister is praying; he is praying on your behalf so listen and then say 'amen'.

3. Conditions for prayer

We come to our third point, 'Conditions for prayer'. We have mentioned the matter of provisos or conditions that the Bible attaches to prayers that the Lord hears. We have already seen one of these back in chapter 3, that of keeping 'His commandments'. John means the two summary commandments given by Jesus, which he

refers to as, 'Believe on the name of His [God's] Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another' (3:22, 23). We must come to God believing that he exists and rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb 11:6). We must come to God without hatred or anger towards a fellow believer (Mat 5:24). Anyone who refuses to love a brother or sister in Christ does not know Christ, and their prayers will not be heard. Notice the prominence given to forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer.

Another feature of the Lord's Prayer is the petition, 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. John knew this prayer, and he also heard Jesus himself pray with the proviso, 'Father, if it is your will' (Luke 22:42 cf. James 4:15). So he now writes, 'If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us' (5:14). Too often our prayers are about 'my will' and about God making provision for 'my will to be done'. Parents do not give their children everything they ask for because they know what is best for their children. As Jesus says, a father will not give his son a stone if he asks for bread, but if his son asks for a snake will he give him a snake? (Mat 7:9). So it is that God does not always give us what we want. He promises to supply our needs, not our greeds.

The closer we come to Christ the better we know his will for us, and the more our prayers will conform to the will of God. Paul says that we can, 'prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God' (Rom 12:2). Not that Paul always prayed according to the will of God. He prayed for the Lord to remove his 'thorn in the flesh' and received the answer, 'My grace is sufficient for you', without being healed (2Cor 12:7-10). Healing is not always God's will; nor is long life (Acts 12:2). Paul accepted God's answer and stopped trying to convince the Lord that Paul's will is best. Let us be persistent in prayer, and confident in coming to the Lord saying 'not my will but yours be done'. We can be confident that God will always act according to his revealed will, as we find this in the Bible.

4. Content of prayer

Too often our prayers are about our will being done, as already

mentioned. In fact, too often our prayers are only about us. I recall asking the Lord for a new bike, for a win in a cricket match, and help to pass my exam. Such prayers are not wrong but they are very self-centred; they were, and are, the prayers of a child. Moreover, these prayers concerned only the things of this world. The Lord knows that we need food, clothes, and shelter, and promises to supply our needs (Phil 4:19). When we ask for personal blessings are we thinking how we might use God's gifts to glorify his name? Man's chief end is to glorify God not one's self.

John indicates that we should be praying for one another, an outcome of loving one another. He is confident that it is God's will for us to pray for a brother caught up in sin (5:16). All sin is rebellion against God and has the potential to destroy fellowship with God and the fellowship of God's people. Christ loves his church and is jealous for his church (Eph 6:25). We should be similarly jealous and zealous for the church of God. This means praying for our church and for any members who fall into sin. We are of course, praying for our witness to unbelievers, but let us not forget that it is believers who are targeted by Satan. James urges prayer for a brother or sister who 'wanders from the truth' (James 5:19-20), as does the apostle Paul (Gal 6:1-2).

The closer we draw to God the better we will know his will, and the clearer we will see our lives in this world, or see things from God's perspective. God is not as concerned about our pockets being filled with treasures as he is about our hearts being filled with his Spirit. He wants to give us treasure in heaven, but we keep asking for treasure on earth. So let us pray that God's will be done in our lives and in the lives of our fellow believers, and let us also pray that God's kingdom comes because in the end his is the only kingdom that matters.

On this note of praying for a brother 'sinning a sin', John categorises sin that does not lead to death and sin that leads to death (5:16). What is he talking about? Is he talking about venial or forgivable sins, and mortal sin or sin that leads to death, as set down in Roman

Catholic teaching? The sin of murder is punishable by death (cf.3:12), as are other wilful or deliberate sins (Ps 19:13), but John is not here listing various sins. There is also debate as to whether John is referring to physical or spiritual death here in verse 16. Stott argues for spiritual death because John is talking about spiritual life, but then Stott gets caught up in the word 'brother' and argues it does not necessarily mean a believer- although John does not actually say the one sinning unto death is a brother.

Jesus spoke of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as unforgivable sin (Mat 12:31, 32). John refers to false teachers coming up in the church as having the spirit of the antichrist (4:3). 'They went out from us because they were not of us' (2:19). These men gave the appearance of being believers but were not. Moreover, they deliberately taught lies about God and were immoral in behaviour, potentially destroying the church and bringing shame to the name of God. Such men appeared in the early church and continue to appear in the church. Jesus faced the same situation with the 'son of perdition' among his disciples. Note that Jesus prayed for Peter who denied him (Luke 22:32), but not for Judas who betrayed him.

In conclusion we remember that there are believers and unbelievers in this world. It is not our position to be judging unbelievers, apart from preaching the gospel to them (1Cor 5:12-13). But it is given to the church to be praying for its members, especially members who fall into sin. And it is given to the church not to pray for but to condemn those who 'sin unto death'. Pauls tells us to judge anyone 'named a brother' whose life and teaching bring shame to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor 5: 9-11). Recall Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit, a sin that brought immediate physical death (Acts 5).

All sin is serious before God but most is not 'unto death'. Within the fellowship of believers we pray for God to be merciful towards a sinning brother or sister, and for them to be restored for the sake of the fellowship, and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.