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Sermon Summary #9

“In Jesus’ Name”: Magical Incantation or Pathway to Power? John 14:13-14

There are numerous reasons why non-Christians struggle to believe the Christian faith. I won’t burden you by listing them. But when it comes to Christians themselves, believers in Jesus, there are typically only two. If you should ask a born-again-justified-by-faith-in-Jesus-man-or-woman what their greatest struggle is when it comes to Christianity, they will most likely point to one of two things.

Some will say *suffering*. Why does God orchestrate life for his beloved children so that they have to suffer as they do? We can understand why those who hate God might suffer. But why do those who love him seem to suffer equally and just as painfully? Suffering is a stumbling block for all of us, to some degree or other.

But the second struggle that many Christians will mention, often before that of suffering, is the perplexity posed by *prayer*. Why does God say Yes to some requests but No to others? Why does it seem that often God doesn’t answer us at all? Why does God suspend so many of his blessings on our asking him for them? What does it mean to pray “in Jesus’ name”?

I can’t answer all those questions today. But I hope at least to provide you with an answer to the last one: What does it mean to pray “in Jesus’ name”? And can we really believe what Jesus says here in vv. 13-14 when he declares: “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it”? For many of you this is an especially painful point. You prayed fervently and frequently for someone you loved to be healed. You prayed “in Jesus’ name” for them to be healed and they died. You asked God repeatedly that he provide you with a new and more fulfilling career, but you remain stuck in a boring and low-paying job. So what could this passage possibly mean?

Four Essentials to Effective Prayer

When we look closely at the entire Farewell Discourse of Jesus in John 13-17 we find several requirements for effective prayer. We can’t simply look at one passage and ignore the others. They are designed to be taken together, as a unified approach to the theology and practice of prayer.

(1) Prayer in Christ’s Name (John 14:13-14)

The first essential element in effective praying is that we come to the Father and make our requests in Christ’s name. *Twice* in vv. 13-14 Jesus says you must pray “*in my name*”. What does that mean? Is Jesus telling us that all we have to do is attach the words, “In Christ’s name” at the end of each prayer and we will be guaranteed a positive answer? If that were the case, the words “in Christ’s name” or “in the name of Jesus” would function much like a magical incantation, no different from what the owner of a magic lamp would do when he says “Abracadabra” and a genie suddenly appears to grant him three wishes.

It’s important to note that one need not even repeat the words “in Christ’s name” to pray “in Christ’s name.” The perfect inflection of the word “Jesus” or “Christ” carries no weight. Praying in Christ’s name is less a form of precise words and more an attitude, a belief, an overall theology that says all I have is because of him and through him. It expresses utter dependence. ***Thus, you can pray “in Christ’s name” while remaining altogether silent.***

We must never treat Christ’s name as if it were a formula that automatically or mechanically generates a positive answer. It is not a superstitious conclusion, like a magical spell that will infuse our prayers with a little extra zing. It is not a rabbit’s foot to hang on the end of a prayer to give it punch.

When you pray “in Christ’s name” you are declaring that the only reason why God should bother to listen and the only grounds on which you can draw near to the throne of grace is that you are trusting in the finality of Christ’s work on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension to the right hand of the Father.

There are numerous other Christian activities that are done “in Christ’s name.” Demons are cast out in his name (Luke 10:17), which is to say, by virtue of his authority and power. Miracles are performed in his name (Acts 3:6; 4:10; 16:18), which I take to mean through his power and for his glory. Baptism is administered in the name of Jesus (Acts 10:48), church discipline is enforced in the name of Jesus (1 Cor. 5:4), and the gospel is preached in his name (Acts 9:27-28). Jesus later says in John 14:26 that the Father will send the Holy Spirit “in my name” (14:26). In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Paul writes: “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:11 that we are sanctified and justified “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In fact, Paul tells us in Colossians 3:17 that whatever we do, in word or deed, we are to do it “in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

When it comes to prayer it simply means to approach the throne of grace ***fully aware of who we are, unworthy sinners whose only claim on God is because of the virtue and merit of Jesus. It is to pray conscious of the fact that we are in vital union with him.***

It also means we are to pray ***in harmony with his person or character.*** It is to pray consistently with all we know to be true of him. It means we should never ask for something that is contrary to the purpose for which he came to earth or inconsistent with what we know he desires.

It means ***to pray in line with his own objectives and goals.*** It is to pray as if you were that person. It is to pray ***according to his will.*** It is to pray ***on the basis of the authority that Christ himself has given us.***

Simply put, to pray in Christ’s name is to have his fame preeminent in your heart, not your own. It is to pray cognizant of his immeasurable worth and the sufficiency of his work on the cross in paying for your sins. Run every prayer through the filter of Christ’s name: will it honor him, will it promote his kingdom, will it make him more famous, will it enable me to live more effectively for his glory, is it in harmony with his mind and revealed will?

We pray in Jesus’ name and not in our own or in the name of any other person because we have no rights or claim to anything good apart from who Jesus is and what God has done for us through him. We are accepted by God because of Jesus. We are clothed in righteousness because of Jesus. We have access to the throne of grace because of Jesus. And so it goes for every blessing and good thing that we enjoy. It is only because of Jesus. Do you pray with that in your mind? You should. You must.

But doesn’t Jesus prohibit in John 16:23 what he commands in 14:14?

In John 14:13-14 he twice uses a Greek word (*aiteo*) which means “to make a request for something” or “to petition someone for a favor.” There is another word (*erotao*) that has the sense of “to interrogate” or “to ask a question” or “to seek information” from someone. Both words are used in John 16:23. The NASB makes this clear:

“And in that day you will ask me no question (*erotao*). Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask (*aiteo*) the Father for anything, he will give it to you in my name.”

The shift in terms may only be stylistic. But if a distinction is to be maintained, John 16:23 is not concerned with prayer to Jesus, but refers to the disciples’ asking for information (see John 16:19 where *erotao* is used in a similar way). Thus it would be a desire for more knowledge or information, not favors in their relationship with Jesus. To this point in their relationship with Jesus the disciples had not prayed to him at all, but they had asked him a number of questions (John 13:6, 25, 36ff.; 14:5, 8, 22; 16:19). But “in that day” (16:23) that is to say, once Jesus has been raised and the Holy Spirit has been given to them, they will no longer need to ask the questions they used to ask, questions that reflected their ignorance and confusion. They will soon enjoy complete understanding.

So Jesus is not suggesting a day is coming when they will pray only to the Father and never to the Son. Rather the day is coming when the Spirit’s presence, on the one hand, will make unnecessary their interrogation of Christ, while on the other hand it will introduce the marvelous blessing of prayer to the Father in Christ’s name.

(2) Prayer for the Father's glory (John 14:13-14)

Merely praying "in Christ's name" isn't enough. Jesus also says that his purpose in answering our prayers is so ***"that the Father may be glorified in the Son"*** (v. 13). Jesus says much the same thing later in John 15:7-8,

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:7-8).

Is what you are asking for something that if God were to give it to you he and he alone would be honored and praised and glorified and seen by others to be the highest treasure of your heart? Jesus clearly roots and grounds all effective prayer in God. Prayer that is not God-centered, prayer that is not spoken so that God will be praised, is not prayer that will be answered.

This helps us understand the meaning of the word ***"whatever"*** in v. 13 and the word ***"anything"*** in v. 14. Do these words mean that whatever we ask, and anything we ask, regardless of its content and irrespective of its outcome, we'll receive? No. ***The "whatever" and "anything" are qualified by their capacity or tendency to glorify God the Father.***

If I pray, in Christ's name: "Lord, promote my name and fame beyond yours," will God answer that with a Yes? No. The reason is obvious. It doesn't glorify God; it glorifies me. Or if you pray, "Lord, would you please grant me an exemption and allow me to watch pornography on a regular basis without damaging my relationship with my spouse or with you," do you think God will answer by saying Yes simply because I ask for this "in Christ's name"? No. Or if you should pray, "Lord, I ask you in the name of Jesus that you would blind the eyes of the auditor at my place of work so that I may embezzle money that I promise I will give to the local church," do you think God will say Yes? No, he most assuredly will not!

Prayer exists to make God look good. Prayer exists so that our lives would reflect his grace and goodness and he would be honored. No prayer that wouldn't show that God is supremely beautiful will ever be answered in the affirmative.

I believe this is what David meant in Psalm 37:4 when he said: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." Be God-centered, said David. Make God and his will and his fame your desire and focus. If you do that, your desires will always be the sort that God will happily and abundantly fulfill. ***When you delight in God, that is to say, when his glory and beauty are preeminent in your heart and mind, your desires will never be self-centered but rather God-centered. You won't ask him for anything that wouldn't bring glory to his name.***

When you ask for God to fulfill some "desire" in your heart and he says No, I suggest it is because your "delight" is in yourself and your will and not in God and his.

That is why Jesus began the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9 with these words: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." That is to say, Father, my chief aim, my number one desire, my all-consuming goal in all I ask from you is that it would serve to "hallow" or make great or promote your name, not mine.

Perhaps the best way of summing up this point is to say: ***If you want God to respond to your interests, you must first be devoted to his.*** When God's name and fame are the center of our universe and all else in life orbits around him, he is pleased to answer our requests. Why? Because those requests will only be the sort that serve to keep him central and supreme in all of life.

This is just another way of saying what we see in 1 John 5:14-15 –

"And this is the confidence that we have toward 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 that we have asked of him."

We must never pray to gratify our own personal desires, unless the fulfillment of those desires serves the greater goal of glorifying God. When our hearts are so transformed that we sincerely desire only what God desires and only what

honors him, then we can pray with complete confidence. And if we pray and God says No, it can only be that, contrary to what we may have believed, the answer to that prayer would not, in fact, have served to bring honor and praise to God.

So, do you see that one crucial key to effective praying is *alignment*: the alignment of our hearts and minds and deepest desires with God's heart and mind and his deepest desires. Once our hearts are aligned, attuned, and in harmony with his, we will never ask anything that he wouldn't delight to give us.

[Thus far we have seen that for prayer to be answered and effective it must be in Christ's name and it must be for the glory and praise of God. We come now to a third essential element in effective praying.]

(3) Abiding in Christ (John 15:7-8)

When we come to the theme of abiding in Christ later in our study of the Last Words of Jesus, we'll look more closely at what it means. For now I must be brief.

But we can't afford to ignore what Jesus says here in John 15. The condition he lays down is explicit: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you," then you will receive what you ask for.

So, what does it mean to "abide" in Christ or to "remain" in Christ? *It means to live daily in conscious dependence on Christ, in moment-by-moment awareness of one's union with Christ, and in ever-more devoted obedience to what he has commanded us to do.* It is to live in such a way that his "words" abide in us. All that we think about is what Jesus has said about who he is, what he has done for us, and what he now requires that we do in obedience to his commands. We feed on his words. We drink deeply from the well of his words. His voice as preserved for us in Scripture is the source of our strength and the foundation of our existence and the joy of our hearts.

If we "abide" in him in this way and his "words" abide in us our minds will be conformed to his mind. Our will will be one with his will. Our desires will never deviate from what we know he desires from us. We would never think of asking for something that only serves us but doesn't serve to glorify and honor him. To abide in Jesus means that we are being changed inwardly in such a way that what we want in life is what he wants for us in life.

To "abide" in Christ and to have his words abide in us also means that our lives will bear the fruit of good deeds and a way of living each day that conforms to his will. This we see both here in John 15:7-8 and again down in 15:16. Let's look closely at both texts:

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:7-8).

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (John 15:16).

Look closely at the opening words of John 15:8 – "By this". By "what"? I think Jesus is directing our attention back to what was just said in v. 8. He is saying that when we abide in him and his words abide in us we will be certain to ask only for those things that glorify the Father. And when we pray in that way we may rest assured that God will answer us. When God is shown to be kind and generous and abundant in his giving to us, in response to our prayers, he is glorified.

We see much the same thing in 1 John 3:22. There we read, "And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him." Bearing fruit for Jesus is the same as keeping his commandments and doing whatever it is that pleases him.

One final word about abiding in Christ. As long as we are in this world and remain in our fallen bodies where the principle of sin operates, we will never fully and perfectly and at all times abide in Christ. It will always be a matter of degree. So don't fall into despair when you fail to abide or when your trust and confidence turn to another. Simply confess, repent, and cry out to the Spirit to restore your heart to its true resting place: in Christ alone.

We come now to the fourth and final requirement for effective prayer. It is found in John 16:23-24.

(4) So that our Joy may be Full (John 16:23-24)

Let's look closely at what Jesus says here:

“In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:23-24).

I want us to focus on the last words in v. 24 – “[so] that your joy may be full.” The first thing you must do is to ask yourself: What brings me greatest joy? If your answer is: more money, more sin, more gadgets, more fame, more stuff, more respect from my peers, don't hold your breath waiting for God to answer your prayers for such things.

But if your greatest joy is the presence and power and praise of God himself in and through your life, you can rest assured that God will answer your prayers so that this joy may be full and rich and unceasing. Consider what the psalmist said in Psalm 16:11 and Psalm 90:13,

“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).

“Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Ps. 90:13).

The joy that comes from answered prayer is the presence of God, the nearness of God, the experience of his power, the assurance of his steadfast love. God wants to answer your prayers so that your joy in him would be complete. But if you ask for things that undermine that joy, things that redirect the focus and trust of your heart away from God and toward the world, it's doubtful if you will receive what you ask.

Simply put, **God will not give us anything in prayer that will diminish our joy in Jesus.** We may think to ourselves that if God would only give us whatever it is we ask that our joy would increase. But he knows better than we do. He knows that some things, though good enough in themselves, will only serve to distract us from focus on Jesus and undermine our capacity to enjoy him to the fullest.

Conclusion

Let me close with two questions for you to consider and a couple of practical suggestions.

First, do you really want God to say Yes to all your prayers? Before you answer, think! I don't. I've prayed for some incredibly stupid, selfish, and self-destructive things during the course of my life. Of course, I probably didn't know at the time that they were stupid, selfish, and self-destructive. But as time passed it became obvious to me that such was precisely the case.

It may be that you've asked God for a different, and what you thought was a better and higher paying job. But God said No. He obviously wanted you to stay put. And only later did you come to see that the job you prayed for was not better, did not serve to glorify God, and would have been damaging to your career and your Christian life, even though it may have paid better.

I'm only speaking for myself here, but I suspect that most of you will agree with me after a little thought. **I would much prefer that God respond to my prayers according to his will and his wisdom and his best intentions toward me instead of responding according to my will. Do you not believe that the wisest and kindest and most loving God would do a better job of deciding what is best for you than you would yourself?** I do.

Second, is it really the case that God ever actually says No to our prayer requests? Your immediate response to such a question is probably, “Yes, he often says No!” In which case, I encourage you to reflect on J. I. Packer's answer.

“God’s yes is regularly a case of [God saying to us] ‘your thinking about how I could best meet this need was right’; his no is a case of [his saying to us] ‘not that, for this is better’ – and so is really a yes in disguise! – and his wait (which we infer from the fact that though we have asked for action, nothing yet has changed) is a case of [God saying] ‘*wait and see*; I will deal with this need at the best time in the best way. Whether or not you will be able to discern my wisdom when I do act, that is what in fact I am going to do. Keep watching, and see what you can see” (*Praying*, 173-74).

“We have it on firm scriptural authority that the Father’s response to requests faithfully, humbly, hopefully, expectantly made by his own children, out of a pure heart and an honest desire for God’s glory, is never going to be a flat no. One way or another God’s response will be a positive response, though it may be ‘I am adjusting the terms of your prayer to give you something better than you asked for.’ Or it may be, ‘I know that this isn’t the moment in which answering your prayer would bring you and others most blessing, so I’m asking you to wait.’ Or it may be, ‘I am answering your prayer, but you don’t know the strategy I’m working on, and it doesn’t at the moment feel or look like an answer at all. Nonetheless, it is. Keep praying, keep trusting, and keep looking for what, down the road, I may be able in wisdom to let you see” (177).

Here I close with a couple of practical suggestions.

First, don’t leave prayer to chance or convenience. In other words, ***plan to pray.*** Set aside a time to pray. Make it an unbreakable priority in your life. If you say to yourself, “Well, I know prayer is important and I’ll just trust God to alert me to the best and most appropriate time to pray,” you likely will rarely if ever pray. If you say, “Well, I’m incredibly busy right now, so I’ll wait until my schedule lightens up a little. Perhaps circumstances will take a turn for the good and I’ll find an extra 15 minutes in my day to pray.”

No. If you leave prayer to chance or commit to pray only if it is convenient, you will probably never pray. Set a time. Set a place. And stand true to it.

Second, combine praise with your prayer. Spend time in worship first. Spend time with your favorite music and adore God, worship God, enjoy God, and reflect on all that he is for you and has done for you in Jesus. Prayer will often flow more naturally out of a heart that has first been filled with the wonder of who God is. If you want a good example of this, read David’s praise of God in 1 Chronicles 29:10-17, followed by his prayer to God in 29:18-19.

Third, pray with an open Bible. If you struggle to pray, pray the prayers that are already found in the Bible. Read aloud and make these prayers your own: Matthew 6:9-13; Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:3-11; and Colossians 1:9-14. Take biblical promises and turn them back into prayer. Read slowly through the Psalms and make the psalmist’s prayers your own.

Fourth, if you genuinely don’t know what to ask for, ask God to lay his burdens on your heart. Be attentive to his voice. Trust him to reveal to you the things he wants you to ask him to do.