

Prayer as Asking in Jesus' Name

Rightly understood, asking within the willingness of God expands our minds, our imagination, and our asking rather than constricts or confines our praying. We are compelled to pray more thoughtfully, more boldly, and more creatively than we would otherwise be able to do.

I remember facing a monumental, potentially life-changing, issue. The implications were far-reaching. The decision I ultimately came to would impact a lot of people, especially me and my family. For 6 months, I prayed. As I contemplated this issue before the Lord, I would always leave with the thought, *who knows what a sovereign God may do?*

Finally, the day came when inaction was no longer an option. The result was not at all what I hoped or imagined, but it's the reason I'm here with you today. I could not have imagined this. God's will, his mind, his willingness, his plan is good and far beyond what we can ask or think (Eph 3:20; 1Cor 2:9).

Jesus helps us see that his willingness to give for exceeds our willingness/ability to ask. He challenges us at the point of our asking. Perhaps, you have heard people talk about the aspects of prayer—praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, petition—emphasizing that prayer is more than petition. While this is true and good, I think a few un-intended consequences can result if these aspects are thought of as the only characteristics of prayer. I'll name a few, but there could be others.

- We will leave off other biblical categories of prayer.

There is more to praying than praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition. We don't want to box ourselves in to patterns of prayer that unintentionally leave off real aspects of relating to God. Relating to God is not a formula. Our relationship with him must be real or it is nothing.

Lament, for example, is something that Christians need to learn to do, or you will hide your hurt and disappointment to appear spiritual. The psalmist meditated on the law of the Lord. Contemplation before God is necessary as we consider the mystery of the divine—his love, majesty, goodness, knowledge, etc. Praying the

Word is another. Free prayer where we pour our hearts out often includes many aspects of prayer altogether like an avalanche. We could go on.

- We avoid asking altogether.

We try to pray entire prayers simply praising God or giving thanks. We may have heard people say or said of ourselves, I prayed and didn't ask God for anything, as if there is something spiritual or superior about not asking.

- We become manipulative in our asking.

We praise on the frontend. Then we thank God for everything we can think of. Then we confess our sin, even old sins that we've asked forgiveness for a dozen times before. We intercede for people whether they need it or not. At last, as if it is of least importance, after we have all things lined up, we lay our petitions before the Lord. We can have the thought that if we line aspects of prayer up well, we are more likely to be heard. We even have an acronym for prayer, ACTS—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. While there are so many good things about all the aspects of prayer, the Bible does not typically line these things up the way we do in our prayer strategies.

- Worst of all, we lose faith that God answers our prayers.

We can think that we are so unimportant, and our requests are so unimportant in the grand scheme of things, that God could not possibly be interested. We can become fearful that God does not care for us or our needs. The thought of rejection mutes our asking, and even our prayers. Perhaps, we don't want to appear needy, or we want to protect God's reputation. It might just be, we doubt the generosity of God. We may feel when people pray for us that they are doing nothing to help.

If we pray and continue praying, we will get to all the aspects of prayer frequently. Nothing is wrong with concentrated times of praise, thankfulness, etc. Equally, nothing is wrong with asking. In fact, all of Jesus's teaching on prayer centers on asking.ⁱ

Jesus challenges us at the point of our asking. Seven times in the following verses, Jesus talks about our asking. We are in no danger of asking too much.

*Whatever you **ask** in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you **ask** me anything in my name, I will do it (Jn 14:13-14).*

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, **ask** whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (Jn 15:7).*

*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 (Jn 15:16.)*

*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 (Jn. 16:23,24).*

Among the most challenging statements Jesus prescribed about *asking* are the following:

Whatever you ask in my name I will do (14:13).

If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it (14:14).

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (15:7).

So whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you (15:16).

Whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you (16:23).

Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full (16:24).

When we hear these statements, we want to qualify them immediately. Certainly, they have contexts that need to be considered, yet Jesus brings us into the vastness of his willingness to answer our requests. Jesus shows us the generosity of God.

These texts in John all take place as part of Jesus's farewell discourse (John 13-17).

1. Praying in Jesus's name, the access of prayer (Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23)

We can't help but notice that Jesus instructs us to pray in his name. In John 14:13,14; 15:16; 16:23, Jesus told us to ask in his name.

Praying in Jesus's name is a new development in prayer. Jesus pointed out this development in John 16:24. This development signals an epochal change, a privilege

that belongs to the new order. Because the KOG has broken into the present age in Jesus, we ask in Jesus's name and receive for the simple reason that we may have the fulness of joy of life in the new age Jesus ushered in.

We pray in Jesus's name, not as a formula tied on the end, but in accord with all the name stands for. We acknowledge that the only way to the Father is through him (14:6). Paul Miller said of praying in Jesus's name, *Jesus isn't just the Savior of my soul. He is also the Savior of my prayers. My prayers come before the throne of God as the prayers of Jesus.*ⁱⁱ

I don't pray in Jesus's Name to perfect my prayers, as a bow tidies up a present. I pray in his name because my prayers are so imperfect. Prayer is a gift of his mediatorial work. Our prayers are heard because of the work of Jesus.

Ole Hallesby takes up praying in Jesus's name from the perspective of our need for a mediator.ⁱⁱⁱ Certainly, through the veil of Jesus's humanity, we see the glory of God. That in and of itself is mediatorial. Further, prayer in Jesus's name is to realize that we have no right to pray or to expect to receive anything. All that comes to us from God comes through Christ as our representative before the Father. Ephesians 2:18 says, *Through him, we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.* As I mentioned before, we indeed are helpless. Jesus said, *Apart from me you can do nothing* (Jn. 15:5).

Praying in Jesus's name is the helpless soul approaching the Father not based on its own merit but on the merit of the Son. Jesus invites us to ask in his name.

Through His suffering and death in our behalf, Jesus won for us all we need. Prayer is not an effort to manipulate God into seeing things our way. We don't somehow win his favor in our praying. We don't bring our merit to God. What we lack is not what prevents us from being heard. Our lack, our helplessness becomes an incentive to pray. We can't say, *I can't pray because I am not worthy to pray.* That's the very reason we need to pray, and the reason that prayer is in Jesus's name.

2. God's glory, the aim of prayer (Jn 14:13; 15:7-8)

The glory of God is a prominent theme in these asking texts, even when it's not explicitly mentioned (14:13; 15:7-8). The entire Farewell Discourse has the glory

of God in view. The glory of God is the manifestation of his presence. In the cross work of Jesus, God is made known in the outworking of his redemptive mission.

The John 14:13 text takes place in the Upper Room. Jesus has told the disciples that he is going away. He said that because he is going to the Father, those who believe will do greater works than he did (14:12). Then in verse 13 and 14 he tells them why believers will do greater works. The works that Jesus would do through his disciples after his death and exaltation would be greater than those he did in the days of earthly life.^{iv}

As a result of Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension, prayer has drastically changed. The Son will continue to glorify the Father as he answers the prayers of his people. Jesus's ministry of glorifying the Father (Jn 13:31) continues through the church. We take up the ministry of Jesus, which moves us to prayer just as it moved Jesus to prayer. The cross work of Jesus and all it implies, all it accomplished through His death, resurrection, and ascension, is to occupy our prayers. To sift our prayers through the sieve of God's glory is to believe that the glorification of God brings to us all the goodness of God.

The wording of verse 14 is a bit curious. *If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.* Often, we think the proper way to pray is to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, a kind of routing prayer through the proper trinitarian channels. It is good to have that category because Christian prayer is Trinitarian in nature.

However, to talk to Jesus in prayer (Acts 7:59-60; 2Cor 12:8), or to talk to the Father (eg. Mt 6:9-13; Jn 17), or to talk to the Spirit (eg Acts 13:2; Rev. 1:4-5) is not to denigrate the trinitarian nature of prayer but rather affirms it. Such prayer affirms the co-equal, co-eternal nature of the persons of the Godhead. It affirms there is one divine mind, one divine will, and one divine being to whom we relate in the standing forth of the divine persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. It's ok to talk to Jesus, but we need to understand the trinitarian underpinning of Christian prayer and think of God in Trinitarian terms.

3. Abiding in Christ and the Word, the fuel of prayer (15:7-8)

In John 15:7 our asking flows from a life of abiding in Jesus and his words abiding in us. Jesus gave us the metaphor of the vine and the branches to illustrate this point. The vine and branches give us a clear picture of union with Christ. The text shows a close connection here between abiding in Christ and his words abiding in us. Jesus and his

word are almost interchangeable, for he is the incarnate revelation.^v We don't bear fruit in order to abide, but because we are in the vine, we bear the fruit of asking and Jesus's answering. The fruitful life come through prayer informed abiding in Jesus and by the words of Jesus abiding in us. This brings glory to Father and shows that we are disciples (8).

Tim Keller speaks of the tragedy of untethered prayer.^{vi} The Word is the starting point for tethering our prayers. We are not the starting point of prayer. When we encounter God in the Word, prayer will follow. Without abiding in Jesus and his word abiding in us our prayers will be limited to the small pond of our mind and desires. But when what we desire is informed by the Word, our wishes, our desires, and our asking are expanded.

Otherwise, we may not be responding the to the real God but to the god we imagine and the desire of a life we design.^{vii} We will create a god who does not exist and then bow down to it. Without prayer that answers the God of the Bible, we will be talking to ourselves.^{viii} What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God.^{ix} So often we act and pray off of impressions, but all impressions need to be tested by the Word. We cannot be sure God is speaking unless we read it in Scripture.^x

4. Chosen to fruitfulness in prayer (Jn 15:16)

Christ is always the initiator. He is the Prime Mover of our salvation and our prayer. We did not initiate our salvation, but He chose us and appointed us to fruitfulness (Jn 15:16). Notice how prayer is closely related to fruitfulness.

The vine metaphor is in the background of this text as it speaks of fruitfulness. So often we try to have a fruitful life absent of prayer or with prayer not playing a prominent role. We have been chosen for the purpose of fruitfulness in the KOG that only comes through prayer/asking in Jesus's name with the Father giving what we ask.

Our efforts at fruitfulness are not nearly as important as our asking. We need what God can do, not what we can do. Our doing has to be fueled by prayer and God working through us, so that it is no longer our working but his work in and through us. Galatians 2:20 says, *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

The primary task of the Christian is to pray: *so that whatever you whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you* (15:16). Who knows what a sovereign God may do? Ask, he may give it to you.

I've learned that God has a much more long-term view than me and a far deeper work than I'm asking for. I see the fruit of prayer that I prayed back in the 1980s that is much deeper and wide ranging than I had the ability to see back then. Often prayer is a long asking in the same direction. Jesus said to his disciples, [they] *ought always to pray and not lose heart* (Lk 18:1).

We want relief today, and God may give it, but God wants for you a fruitful life. Ask like he will give it today, but don't lose heart. Jesus said, *Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom* (Lk. 12:32). What does that do for your asking?

5. Joy of the Kingdom, the result of prayer (16:23-24)

The asking that characterizes life in the KOG, glorifies God through making him known in Christ, and, also, bring fulness of joy to believers. *Joy* is a theme of these texts as well. Abiding in prayer and the word in John 15:7 have our joy in view (Jn 15:11). Joy is the mood of the KOG. Christ is risen. We have every reason to be joyful.

In John 16:23-24, joy again is in view. Jesus again continues to address the epochal change ushered in by his being taken away and going to the Father and sending the Spirit (16:7, 17). The disciples had questions about Jesus's going away (16:17-19).

In that day (16:23-23) is a reference to end of the age ushered in by Jesus. When that day is inaugurated by him going to the Father, the disciples are not going to have the questions they have now. The characteristic of the new age is *no more questions*.^{xi}

They will be in the know about what God is doing in the dawning of the New Covenant. The covenantal shift means rather than asking Jesus questions about what is going on and why, they will ask the Father from a position of knowing how God is working in salvation history. Their asking will be in concert with the Father's work in the world. They will ask in Jesus's name and receive. The result would be the fulness of their joy in the life of the Kingdom.

Never before had the disciples had access to the Father. Now, Jesus is saying, through me you can ask him, and you will receive. Not only that, but He will also give to you

for the simple reason that you can have joy. The way to joy in the Kingdom is in asking.

Imagine a community where people have answers to the problems plaguing mankind, to the way of a life of joy, and to the purpose of God in history. Imagine a community of people who ask and receive. Imagine a community of people filled with joy. Dear friend that his church, the place where life in the KOG is manifest on earth. Friend, our misery is measured by our sin. Our joy is measured by our asking.

Conclusion:

What about the problem of unanswered prayer?

You could be thinking, *I hear all the ask and receive talk, but I have prayed and God did not answer.*

Surely, if we have ever prayed we have come up against this problem. I want to preface comments by saying, *it ain't over yet.* Let's remember what Jesus said, we ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Some argue that there is no such thing for the believer as an unanswered prayer.^{xii} Sometimes we have the answer but it's just not the one we want. The answer may be, *No.* God's *no's* can be shattering and bring us deep disappointment.

Famously, Paul was given a thorn to keep him from being conceited (2Cor 12:7). Paul asked the Lord 3 times to heal him (2Cor 12:8). He was thinking, *I think I can keep the whole pride thing in check.* The Lord said, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness* (2Cor 12:9).

That is hardly unanswered prayer, but it is a hard, *No.* But it is a *no* with a purpose, as all the Lord's *no's* are: that the power of Christ would more clearly be seen at work in Paul and that Paul would learn the sufficiency of grace. Paul's response was to surrender to God's purpose in his life.

Even more famously, in the garden Jesus prayed, *Abba, Father, all things are possible for you* (the expansive nature of the divine mind). *Remove this cup from me* (getting real). *Yet not what I will* (the limited nature of the human mind), *but what you will* (trusting in the wisdom and goodness of God) (Mk. 14:36). Jesus asked but surrendered to the divine will. His asking is real but not selfish. Real but surrendered. There is no voice from heaven this time. We hear nothing.

We are aware of the content of the gospels, of biblical theology, of the course of God's redemptive work in history. We know the cross is the only way to accomplish the Father's will. Jesus knew it all better than we know it. He, also, knew what he wanted in that moment, and he asked, but surrendered to what he knew the will of God to be.

Paul Miller^{xiii} has some helpful comments on this issue from James 4:2b-3, *You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

James describes **2 dangers** in asking. **One** is not asking. The **second** is, asking selfishly. When Jesus prayed in the Garden, he **asked**; *Father all things are possible with you. If possible, let this cup pass from me.* He was being real, honest. We tend to hide our feelings from him. We act stoically. There is nothing there for God to work with. You have closed off your life and are hiding from God. We could say, *You don't have, because you are not real.*

Jesus avoided the second danger of **asking selfishly**, *Yet not what I will, but what you will be done.* Jesus surrendered to what he knew the will of God to be. Why would he ask for something he knew the Father would not do? Jesus is a person. Yes, he is God, but he is also fully man. He shows us that we should ask honestly, and we should surrender fully.

I think at least part of the reason we have the prayer in Garden and hear the cry from the cross, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me*, is to encourage us to pray, to ask.^{xiv} To get real in the down and dirty of our hearts, desires, disappointments, and fear and lay those before the Lord.

Jesus cried in prayer, and there was no response. The heavens were silent. The Farewell Discourse in John's gospel with the *ask* texts is the precursor to Garden prayer and the cry from the cross. Do you see, we are right back at asking in his name? In the silence he received, he bought the right for us to ask and receive. We deserve the silence he received. As imperfect as we are, as our prayers are, Jesus has imputed to us his right to ask. When Jesus told us to ask in his name, he knew the price he would pay that we might receive both God's *no*'s and *yes*'s.

ⁱ Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*, 118.

ⁱⁱ Miller, 119.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*, 59ff.

^{iv} Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Eerdsman, 497.

^v Carson, 518.

^{vi} Tim Keller, *Prayer*, 62.

^{vii} Keller, 62.

^{viii} Keller, 62.

^{ix} Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*, 5-6, quoted in Keller, *Prayer*, 62.

^x Keller, 63.

^{xi} Carson, 545.

^{xii} Keller, 236.

^{xiii} Paul Miller, *The Praying Life*, 115. I am largely dependent on Miller for these comments.

^{xiv} Keller 237-239. Keller has an enlightening brief discussion of Jesus being the only man who deserved to be heard but whose prayer was unanswered, so that we might approach God in the merit of Christ.