

Prayer as Spiritual Thermometer

1 John 3:19-24 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. ²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. ²² And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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.

A spiritual thermometer exists that takes your spiritual temperature for you every time you use it. It reveals your spiritual health. This spiritual thermometer reveals what kind of relationship you have with God, how close it is, how well you know Him. It is the thermometer of prayer.

What you are in prayer is really what you are in your Christian life. You are really as mature and close to God as you are in prayer. Because in prayer, you are quite simply 'before God'. You turn your back upon everything else, exclude everything else, and are face to face with God alone. And once you have tuned out all the noise, and stopped putting up fronts and masks and projecting an image, and you are alone with God – then what you say to Him, and how you act before Him is the purest and greatest test of your relationship with God.

Some couples are loads of fun when they are in company with others, but be a fly on the wall when they are alone, and they have nothing to say to each other. Many Christians love to talk about God, and teach and learn the things of God, but get them alone with God, and they have very little to say.

Prayer tests where you are in your relationship with God. As we examine this passage, we're going to see that prayer is the clearest test of our assurance of salvation, and of how much we abide in Christ. This whole epistle has been about assurance – how to know that you have eternal life. John has already talked several times about the life of abiding in Christ. Now he is going to bring those two themes, assurance and abiding, together under the topic of prayer. Prayer is the ultimate test of assurance and abiding. And since assurance and abiding are some of the deepest tests of our whole relationship with God, prayer is one of the greatest tests of our walk with God.

We'll see John's argument in two ways. First, confidence in prayer reveals your assurance of salvation. Second, answers to your prayer reveal your obedience to your Saviour.

Let's begin with the first point, which comes out of verses 19 and 20

I. Your Confidence in Prayer Reveals Your Assurance of Salvation v 19-21

And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him

Now follow John's argument here. He says, by this we know. What is he referring to when he says 'by this'? Is he referring to something before verse 19, or after verse 19? Well, the grammar doesn't tell us, but fortunately for us, John says the same thing before and after verse 19 – he is talking about loving the brethren. John says, by this – when we love the brethren – we know we are of the truth.

By this we know that we are of the truth. In other words, if you know what John is pointing at you know you are of the truth. What does that mean? To be of the truth, is to be a Christian, someone

who has believed the truth, who has received Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. So you see the evidence of loving the brethren in your life, and you know from that you are showing one of the signs of life, and what is the result of that? “We shall assure our hearts before Him”

Take note of that little phrase at the end of the sentence 'before Him'. What is that referring to? What does it mean to be 'before Him'? Is it talking about being in heaven before Him, or is it talking about being before Him in prayer? Well, the context tells us. Verse 22 speaks about asking Him, which is prayer.

So John is talking about prayer. What is he saying about prayer?

He says that if we know we are saved, we will be able to assure our hearts before Him. That word for 'assure' means to conciliate, to persuade. It has the idea of calming, even tranquillising the heart. This thing that we know is evidence that we present to our hearts, and it calms them, persuades them, and causes them to rest when they go to be before God in prayer.

To be assured of your salvation is to have assurance, rest, and peace before God in prayer.

Do you know something of the wince before prayer? You know you must go before Him, but there is this repulsion, this wince, as your heart and conscience pronounces quite unworthy to go into His presence and pray. An alarm sounds, a dog barks – you are an intruder on holy ground. And here comes something that says to our heart, our conscience, “Down, boy. It's OK” It punches in this code, and the alarm stops.

You see, how you are before God in prayer is really a practical test of what you believe God has done with your sins. If you believe from the gracious evidence of your life in the present, that God has indeed justified you in the past, you can go before your Father and be at rest.

Hebrews 10:22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Verse 20 takes things a little further.

For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.

John is still talking about our hearts, and their state before God in prayer.

When we go to prayer, we hear that alarm: that voice of the conscience that finds evidence of our sins, that detects our faults and convicts us, that has knowledge which works against us.

Now John tells us something about God when this alarm goes off. He tells us that God is greater than our heart and knows everything, if we are before God and our heart condemns us.

Now Christians have disagreed on what this difficult verse means. It can really mean two things, and those two things are nearly opposite in meaning. And good men have come down on both sides. In fact, Luther and Calvin took different sides on this matter. So let me give you both, and tell you which one I think is meant here.

The first view is this: John is possibly saying something quite frightening and disturbing – that God is greater than our heart when it comes to judgement. If we think we know how bad we are, we don't know a fraction of what God knows. God doesn't just agree with that alarm, He turns up the volume.

The second view is this: John is saying something comforting and encouraging – that God is greater than our heart when it comes to compassions. Yes, we think we are bad, and God does know that, but He knows even more than that. He not only knows all of our sins before we ever know them, He knows the deepest things of a man. He knows when mixed in with our clumsy efforts were some righteous desires. He knows how to separate surface failures from deep desires for pleasing God.

I think this second view is right because it carries the momentum of the passage. John is telling us that when we are before God in prayer, the evidence of our lives can assure us of our justification, and know that we stand before a merciful God who knows us far better than we can, and knows far more than we can.

Do you remember when Jesus pressed Peter with those three questions, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” He asked Peter that three times as a way for Peter to “unconfess” his three denials of Jesus. And finally Peter says to Jesus: *Lord, you know all things; You know that I love you.*” And when we are before God in prayer, we have the life evidence of His grace in the present telling us, we are of the truth, and that tells us – He has accepted Me in Christ. Rest, heart, rest. He knows all things. He knew them all the day He justified you. He knew exactly how many sins you would accrue in your life, just the size of the debt he would debit His Son with on the cross.

So verse 21 brings it together for us.

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God

When condemnation evaporates, our tongues are loosed, and we speak to God. The coal touches our lips from the altar, and boldness comes back. We say with Isaiah, “Here am I! Send me!” Condemnation and confidence are opposites. The presence of one means the absence of the other.

Psalm 51:14-15 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, The God of my salvation, And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.

Your confidence in prayer is the test of whether or not you believe God has pardoned you. It is an immediate test of your sense of assurance of salvation.

Prayer is certainly the place where we confess our sins, regret them, repent of them, and mourn over them. But all that should be done in an atmosphere of confidence before God, being assured of pardon. There is a kind of self-condemnation which is allied with the accuser of the brethren. There comes a point when your heart actually has a God-complex. You wish to overrule the justice of God Himself. You want to press charges when God has closed the case, and will not give Satan any grounds to appeal, let alone you.

To which God may rightly answer with indignation, “What, My Son's righteousness not good enough for you, sinner? My Son's perfect, unspotted, loving obedience not enough? What do you propose in its place? Your filthy rags? Your sordid good works, polluted from the start with pride, self-love and mixed motives?

Job 40:8 8 "Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?

No, let us hide behind our Advocate, and rest our hearts in His obedience. The outward evidence is God's gift to us to assure us that He knows us better than we do. If the supernatural fruit of loving others is present, we can rest in His superior knowledge of our state.

The confidence that we experience before God is one major test of our spiritual health. But what about the results of our prayers? What about once we have left the prayer closet, and we look for answers? What do those say about our walk with God?

II. The Results of Prayer Reveal Your Obedience to the Saviour v22-24

And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

This is a very clear and uncompromising text. That which we ask from Him in prayer, we receive. The reason we receive whatever we ask from Him is that we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

This verse really upsets our pet theologies of prayer. Not only that, but it is hard to square with our lives. What does John mean? Well let's eliminate some options: Does John mean that our obedience and good works buy us answers to prayer? No. Our works could never be the ground or cause of answered prayer. God's grace to us in Christ is always the ground or cause for answered prayer.

Does John mean that when you obey Him and do what pleases Him, you can go to God with a blank cheque, and get whatever you want? No. Because when you obey God and seek to please Him, you don't go to God with a blank cheque. In fact, that's just the point. When you obey and please God, you go to God with a cheque, and give Him the pencil. You increasingly want to please Him, so you want to know what He wants. And because you are learning what pleases Him, what He wants, you ask for those things. You are delighting yourself in the Lord, and the Lord is giving you the desires of your heart.

So what happens? As you live the life of knowing Christ more and more, you are taking in His Word. You are renewing your mind. His will is increasingly becoming wedded with yours. So when you pray, more and more you are synchronising with God. It's what John calls abiding.

²⁴ *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.*

John 15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

John 15:7-10 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. ⁹ "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of this is an organic one. If Jesus is a plant, then we are extensions of that plant. The more we accept His mind and will, by hearing His Word, and obeying His Word, the more of it flows through us. The more it flows through us, the more we produce fruit that looks like His will. That fruit is answered prayer. In other words, the more answered prayer in our lives, the more evidence it is that we are synchronising with God, loving what He loves, seeking what He desires, and asking for His pleasure.

We are also learning patience, persistence, waiting on Him. We are learning to look to Him. We are learning, like any good Father, God encourages obedience with rewards, and chastises

disobedience.

Answered prayer is not a face-off between strangers. It is the result of two Persons who synchronise their desires. It is what happens when we increasingly move in the rhythm of His life. The result is inevitably gaining His priorities, praying His desires, learning His heart. Prayer becomes not an over- the- counter negotiation, but a wrestle that becomes a dance, till instead of struggling against Him, I move in time with Him. In this divine-human interaction, we learn to ask and wait, and struggle and learn. We learn as children to love and revere our Father.

We want prayer to be requests; God wants prayer to be relationship. We want the answers without the submission; God wants to use the whole process of answered or unanswered prayer to draw us into Him.

Notice that John doesn't say that there comes a day when you reach perfect obedience and on that day all your requests are answered. Instead, the suggestion is that when our obedience is right, it shows up in our prayer lives.

I think we often fail to use the results of our prayers as a spiritual thermometer this way. We have become too blasé about unanswered prayer.

A.W. Tozer wrote an article about Unanswered Prayer, which we've quoted before. He says this

“This error appears among the saints as a kind of all-purpose philosophic therapy to prevent any disappointed Christian from suffering too great a shock when it becomes evident to him that his prayer expectations are not being fulfilled. It is explained that God always answers prayer, either by saying yes or by saying No, or by substituting something else for the desired favour.

Now, it would be hard to invent a neater trick than this to save face for the petitioner whose requests have been rejected for no obedience. Thus when a prayer is not answered he has but to smile brightly and explain, "God said no." It is all so very comfortable. His wobbly faith is saved from confusion and his conscience is permitted to lie undisturbed. But I wonder if it is honest...”

Tozer goes on to say that an answer to pray has two things – a clear-cut request, and a clear-cut answer.

“When we go to God with a request that He modify the existing situation for us, that is, that He answer prayer, there are two conditions that we must meet: (1) We must pray in the will of God and (2) we must be on what old-fashioned Christians often call "praying ground"; that is, we must be living lives pleasing to God...

God wants us to pray and He wants to answer our prayers, but He makes our use of prayer as a privilege to commingle with His use of prayer as a discipline. To receive answers to prayer we must meet God's terms. If we neglect His commandments our petitions will not be honoured. He will alter situations only at the request of obedient and humble souls.

The God-always-answers-prayer sophistry leaves the praying man without discipline. By the exercise of this bit of smooth casuistry he ignores the necessity to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world, and actually takes God's flat refusal to answer his prayer as the very answer itself. Of course such a man will not grow in holiness; he will never learn how to wrestle and wait; he will never know correction; he will not hear the voice of God calling him forward; he will never arrive at the place where he is morally and spiritually fit to have his prayers answered. His wrong philosophy has ruined him.”

Tozer does not mean that some requests may take many years to be answered. Tozer does not mean

we should not keep praying for things we know are biblical and in the will of God. Tozer means the casual acceptance of unanswered prayer in our lives dulls us to the fact that we may not be abiding as we ought. We might be living quite far from God's pleasure, and are asking Him for things He has no intention of giving to us, either because they are out of His will, or because He wants our attention and submission and heart before He will give us the thing we are asking for.

Notice, it more than commands, it is doing what pleases Him. Without love, we simply fulfil obligations. With love we go beyond the obligations to bring joy to the one we love. John 8:29 is our model here: *"And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him."*

Warren Wiersbe said, "A Christian who lives to please God will discover that God finds ways to please His child."

So what does it look like to keep His commandments and please God? Verse 23 is a helpful summary.

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.

What pleases God fundamentally? What is our deepest obligation? It is to believe in Jesus Christ; to place your faith in Jesus Christ, as the one to save you from sin. Having done that, you love God's family as your own family. This fulfils all the commandments.

John 6:29 Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.

Matthew 22:36-40 Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 "This is the first and great commandment. 39 "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Do you believe right now that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Son of Man, whom the Father sent to be the Saviour of the world? Do you rest in Him and Him alone? Further, do you regard other believers as your kin? Do you share a common Father, older brother, hope, inheritance? Do you find yourself drawn to them, desiring to help and strengthen and encourage and build up and nourish and assist? Is there a family bond?

The person who is loving God by faith, and loving one another, is keeping God's commandments and doing what is pleasing in His sight. Such a person is abiding. And the Word of God says that person will find his or her requests answered, possibly because the requests themselves change; possibly because the person grows in persistent prayer; possibly because God rewards Spirit-filled obedience. Whatever the case, abiding brings answers. And do you know what answers bring more of? Assurance.

Do you see how your prayer life all at once reveals huge things about your walk with God? Your confidence in God's presence reveals your assurance of salvation. Are there enough signs of life, like loving the brethren that assure you that you have indeed passed from death to life, that Christ is your Advocate, and that your troubled conscience can rest? Prayer reveals that.

Your success in prayer, if we can put it that way, reveals the obedience in your life. If the tree of your prayer life bears little fruit, it may be because you are not abiding. If you are a believer in

Christ, and are loving the brethren, and loving your neighbour, increasingly, you should see answers to your prayers.

So will you stop and consider your prayer life? What are you like in the presence of God? Does your heart condemn you? If so, what is your answer to your heart? Is Christ your Advocate? If you say yes, do you have some present-day evidence to show for that? Do you love His people? What is your confidence like in prayer? What is your assurance of salvation like? What are the results of your prayer life? Do you bother to check? Do you use a barrenness in answers to check if you are really synchronising with God, waiting on Him, being rewarded by Him?