

**What is the place of prayer in your life?** For some, prayer is almost non-existent. It can be *inconvenient* for those whose daily routine is full of commitments and responsibilities. It seems *unnecessary* for others whose lives are saturated with material prosperity and security. It is even treated as *a distraction* for those who believe their own sacrifices and investments are the more urgently needed. Prayer is even treated as *futile* by those who believe that God is too distant to care.

For others, prayer is minimal. *Patterns of sin* can dampen one’s eagerness to enter His presence, and then the focus of prayer is almost exclusively on personal confession. *Procrastinators* leave prayer to the end of the day, to a time when prayer is usually cut short by fatigue. *Discouragement* hampers the commitment of some, since the lack of concrete “answers to prayer” leads to a suspicion that prayer may not be worth the struggle. Still others rely excessively on *emotion*, praying only when they “feel like it,” or only when they enjoy spiritual highs. The list goes on.

Ultimately, a lackluster prayer life demonstrates the absence of understanding and conviction. We don’t fully understand the privileges we possess, the access we’ve been granted, or the promises we’ve received. We’re not fully convinced in the purpose of prayer itself. We haven’t taken the time to consider what it really is. Most importantly, we don’t seriously appreciate the power and goodness of the God who has brought us out of death to life and who delights in giving us all that is good. John Piper (*Desiring God*, 162) describes this weakness as follows:

A failure in our prayer life is generally a failure to know Jesus. “If you knew who was talking to you, you would ask Me!” A prayerless Christian is like a bus driver trying alone to push his bus out of a rut because he doesn’t know Clark Kent is on board. “If you knew, you would ask.” A prayerless Christian is like having your room wallpapered with Saks Fifth Avenue gift certificates but always shopping at Goodwill because you can’t read. “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that speaks to you, you would ask—you would ask!”

All too often, we struggle in ruts of discouragement simply because we lose sight of the resources we already possess. Therefore, the solution is to be found in *remembering*—or perhaps *understanding correctly* for the first time—what awesome rights and privileges we possess as the children of God, particularly in prayer. First John 5:13–17 helps us recover this understanding of these rights and privileges.

### **1 John 5:13–17 – “Assurance and the Success of Prayer”**

In 1 John 5:13–17, the apostle John writes,

**These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before 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 which we have asked from Him. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading to death*, he shall ask and *God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death*. There is a sin *leading to death*; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not *leading to death*.**

Like the previous section (5:6–12), John includes language in this section that poses challenges for interpretation—specifically, the language of “a sin not leading to death” and “a sin leading to death.” Nonetheless, solutions to those interpretive problems are not out of reach, and the overall message of the text—which is straight forward—provides tremendous encouragement to believers regarding their practice of prayer.

The section can be divided between three emphases related to prayer: (I) The Argument for Prayer (v. 13); (II) The Assurance for Prayer (vv. 14–15); and (III) The Application of Prayer (vv. 16–17).

## I. The Argument for Prayer (5:13)

At the outset of this section on prayer, John states the overall purpose of his letter: **“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (v. 13)**. The phrase **“these things”** doesn’t refer only to the statements John made in the prior section (specifically, vv. 11–12), but to the contents of the entire letter. He addresses them **“to you who believe,”** referring to all those who had expressed genuine faith in the message which the apostles had preached—as opposed to the *spurious faith* demonstrated by the secessionists, who had rejected the apostolic preaching of Jesus, withdrawn from the church, criticized the faith of those who remained, and promoted a different Christ (see 2:18–24; 4:1–6). John describes this genuine faith as belief **“in the name of the Son of God.”** It was a faith that embraced the historical person of Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of God. It was a faith with the *right Christ* as its object of trust, confidence, and conviction. It is to these whom John writes, seeking to boost their assurance.

The assurance that John seeks to bolster is captured in the purpose statement of his writing: **“so that you may know that you have eternal life.”** The “knowing” John speaks of isn’t the kind of knowing that is based on assumptions, wishful thinking, or possibilities. John speaks of a *settled knowing*—a knowledge that results in *conviction*. And that knowledge is described as the possession of **“eternal life.”** This “life” is not “eternal” merely because it *doesn’t end* (quantity or breadth of life), but also because it *is supremely blessed* (quantity or depth of life). It describes the life of those who have been “born of God” (see 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). It is the life of the “overcomer” (2:13; 4:4; 5:4–5). Moreover, John doesn’t describe this **“eternal life”** as something to possess *in the future*. It is something that all regenerate people possess *now*; they **“have eternal life.”**

Ultimately, John is convinced of his readers’ authenticity of faith and wants them to enjoy the assurance of their salvation. He does not describe assurance as a carrot-on-a-stick—something to dangle out before Christians to motivate them to move forward but never to grasp. Instead, it is something to be enjoyed by all true Christians in the here and now. Responding to the tendency in broader Christendom to deny assurance, John Stott writes,

It is common today to decry any claim to assurance of salvation, to dismiss it as presumptuous, and to affirm that no certainty is possible on this side of death. But certainty and humility do not exclude one another. If God’s revealed purpose is not only that we should hear, believe, and live, but also that we should know, presumptuousness lies in doubting His word, not in trusting it. (*Epistles of John*, 185)

But how does this purpose statement tie into the larger section on prayer? It does so by setting up **the argument for a vibrant, confident prayer life**. That we can *know* that we have eternal life (5:13), that our sins have been forgiven (1:9; 2:2; 4:9–10), and that we are God’s beloved children (3:1–2), means that we can approach Him freely, frequently, and fearlessly for all of our needs. In fact, John made a similar argument earlier in his letter: **“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him . . .”** (3:21–22). Who would not want to take advantage of such privilege?!

### JOHN’S PURPOSE STATEMENTS

**John’s Gospel:** “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30–31).

**John’s First Letter:** “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

## II. The Assurance for Prayer (5:14–15)

Having established the basis for why we *can* pray (v. 13), John then describes the *assurance* that is to characterize our praying. We are not to go before our Father *doubting*, questioning whether He will listen. Instead, we are to approach Him with *boldness*, fully believing He hears and cares. John expresses this confidence in two successive conditional statements. He first states, **“This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (v. 14).**

The phrase **“This is the confidence”** points forward to the second half of the sentence, which begins with the pronoun **“that.”** The word **“confidence”** is noteworthy. John has already used it three times in the letter: in 2:28 and 4:17 to refer to the believer’s posture at the appearance of Christ, and in 3:21 to refer to the believer’s posture in prayer. The word describes “a state of boldness, especially in the presence of persons of high rank.” It particularly emphasizes a boldness *to speak*. This boldness is experienced **“before Him”**—literally, “before His [God’s] face.”

John describes this **“confidence”** in the form of a conditional sentence: **“if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”** John assumes this condition to be true. Believers *are* to ask God for everything. Certainly, John has already called upon his readers to ask for forgiveness as a pattern of life (1:9). John has assured them that there is an Advocate with the Father who pleads on their behalf (2:1). But John encourages his readers here to ask for more than just forgiveness. The word **“anything”** means just that! John’s unusual placement of the word in the sentence indicates he is emphasizing this idea. Yes, *anything!*

What happens when we as the children of God make requests of our Father? **“He hears us.”** The statement is simple yet profound. Almighty God, who is Light and in whom dwells no darkness at all (1:5) *heeds our requests*. The statement is stated as *a settled fact*. And as a fact, it provides tremendous assurance for prayer.

However, John includes an important qualification: **“according to His will.”** In other words, this is not a blank check to make requests for God to satisfy every fleshly ambition. Instead, it is an acknowledgement of the believer’s need to think, desire, and ask in line with the character of God Himself.

- For key texts that emphasize asking “according to His will” or “in His name,” see Matthew 6:9–10; Mark 14:36; John 14:13–14; 15:17; 16:23–24; James 1:5–6; 4:2–3.

D. Edmond Hiebert summarizes this principle well: “Prayer is not a device for imposing our will upon God, but rather the bending of our will to His in the desire that his good will may be done” (*Epistles of John*, 256).

John then expresses another conditional statement which he assumes to be true: **“And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him” (v. 15).** Carrying forward the conclusion he reached at the end of v. 14, he now states, **“And if we know.”** His wording again emphasizes settled conviction: “And if we know . . . *and we do know!*” He goes on to state, **“[then] we know that we have the requests.”** Again, John states the outcome as *a settled fact* (see the end of v. 14). If our God truly does listen to our requests, made in the sincere attempt to follow His will, then it surely follows that He will answer each one. He is not ambivalent. He is not distracted. He does not look away. *He answers*. It will certainly be in His own way and in His own timing, but *He will answer*.

This is a precious truth. Insecure in their own salvation, or doubting God’s grace and goodness, Christians can easily think that prayer is burdensome to God. They assume that He, their Father, is more interested in *withholding things* from them than *granting their requests*. John debunks this horrible theology and replaces it with truth. For John, **prayer is the special means that God uses to give His children what they want, when their desires are rightly aligned.** After all, this is precisely what Jesus taught when He stated,

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matthew 7:7–11).

Does not God, who is Light, know how to give even better gifts to His children? Yes! Believe it! Ask!

### III. The Application of Prayer (5:16–17)

Having described the assurance believers are to have in prayer, John then provides a special *application* of such praying: *intercessory prayer on behalf of a sinning brother*.

The language of vv. 16–17 presents challenges to interpreters. Yet, when read in the light of the entire letter and the problem of the *secessionist-antichrists* who were threatening the church, the explanation to the language of these verses becomes clear.

John writes, “**If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this**” (v. 16). John describes a *hypothetical situation* that may or may not happen (see the same construction in 2:1b). The situation occurs when one “**sees His brother committing a sin.**” The language is concrete. John isn’t describing a hunch or suspicion about sin. Instead, he describes a situation when a believer observes another believer—a “**brother**”—objectively committing sin. In that case, John says, the right response is for the brother who observes the commission of sin to immediately “**ask**” God, who has promised to hear (see v. 14) and answer (v. 15). The answer of the prayer will be the restoration of spiritual “**life**”—the granting of forgiveness, cleansing from unrighteousness, and restoration to fellowship—the same things that the believer asks for himself (1:9; 2:1–2).

But what challenges interpreters is John’s language of “**the sin not *leading* to death**” (literally, “the sin not with reference to death”) and “**the sin *leading* to death**” (“the sin with reference to death”). John prescribes intercessory prayer for the former but discourages it for the latter. Why? In short, it is best to understand the first category, “**the sin not *leading* to death,**” as referring to the sins that *genuine believers* commit, since John specifically states that it is a “**brother**” who can commit such a sin. The second category, “**the sin *leading* to death,**” for which John discourages intercessory prayer, can be understood in two ways: either (1) a serious sin committed by believers, which warrants *physical* death as God’s discipline on such believers (see Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor 5:3–5; 11:27–30); or (2) the sin of *apostasy*, for which death is not merely physical, but *eternal* in nature.

It is best to take the second option—“**the sin *leading* to death**” as *apostasy*. Throughout the letter, John has referenced the actions and beliefs of the *secessionists*—those who once claimed to believe the apostles’ message and who identified with the church, but who then explicitly rejected apostolic truth and became “*antichrists*” (1 John 2:18, 19, 22; 4:3). Their conduct—their apostasy from the faith—is so blasphemous, that John discourages intercessory sin on their behalf: “**I do not say he should make request for this.**”

To finish the section, John states, “**All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not *leading* to death**” (v. 17). Although he has divided sin into two categories in v. 16, John does not want believers to minimize sin. It is all “**unrighteousness.**” That said, John does want his readers to understand an important distinction: the unrighteousness they commit, as genuine believers, does not result in *eternal separation from God*.

### For Discussion

1. What are the main obstacles you experience in the practice of prayer?
2. What steps of discipline have you found to be helpful in cultivating the practice of prayer in your life? Share wisdom for the benefit of others in your group.
3. Why is the *assurance of salvation* so foundational to a vibrant life of prayer?
4. Do you struggle with believing that God *desires* to give you good things? Why?
5. What are some legitimate explanations for why God *will not* grant what you ask? Provide biblical proof.
6. How does John’s counsel in 1 John 5:16 prepare you for those moments when you learn that another brother has stumbled? How will you implement this in your daily life?

### For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 5:14 and Ephesians 6:18.
2. **Sing** “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul” (*Hymns of Grace*, #52).
3. **Read** the booklet, *A Call to Prayer*, by J. C. Ryle, available here: [Ryle, J. C. — A Call to Prayer \(Devotional eBook\)](#).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at [www.gracechurch.org/motw](http://www.gracechurch.org/motw).

Next meeting: May 13 – 7pm – Evening of Prayer (come for refreshments and fellowship at 6:15pm)