

## Lesson #4

### Pray And Obey

#### The Catalyst of Prayer in the Equation of Life

##### **Main Passage:**

##### **1 John 3:21-24**

*Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God <sup>22</sup> and receive from Him anything we ask, because we keep His commands and do what pleases Him. <sup>23</sup> And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us. <sup>24</sup> The one who keeps God's commands lives in Him, and He in them. And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us.*

##### **Big Idea:**

Prayer is a catalyst that helps us to establish equilibrium between abiding and obeying.

Equilibrium is demonstrated with supply and demand. In our prayer life, it is the balance between obeying and abiding. Just like a catalyst aids a reaction without being used up, you can't out pray God's willingness to hear and answer your prayers.

##### **Outline:**

**1<sup>st</sup> Teaching Point:** Pray for God to reveal your heart.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Teaching Point:** Pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal temptations.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Teaching Point:** Pray with hopeful expectancy as you obey His commands.

##### **Lesson:**

#### **1. Pray for God to reveal your heart.**

- Our hearts are wicked apart from Christ. We need to acknowledge this truth and when we pray, ask God to reveal what He finds in our hearts.
  - **Jeremiah 17:9-10**  
*"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct according to what his deeds deserve."*
  - **Application question:** What are the motives for what we are praying?
- God is the best judge of our hearts. In prayer, ask Him directly to reveal heart issues and anxious thoughts that are trying to take hold in your mind.
  - **Psalm 139:23-24**  
*"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."*
  - **Application question:** Analyze the thoughts dominating your mind right now. What is the theme of your anxiety?

- God, the creator of the universe is able to create a clean heart in each of us.
  - **Psalm 51:10**  
*“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”*
  - Application question: What would happen if we believed God to be the best judge of our hearts, and we prayed for Him to create clean hearts in us?

## 2. Pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal temptations.

- The Holy Spirit is given to us by God to make known our sin issues. Conviction is needed so that we can know where we are struggling to choose righteousness.
  - **John 16:7-8**  
*“I will send Him to you. When He comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.”*
  - Application question: What is one way you’ve learned to recognize the Holy Spirit’s conviction in your life?
- Our problem is we think we will not be tempted. It is easy to point out other’s struggles and assume that we would not get caught in the snare of sin.
  - **1 Corinthians 10:11-13**  
*“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”*
  - Application question: What is the relationship between acknowledging we are not standing firm and perceiving the way out that God graciously provides?
- Satan wants to thwart the things of God in our life. We must be alert, prayerful.
  - **1 Peter 5:8**  
*“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*
  - Application question: What could be done to maximize your alertness on a daily basis?

## 3. Pray with hopeful expectancy as you obey His commands.

- Rebuilding our lives on prayer means expecting that God does hear us and He does answer!
- It requires cultivating a hopeful expectancy that:
  - God is all that He says He is.
  - God will do all that He says that He will do.
  - **1 John 3:21-24**  
*“Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask, because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him. And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He*

*commanded us. Those who obey His commands live in Him, and He in them. And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us.*

- v 21: God knows our heart.
  - v 22: Hopeful expectancy to receive what we ask because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him
  - v 23: Command is to believe + love one another → Receive what you ask
  - v 24: Those who obey live in Him. The phrase “live in Him” is translated as abide as well.
- Application question: How would you rate your belief that God hears your prayers and answers them?

Prayer is our resource that is always available to empower us to live a life in equilibrium:

**Obeying ↔ Abiding**

May our obedience yield more abiding and may our abiding yield more obedience as we rebuild our lives on prayer.

**Final application questions**: What action steps can you make to abide more? What is your biggest obstacle to obedience in your life?

**Small Group Discussion Questions**:

1. What are the motives for what we are praying?
2. Analyze the thoughts dominating your mind right now. Is there a common theme in your anxiety?
3. What would happen if we believed God to be the best judge of our hearts, and we prayed for Him to create clean hearts in us?
4. What is one way you’ve learned to recognize the Holy Spirit’s conviction in your life?
5. What is the relationship between acknowledging we are not standing firm and perceiving the way out that God graciously provides?
6. How would you rate your belief that God hears your prayers and answers them?
7. APPLICATION: What is one thing you can take away from today’s lesson that can be applied this week? Please explain.

**Small Group Prayer Suggestions**:

1. Pray for God to reveal the motives of your heart and then pray Psalm 51:10: for God to create clean hearts and renew a steadfast spirit within each of us.
2. Pray for God to reveal any blind spots that exist to temptation and to be alert to the schemes of the enemy that would hinder our abiding and obedience.
3. Pray for hopeful expectancy that God hears and answers our prayers when we believe Him and love others. Pray to abide in Him and obey Him!

## Additional Commentary: John 3:21-24<sup>1</sup>

**3:21–22** John’s personal address “beloved” (*agapētoi*; cf. 4:1, 7) expresses his concern for his readers who have experienced the struggle of a condemning heart. A reminder that they know the love of God would serve to comfort them. Keeping with his practice of placing positive and negative statements back to back, v. 21, which deals with the uncondemning heart, contrasts the thought of the previous verse, which addresses the heart that does condemn. Confidence before God results from a noncondemning heart and thus provides motivation for prayer.

The term “confidence” (*parrēsia*) means “boldness,” “a freedom of speech,” and “a frankness such as that a child has in approaching his father.”<sup>48</sup> Although the confidence described in 2:28 is associated with the second coming of Christ, here the word deals with the Christian’s uninhibited, free communion with God in prayer. The phrase “before God” (*pros ton theon*, lit., “toward God”) portrays an intimate, relational, face-to-face encounter with the heavenly Father. At the same time, as Burdick reminds us, “it should be remembered that the confidence and boldness expressed by *parrēsia* contain nothing of impropriety or brashness. It gives no license to anyone to command God to act; it does not erase the distinction between God’s infinity and our humanity.”<sup>49</sup> Our confidence rests in his mercy and love, which have been extended to us.

The conjunction “and,” which begins v. 22, seems to carry an exegetical aspect (it explains the immediately preceding statement). If so, our confident fellowship with God is accompanied with a guarantee of answered prayer. The clause “whatever we ask” (*ho ean aitōmen*) is all-inclusive and leaves open both the content and the occasion for our requests. At the same time, this statement requires that both the immediate and remote context must be taken into consideration with this statement. The immediate context suggests that the one asking is the one who is striving to “obey his commands and do what pleases him” (v. 22b). Likewise, 5:14–15 states that the prayer is to be offered “according to his will.” The guarantee of answered prayer is based on the proper standing of the petitioner, which in return gives him confidence to approach God freely and openly.<sup>50</sup>

Both *aitōmen* (“we ask”) and *lambanomen* (“we receive”) are present tense verbs that describe a fact that is generally or always true.<sup>51</sup> God always answers the requests of his children. The “from him” (*ap’ autou*) clearly refers to God the Father as the source of these answered prayers. It is “clear that these answers are not merely fortuitous circumstances but come from Him as His specific response.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Akin, [1, 2, 3 John](#), vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 165–169.

<sup>48</sup> The word *παρρησία* occurs four times in 1 John (2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14), and in each use it conveys the confidence a Christian has before God (Kruse, *Letters of John*, 142, n. 156). Also see commentary at 2:28.

<sup>49</sup> Burdick, *Letters of John*, 276.

<sup>50</sup> Stott lists six conditions that must be met in order for prayer to be answered: prayer must be offered in Jesus’ name (John 16:23–24), for God’s glory (Jas 4:2–3), from a heart that does not cherish sin (Ps 66:18), from a forgiven and forgiving heart (Mark 11:25), with faith (Matt 21:22), and backed by an obedient life (1 John 3:22) (*Letters of John*, 153).

<sup>51</sup> Such use of the present tense is called “gnomic” presents instead of the more “progressive” presents. See C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), 8.

<sup>52</sup> Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, 170.

John adds that the promise of answered prayer is conditioned upon obedience and a willingness to please him. The causal conjunction *hoti* (“because”) is not to be taken to refer to the ground on which answered prayer is based, but to the indicated condition for this guarantee. As Stott remarks, “Obedience is the indispensable condition, not the meritorious cause, of answered prayer.”<sup>53</sup> The two verbs that confirm this precondition, “we obey” [*keep; teroumen*] and “[we] do” [*poioumen*] are both progressive presents and mark a defining characteristic of those whose prayers are answered. It is the continual obeying of God’s commands and the striving to please him that precede our confidence before God in prayer. Such conduct provides “an objective, moral reason for the divine response; it does not simply depend upon the subjective ground of a worshiper’s clear conscience.”<sup>54</sup>

The apostle seems to distinguish between “the commandments” (*tas entolas*) and “those things that are pleasing to him” (*ta aresta enōpion autou poioumen*). Although the commands appear to be those explicit demands of God’s will, the things that please him are those spontaneous acts motivated by love and a desire to honor him above the specified commands. The believer desires to please him and bring glory to him in all manner of life and obedience (1 Cor 10:31). Such an attitude guarantees answers to prayer.

**3:23** Having spoken of the need to obey God’s commands, John now establishes the central command that is a summary of all the mandates. Fundamentally, there is only one comprehensive command conveyed in a dual form: an explicit belief in the Son, Jesus Christ, and an active love for one another. The two parallel verbs “believe” (*pisteusōmen*) and “love” (*agapōmen*) work together to form one primary command. As Lenski declares, “You cannot believe without loving nor love without believing.”<sup>55</sup> The Christian life demands an essential union between faith and love.<sup>56</sup>

The command “to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ” (*hina pisteusōmen tō onomati tou huiou Iesou Christou*) contains the first occurrence of the verb “believe” in the epistle.<sup>57</sup> While the manuscript evidence is somewhat divided as to whether “believe” is in the past or present tense, John seems to be pointing to the initial act of placing one’s faith in Jesus Christ, in which case the past tense would be employed.<sup>58</sup> The content of this belief entails “the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.” These words have “a creedal ring, being in fact a miniature confession of faith.”<sup>59</sup> The preposition “on” or “in” is added in the English translations for clarity, but actually John uses a dative of personal relationship, which involves a personal commitment of oneself to “the name” of Jesus Christ. It is a personal identification with all that the bearer of “the name” entails.

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<sup>53</sup> Stott, *Letters of John*, 152.

<sup>54</sup> Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 205.

<sup>55</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 479.

<sup>56</sup> A. Plummer suggests that this verse is the answer to those who from the previous verses want to argue that all that is required is to do what is right with little regard for what one believes. This insistence upon both faith and love reveals the necessity of both elements for a genuine salvation encounter and life (*The Epistles of S. John* [1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 137).

<sup>57</sup> The verb occurs nine more times in the epistle (4:1, 16; 5:1, 5, 10[3×], 13[2×]) and will become a developing theme in the remaining chapters. The concept is present in his earlier teaching on the need to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and the danger of denying this truth (2:22f.; see Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 201).

<sup>58</sup> F. F. Bruce labels it an ingressive aorist, which means it reflects the decisive moment when the life of faith began (*The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1970], 100).

<sup>59</sup> Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, 172.

The name in biblical usage is closely associated with the nature and personhood of the one who bears it. To believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, is to place one's faith in all that Jesus is. "His Son" emphasizes the deity and unique sonship of this individual. "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua," which means "the Lord is salvation." It is his human name he was given at birth and which identifies him as totally human (Matt 1:21).<sup>60</sup> "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah" and affirms his role as the Old Testament Messiah. The double designation "Jesus Christ" represents the earliest of Christian confessions (Acts 2:36; 3:20; 5:42). To believe in the name of Jesus Christ is to place one's faith, one's trust, in him and all that he is—the Divine Son, the incarnate Deity, the sinless Human, the Messianic Savior, and all other facets of his unique nature and personhood. Belief is acceptance of the entirety of him.<sup>61</sup>

The second facet of this dual command is "to love one another as he commanded us" (*kai agapōmen allēlous kathōs edōken entolēn hēmin*). John uses the present tense in his command to love, which reminds his hearers that the practice of Christian love is a daily, continual expression. Furthermore, the reciprocal pronoun "one another" demands that love must be mutually displayed by members of the family of God. The added words "just as he commanded us" make clear that what is required is in exact conformity to the demands of Jesus (cf. John 13:34; 15:12, 17). To be a child of God is to love one another. Thus, John insists that both faith and love stand as essential tests for the true child of God. Right belief and right action reveal the authenticity of one's faith.

**3:24** In this final verse of this section, John resumes the thought of v. 22 (i.e., keeping God's commandments) and prepares for what follows in 4:1, testing the spirits. Thus, v. 23 serves as a parenthetical explanation of the central content of these commands and as a transition to a new subject. The pronouns John employs in v. 24 probably refer to God the Father.<sup>62</sup> With the words "those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them," the apostle again introduces a mutual "abiding" relationship for the one who obeys these commands. The one who is characteristically living in obedience experiences a reciprocal fellowship with God. The present tense verb "lives" (*menei*) indicates a close and permanent relational abiding between the child of God and the heavenly Father (see 2:24–28; also cf. John 15:1–6).

The pronoun in the expression *en toutō* ("by this" or "hereby" or "this is how") may point forward (to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit) or backward (to the keeping of his commands) as evidence of this reciprocal relationship. Most commentators agree that the more natural interpretation is to connect it with what follows (as reflected in the NIV translation).<sup>63</sup> In other words, the primary evidence of our mutual abiding experience in God is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives; for as Hiebert notes, "The Holy Spirit is the source from which the certainty of our relationship with God is drawn."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The name "Jesus" is associated with his saving role. He had to be human to become the perfect sacrifice for sinful humanity.

<sup>61</sup> It appears evident that John is countering the heretical views of those who had infiltrated the church and held too low or too high a view of Christ's personhood (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 208).

<sup>62</sup> Hiebert emphasizes that John does not clearly distinguish between God the Father and God the Son. "Generally, [John] felt no need to press a rigid distinction since he always thought of the Father as working through the Son and the Son as revealing the Father" (*Epistles of John*, 173).

<sup>63</sup> Westcott and Burdick are two who suggest that the pronoun refers back to the keeping of the commands as the objective evidence of this relationship (Westcott, *Epistles of John*, 121; Burdick, *Letters of John*, 281).

<sup>64</sup> Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, 174.

The verb “we know” (*ginōskomen*) refers to knowledge obtained by drawing a conclusion based on facts.<sup>65</sup> When one possesses the Spirit of God, it is divine evidence of the reciprocal relationship, enjoyed and experienced (cf. Rom 8:16). The phrase “by the Spirit” (*ek tou pneumatos*) means “from the Spirit” and indicates the source of our knowledge. “The assurance is begotten by the Spirit.”<sup>66</sup> The past tense translated “he gave us” (*edōken*) looks to the moment when the Spirit was given. In particular, it points to that instant when the Spirit is given to each believer at the time of their regeneration. John’s mention of the Holy Spirit opens the door to his ensuing discussion in regard to the spirits (4:1–6).

In this section John provides the believer with certain assurances that accompany being a child of God. With these assurances comes the overwhelming truth that we can stand confidently before God in prayer and rest assured that he will answer our requests.

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<sup>65</sup> Brown points out three tests of knowledge in this section: (1) Christ laid down his life for us (3:16); (2) we show the truth of love in our deeds (3:19); and from the Spirit whom he gave us (3:24) (*Epistles of John*, 465).

<sup>66</sup> Plummer, *Epistles of S. John*, 91.