

October 2008: The Infallible Key to Answered Prayer

While I was at Denver teaching on Formational and Healing Prayer--and partly because I had to do a lot more summarizing due to lack of textbooks--I learned something about prayer. In fact I discovered what I am calling "the infallible key to answered prayer." Ever wanted to know that your prayers would be answered? I have struggled with this a lot and had this on my mind as I was preparing the lecture on intercession. As I was trying to put together the views of the textbooks (*Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart* - Orthodox; *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola - Roman Catholic; *The Book of Common Prayer* - Anglican; *With Christ in the School of Prayer* - evangelical Protestant), I noticed a progression, here illustrated through Andrew Murray's work, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*.

In order to have answered prayer, we must pray those prayers that are according to God's will. The first epistle of John states, "And this is the boldness we have in 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 obtained the requests made of him" (1 John 5:14-15). Andrew Murray writes, "John supposes that when we pray, we first find out if our prayers are according to the will of God. . . . It is evident that if it be a matter of uncertainty to us whether our petitions be according to His will, we cannot have the comfort of what He says, 'We know that we have the petitions which we have asked of Him.'" So, get the connection? If we want to be sure are prayers are answered, we should simply make sure that we are asking prayers that are according to God's will. Right?

Not always so simple. How do I know whether this particular prayer for my sick neighbor is "according to God's will." On the one hand, I know that God's desires healing and that God has healed before (Jesus healed lots of people who came to him). I know my sick neighbor would certainly like to experience healing. But sometimes God doesn't heal and sometimes perhaps it is not even "according to God's will." Sometimes better things are accomplished through sickness. So now our task is to find a way of knowing, in a concrete and ongoing manner, the will of God. Which brings us to our next step of the progression. We discover the *will* of God through a life lived in, with, and toward the *heart* of God. Again Andrew Murray writes, "And so once again the lessons comes: What our prayer avails depends upon what we are and what our life is. It is living in the Name of Christ that is the secret of praying in the Name of Christ; living in the Spirit that fits for praying in the Spirit. It is abiding in Christ that gives the right and power to ask what we will; the extent of our abiding is the exact measure of the power in prayer. It is the Spirit dwelling within us that prays, not in words and thoughts always, but in a breathing and a being deeper than utterance. Just so much as there is of Christ's Spirit in us, is there real prayer." As you develop a habitual orientation toward God, as you increasingly develop a sense for the Spirit of God both in general and in the concrete details of your own life, you will ultimately gain such a unity with the God's Spirit that you will gain a conviction that *this* is the prayer according to God's will in a given situation. Our prayers will reflect the will of God when we have lived a life in the heart of God. Its that simple.

But how do we accomplish this? How do we “live into” the heart of God? So often our biases and interests get in the way of our oneness with the heart of God. We live our own lives rather than living God’s life through us. And here is where the next step comes in. We live into the heart of God by de-habituating ourselves from the leadership of false interests--those of the world, the flesh, or the devil--and opening ourselves to the influences of the Spirit. We fast, we watch, and we pray. Andrew Murray writes of prayer and fasting, “And so He [Christ] teaches us two lessons in regard to prayer of deep importance. The one, that faith needs a life of prayer in which to grow and keep strong. The other, that prayer needs fasting for its full and perfect development.” And again, “Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible; fasting, the other with which we let loose and cast away the visible.” “Watching” is the term *Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart* uses to describe the careful attention we pay toward noticing the influences of the Spirit and of the other forces in our experience. By paying careful attention to the movements of God and of the world, flesh, and devil; and by “fasting” from those influences that habitually draw us away from God; and by the prayer of calling out to God for help again and again when we need help; we take intentional steps of spiritual formation that lead to a life that is lived not oriented around ourselves but rather is lived into and from the heart of God (see 1 Peter 4:1-2). Again, quite simple. A life of spiritual formation leads to a life formed in Christ.

But is it really that simple? Doesn’t all this attention to spiritual formation (fasting, watching, praying, spiritual disciplines and so on) become just one more form of legalism? Doesn’t all this lead not to a harmony with the heart of God (and with prayers that reflect the will of God), but to a preoccupation with my own spiritual temperature? And doesn’t this lead to a false view of God--God the One who measures my every move against some unrealizable standard of perfection? With this question we are brought to our last (really our first) step of the progression - deeply understanding the fatherhood of God. Murray writes, “The knowledge of God’s Father-love is the first and simplest, but also the last and highest lesson in the school of prayer. . . . It is in the knowledge of God’s Fatherliness, revealed by the Holy Spirit, that the power of prayer will be found to root and grow.” Later he writes, “The power of the promise, ‘Ask, and it shall be given you,’ lies in the loving relationship between us as children and the Father in heaven. . . . And so the lesson we have to-day in the school of prayer is this: Live as a child of God, then you will be able to pray as a child, and as a child you will most assuredly be heard.”

We become legalistic when our disciplines and our fastings do not emerge from the instructions of the loving Father. Our spiritual formation is a de-formation when (1) we fail to hear the call of the Father forward, or (2) when we manufacture our own procedures of formation to realize the Father’s call. Spiritual formation is inspired, empowered, and fulfilled in the gracious love of our Creator and Life-giver. Christ desires to see us take steps of maturity. But I think God longs even more for us to know, deep inside, his own unconditional love. Indeed, perhaps this is the most important step of maturity. And so it all begins with our rest in faith, allowing ourselves to be received into the unconditional love of God.

So, now you have it, my infallible key to answered prayer. Do you want answered prayer? Then pray prayers that are according to God's will. Do you want to pray prayers that are according to God's will? Then live your life in, with, and toward the heart of God. Do you want to live a life toward the heart of God? Then fast, pray, and watch. Be intentional about de-habituating those areas of your own life that keep you from God and about opening yourself to the Spirit's influence. Do you want to fast, pray and watch in such a way that it is not born of or leads to dead legalism? Then start by resting. Just sit and soak in the unconditional love of God. This "key to answered prayer" is not an instant key. Nonetheless, if you follow it, over time, it is sure to bring results. Why not start today?

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.