

**Lent 2: “Are You Serious?” (Trusting Prayer) Text: 1 John 5:14-15 2/21/08**

The best lesson I ever got on prayer came while I was preaching a sermon on prayer. But it wasn't from the sermon. It was from what happened during the sermon. Imagine yourself up here, preaching without notes. It feels kind of like walking on water (or as close as I ever hope to get) – difficult under the best conditions; even more difficult when there are distractions. But this particular Sunday, kids in the very front row were making such a racket it would have been hard to listen, much less preach. There was a Baptism, you see, and their parents were guests who didn't seem to have much experience with church. So it wasn't like I could just give them “the look” and they'd get the point. Still less could I stop and say, “There is a cry room, you know!” All I could do was what I was telling the congregation to do: **pray**. So I did. And believe me, it wasn't just a perfunctory little prayer: *Dear Lord, if it be your will, please help me concentrate.* No, no! This was serious prayer. *Lord, this is Your Word You have called me to preach. These are Your people You have called me to feed. And You and I both know that's not going to happen unless You really come through with some help. You promised that Your grace would be sufficient for me, that Your power would be made perfect in my weakness. Well, that's what I need right now. So please, Lord, help me!* And guess what? The Lord did help me! I don't know how much anyone got out of the sermon, but He did get me *through* the sermon – in a way that had to be supernatural, because I could never have done it on my own. That Sunday at least one of us got a great lesson on prayer – me! – a lesson on how God really does answer serious prayer!

Now, you probably noticed that my prayer was nothing fancy. Like we discussed last week, I “*just talked.*” But you may have noticed some other things about the prayer, too, and this week I'd like to focus on them. For even if we do “just talk” to God, there is talk and then there is *talk*. When we talk with each other, for instance, sometimes it's just “shooting the breeze” about the weather, sports, or whatever, but then again, sometimes it is serious talk about things that really matter. We can talk the same way with God, and God loves it whenever we “*just talk,*” but when we're making requests that really matter to us, Scripture makes it clear that we need to be talking serious talk. Or to put it more theologically, we need to be praying a “trusting prayer.” That is, we need to trust that what we're asking is something God wants to do and will do. “*Wouldn't it be nice?*” prayers are not serious, trusting prayers. “*I wish He would but I doubt He will*” prayers are not serious, trusting prayers. “*Oh, what the heck? I'll give it a shot*” prayers are not serious, trusting prayers. They're perfunctory prayers – the spiritual equivalent of shooting the breeze. A trusting prayer has God's direct promise to back it up, or at least a solid biblical principle, and it is prayed with the clear expectation that God will in fact answer it. “Trusting prayer” is the kind of prayer John had in mind when we wrote in our text: **“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.”**

To illustrate what trusting prayer is like, let me tell about something that happened back when I was doing youth ministry. A kid named Carlo asked me if he could borrow my car for the senior prom. The car in question was a beautiful black Celica – the nicest car I ever owned. Needless to say, I wouldn't loan it out to just anyone. So my first reaction was predictable: "Are you serious?" Now, if Carlo had backed down at that point – "Nah, I didn't think you'd go for it" – I wouldn't have gone for it. But he said, "Yes, I am serious. You've told us often enough, if we ever need help, come to you. Well, I need help." And he did, because the only other option would be driving his date to the prom in an old station wagon. Now, he knew I wouldn't want him to have to do that. Still, it took a lot of guts to ask to borrow my car. He really had to trust me – didn't he? – to know I wouldn't just laugh at him; that I'd actually do what he asked. But he did trust me. And altogether, his need, his guts, and his trust convinced me. Plus, I knew he was responsible. I knew he wouldn't do anything wrong. So Carlo drove to the prom in a beautiful black Celica. Mine.

Now, can you see how Carlo's approach fits what Jesus said about prayer?

- **"Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."**
- **"Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."**
- **"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."**

What we have here is a fantastic invitation to ask for God's help and blessing with trusting prayer! It's not a blank-check, of course. When Jesus says ask **"with faith,"** He doesn't mean that if we work ourselves up into thinking we're really going to get whatever we want, then we'll automatically get it. To the contrary, James reminds us that there can be cases where **we "ask and do not receive" precisely because we "ask with wrong motives to spend what we get on our pleasures."** When Jesus invites us to pray **"with faith,"** He means with faith in Him, and faith in Him always keeps in mind that there are certain things the Lord does and does not want. In fact, if we **"abide"** in Him and His words abide in us, what He wants will be the guiding factor in our prayer. But even within these parameters, what an invitation is waiting to be accepted! And not just accepted with little perfunctory prayers, mind you! Not just accepted with half-hearted prayers. This kind of prayer takes guts and absolute trust! As James also reminds us, we must **"ask in faith, never doubting..."** But when we do **"ask in faith, never doubting,** and when we do **"ask anything according to His will,"** God **"can do abundantly far more than all we ask or imagine!"** Yes, we have a fantastic invitation to ask for God's help and blessing with trusting prayer!

Now, some of us may be a little skeptical about this. I understand. It's only human. But if you are skeptical, let me ask you this, Christian to Christian. Do you feel the same way about other promises Jesus made? For instance, Jesus promised you forgiveness. So when you confess your sins, do you pray, *"If it be Your will, I kinda hope you'll forgive me"*? No! He said it. You believe it. That

settles it. You know you're forgiven! And Jesus promised you eternal life. So when you think about dying, do you pray, "*If it be Your will, it'd be sort of nice if you'd let me into heaven*"? No! He said it. You believe it. That settles it. You know you're saved! And if that's the case, why trust some of Jesus' promises but not others? Especially when they're repeated elsewhere in Scripture? Our text is crystal clear: "**If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.**" Now this begs the question: *If something isn't God's will, why would we ask for it?* But it *also* begs the question: *If it is God's will, why would we doubt?* I'll tell you, I've really had to ask this of myself. And don't we all? Wouldn't it be a shame if we forfeited all kinds of possibilities because we didn't have the guts to "**ask with faith**"? Wouldn't it be tragic if God's help and blessing went untapped because we believed some of Jesus' promises but not others? On the other hand, think what could happen, think what the Lord could make happen, if we had the "**boldness**" to "**ask anything according to His will**" with trusting prayer!

That's prayer like that of the Roman centurion, who put such trust in Jesus that He could say, "**Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.**" That's prayer like that of the Canaanite woman, who kept on trusting and trusting in spite of apparent rebuffs. Jesus' power has not diminished since then! His power to help and heal and bless and guide has not run out! But how can we tap into it unless we trust Him absolutely and pray accordingly! I can't think of a single example in Scripture where people hedged their bets and still experienced answers to prayer. But there are plenty of examples in Scripture and plenty of examples now where people with confident faith have taken God absolutely at His Word and found how faithfully God answers trusting prayer.

One such person was our own Dorothy Weyerts. I'm sure many of you knew her. Throughout her life she had seen so many answers to prayer that she had great faith in prayer – so great, in fact, that toward the end, when I prayed for her in the hospital and she got better, she told me, "You know, I was ready to go, and if this should ever happen again, you are not to pray for my recovery." Now, just consider the depth of faith there – faith that of course God answers prayer! And the story continues. Just a few days before she died, I brought Dorothy Communion, and afterward I asked if I could pray for her. She kind of raised her eyebrow at that. So I quickly assured her, "Not to worry! I'll just pray for God's peace. That's all."

Dorothy firmly believed that God answers prayer – "**anything according to His will.**" And that's the kind of faith that *gets* answers. That's trusting prayer. So my friends, can we pray with the same confidence? For the moment, forget all the possible "gray-areas." Forget all the what-ifs and how-about. With "**boldness,**" can we zero in on things that we know are God's will – things that we have every reason to believe are God's will – and pray with absolute trust "**that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And...we know that we have obtained the requests made of Him**"? Are we serious enough about prayer to do that?

If so, then it's time to move beyond theory into practice. The only way to see that the promise is true is to put it to the test. So as a homework assignment, I'd like to propose a test – a bold test of our faith and God's promise. Let's take something we know is God's will. For instance, are we all agreed that the Ten Commandments are God's Will? Let's see a show of hands. Okay then, let's take one of them -- the third Commandment. Are we all agreed that it is God's will for us to **“remember the sabbath day to keep it holy”**? Again, a show of hands, please. So given this commandment as well as verses like **“Do not forsake the gathering together of yourselves,”** I think it is safe to say that God wants us all to worship on a weekly basis. That is His will. In our congregation, though, that doesn't happen. On the average, worship attendance only runs about 35%. So here's the test. *Tonight, tomorrow, and Saturday, let's pray that every RLC member who can be in church this weekend will be.* Simple enough. Even given the number of sick members and shut-ins and people out of town, we can expect quite an upsurge in attendance if God answers this prayer. So what do you think? Is it true **“that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us”**? Do we trust this promise enough to put in some significant prayer time tonight, tomorrow, and Saturday, and expect God to fill this church this weekend? I know it is a pretty bold assignment. And if it feels like I'm putting you on the spot, think how it feels for me as your pastor! But *I'm* willing to test the promise with some serious, trusting prayer. In fact, I've already told the secretaries to increase the number of bulletins and have the altar guild prepare for more at Communion. So let me see some hands. How many are willing to pray along with me – pray with trusting prayer – that every RLC member who can be in church this weekend will be?

We can start praying for this in just a moment when we go into our prayer time. But before we do, let me close with one last story. During a terrible drought, a preacher asked all the people to come pray for rain, and to show their trust in God, he told them to bring along some symbol of their faith. So some carried Bibles to the meeting. Some carried crosses. Some carried religious pictures. But as they prayed for rain, it was a little boy who carried the best symbol of all: a great big umbrella!

That, my friends, is trusting prayer! Amen.