

I'm gonna be honest: I'm not sure I have this whole prayer thing figured out.

I know the good catechism definition for prayer – a believer talking to God. I intellectually know what the Bible says about prayer – I've got a lot of Bible passages on prayer rattling around in this skull.

I know what it is and I do it. I still fold my hands and say my prayers before every single meal, like my parents taught me when I was still in diapers. I start my days with prayer. I pray with my family, I pray here in church.

I know what prayer is and I do it – I would even say that I've gotten better at prioritizing prayer over the last handful of years.

But I'm still not sure I have it figured out.

It's kind of hard to explain... I know what prayer is. I do it. But I don't think of prayer as a super meaningful part of my Christian life. There are some parts of my Christian life that I can't do without – like weekly worship or personal devotions.

The importance of weekly getting together with other believers for worship is so deeply ingrained in me, it is so meaningful to me, it is like brushing my teeth. You know that feeling where you forget to brush your teeth in the morning and you just feel off and scuzzy all day long? That is how weekly worship is for me. If I would miss church even for one weekend I would feel like something is off, something is wrong.

(Which, side note to you parents out there: This deeply ingrained and unquestionably healthy habit of worship is not a habit I chose. My parents instilled it in me. My parents taught me to care for my teeth by forcing me to brush twice day, whether I wanted to or not. They also taught me to worship my Lord by bringing me to church every single weekend. I'm not sure I would be standing here today if it were not for them and the spiritual habits they began teaching me when I was still in diapers. I know bringing the kids is hard – that sometimes, especially when they are little, you go away from church barely having heard a word that was said. I watch my wife do it by herself every single weekend. But it is worth it. Whether you realize it or not, you are teaching your children spiritual habits that may very well last a life time. It is your God-given privilege and responsibility to make sure they are healthy spiritual habits.) – Side note over...

I feel the same way about personal Bible studies. One of my favorite things about being a pastor is that I get paid to meditate on the scriptures. I get paid to learn more about Jesus. My personal devotion life is tremendously meaningful to me. If I go on vacation and get out of my routine of having a cup of coffee with my Bible to start my day, I miss it. I look forward to getting back into the routine when vacation is over.

But I'm not sure I feel the same way about prayer. I know what it is. I do it – in fact I think I'm getting better at it. I intellectually know that it is an important part of the Christian life. But I'm not sure my heart fully understands and appreciates the gift of prayer.

Maybe to some of you that is surprising to hear from your pastor, but hey, if you haven't figured it out by now, I ain't Jesus... This Christian life thing, I don't have it all figured out. I still need Jesus just as desperately today as ever before to forgive me, to teach me. Until the day I die, I will need his forgiveness and teaching.

And for me this is one of those areas. I need my Jesus to help me appreciate the gift of prayer.

Maybe that is surprising for some of you, but maybe for others it isn't. Maybe some of you are right there with me – you know prayer is a good thing, you know God tells you to pray, you've been taught to pray, you do your best at praying, but you are not sure you have it all figured out.

Thankfully we have an unprecedentedly patient Savior and Teacher.

Whether you feel like me or not, today is a great opportunity to let God do what he does best – to work on our hearts and heads through his Word – to teach us a little more about prayer.

That reading from 1 John is just three short verses, but there's a lot of juice in that orange. Here is the big point I want to make about prayer from 1 John 5: **Prayer is not a device for imposing my will on God, but rather for binding my will to his as he carries out his grace-filled plan.**

That's a mouthful, but we are going to break it down and look at 1 John 5 as we meditate on this important truth about prayer.

**Prayer is not a device for imposing my will on God, but rather for binding my will to his as he carries out his grace-filled plan.**

Let's think about that first part: **prayer is not a device for imposing my will on God.**

I think this is one of the unthought-through assumptions about prayer that robs prayer of some of its beauty.

Prayer is not a uniquely Christian thing. Muslims pray. Jews pray. Jehovah's Witness pray. There is that famous quip, there are no atheists in foxholes – the recognition that a deeply ingrained human response to fear, even for many much of any relationship with any god, is prayer.

The problem is, the assumption behind most of those human-driven ideas about prayer is that prayer is a way for me to make my desires, my requests, my needs known to God (whatever god you believe in) in the hope that my prayer will prompt him to take

action on my behalf – as if God is up in heaven just waiting for me to tell him what I need him to do. As if God won't act on my behalf unless I pray hard enough, fervently enough, persistently enough.

In essence, prayer for many people is a device for imposing my will on God. "This is what I want. How I get God to give me what I want is prayer."

And clearly, when stated that way, I hope that sounds wrong to you. God is not like Amazon. He's not some giant dispenser in heaven who is waiting for you to make your order, pay for it by praying in just the right way, so he can fulfill that prayer with free two day shipping. We know that's true because all of us have asked for things from God in prayer and they didn't arrive two days later in a box with a smile on the side.

So most of the world gets this wrong about prayer, and if I think about my own prayer life, I think I'm tempted to get this wrong too. I hear God's encouragement to be persistent in my prayer (like in the gospel for today), or I think about James' famous words that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective and at least a part of me thinks that if my prayers are persistent enough, God is going to give me what I want.

But that's not what prayer is. **Prayer is not a device for imposing my will on God.**

What is prayer then? Well, enter our big idea from John today: **Prayer is not a device for imposing my will on God, but rather prayer is a device for binding my will to God's will as he carries out his grace-filled plan.** Prayer is device to take my will and bind it to God's will.

Now what in the world does that mean?

Maybe some of you have heard this before: there is a way to pray where God will always give you exactly what you asked for. (Have you heard this one before?) It is based off this section from 1 John 5. John tells us the secret to always getting from God what we ask for: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him."

If you want God to always give you what you ask for then always end your prayers by asking God to do his will. So, you can tell God all the things you want but at the end of the day you aren't demanding to get your way, but are willing to let him be God and get his way.

Prayer is a device for binding my will to God's will as he carries out his purpose... and therein lies the struggle.

Remember my struggle to appreciate prayer the way I should? This is a big reason for that.

The struggle is twofold.

First, I really like getting my way. So to think of prayer not as a way to cajole God into giving me what I want, but a way for me to talk myself into submitting to God's will... not as fun.

Second, if God is just going to get his way anyway, what is the point of praying in the first place?

To the second struggle, prayer may not turn God into Amazon, but don't forget that God clearly promises that our prayers are powerful and effective. It may be hard to understand, but God promises that he actually takes our prayers into account as a goes about doing his will (Jesus makes that clear in the Gospel today). Also, don't underestimate the value of wrestling your will to God's will in prayer – like Jacob wrestling with God, refusing to let God go until he blessed him, there is something incredibly helpful about wrestling in prayer as you try to reconcile what you want with what God is allowing to happen in your life and clinging to him, refusing to let him go until he blesses you.

To the first struggle, we need the reminder of 1 John 5:13. Before telling us to bind our will to God's in prayer John reminds us why we can do that with confidence.

He's writing instruction on prayer to people who "believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

It comes down to who knows what.

When I pray do I know what is best for me, meaning I have the right to be upset if God doesn't give me what I ask?

When I pray and ask God for stuff, I *think* that what I'm asking for is good for me, I *think* it would make me happy, I *think* it would meet my needs. But the Bible makes clear that we humans tend to be really bad at *knowing* what is really best for us in the long run.

So, I don't know what is best for me. But God does.

I don't know what is best for me, but the Bible makes clear that I have a God who not only knows what is best for me, but it is his will to give me what is best for me, no matter how much it costs him.

God's will is that all of us believe in the name of the Son of God, that we know who Jesus is and that his cross means that we have eternal life. This is God's will: you with him forever. Which means if you bind your will to God's will, if you let him get his way, everything that happens in your life he will use to that end – to bring about his will.

I don't know what is best for me. But I do know that I have a God who gave his Son so that I could have eternal life. Our sinful hearts always think that we know what's best, but our patient Savior and Teacher loves to remind us that we don't have the slightest clue what we should be praying for, but that's ok, because he knows exactly what we need.

**Prayer is not a device for imposing my will on God but rather for binding my will to his as he carries out his plan to bring me home to heaven.** My sinful heart still wrestles with that, but my patient Savior isn't done with me yet. No, he's going to keep at his teaching and forgiving until he brings me to the eternity he's planned.

Your will be done, Jesus.

Amen.