

April 28, 2024

1 John 3:18-24

I'm not sure if any of you are in tune with modern country music, but there is a singer, Jason Bradley DeFord, commonly known as "Jelly Roll," and he had one of the biggest hits of 2023 called, "Need A Favor. The lyrics go like this: *I know Amazing Grace, but I ain't been livin' them words. Swear I spend most Sundays, drunk..., than I have in church. Hardcover King James only been saving dust on the nightstand. And I don't know what to say by the time I fold my hands. I only talk to God when I need a favor. And I only pray when I ain't got a prayer. So, who the hell (sorry) am I to expect a Savior, if I only talk to God when I need a favor?*

Now, you can say whatever you'd like about Jelly Roll's place among Country greats, or lack thereof, but you must admit: He asks a great question. Why on earth should we expect God to listen to our prayers, let alone answer them? If we only go to God when we need something from him, which if we're honest, accurately describes us at some point, why would God listen to us? Would you like it if your friends or children only called you when they need money? Why should we expect God to give us anything? This is the question that John addresses in this part of his letter: **How do we know that God is listening to our prayers?** And the three answers John gives us is this: **1. God's Grace, 2. Our Obedience, and 3. The Holy Spirit's Presence.**

1. God's Grace. When we arrive at verse 18, John is finishing up his famous love discourse, something we'll look deeper into next week, but his point is that Christians are not called to simply talk the talk, but walk the walk when it comes to loving God and our neighbor, and says if you claim to be a Christian and don't have a life that reflects your faith, you may not be. He then continues his thought and applies it Christian prayer and says, when you approach God's holy throne in prayer, you need to be confident, so don't do anything that would make you unconfident! It's that simple. The picture he's painting is this. In the ancient world, approaching a king or a powerful person without being invited wasn't simply rude or presumptuous, it was deadly. If you are familiar with the book of Esther in the Old Testament, part of the power of what she did for her people when she approached King Xerxes is that even though she was his wife, she did not have the right to approach his throne uninvited, and all he would have had to do was give the signal, and she would have lost her head. And John is saying that when we go to God in prayer, we are not just throwing up words while our hands are folded, we are approaching the King of the Universe on his Holy Throne, and if you are going to do that, you'd better be ready! This is a big deal! How do you know that you are ready to approach God's throne? How do you know that you have any right to be heard, especially when we look at our lives and realize that we aren't even close to what God demands?

Because God is greater. Every single evil, perverted, murderous, toxic thought that you've ever let simmer in your mind. Every evil fantasy that you've indulged in that no one knows about. God knows about it. Every hurtful, cutting, sarcastic, threatening, divisive word you've spoken, some of them were under your breath and some weren't, some know about it, some don't, God knows all of it. Every shameful thing we've seen and done in closed corners that no one knows about, every selfish act that if anyone knew about, we'd have no friends. God knows about it. Every hypocrisy, every lie, every time you did something good only because it benefited you, he knows.

*And he still loves you.* He still cherishes you. How, how could a Holy God love such broken people and listen to their cries and answer them all? How could God allow evil sinners to approach his holy throne? Because Jesus, that perfect God, left the holy throne and lived the pure, loving life that we should have, and do you remember what he begged of his Father in the garden, "If it be your will, let this cup pass." And His Father crushed him. And Jesus cried out to his Father, "My God, why? Why have you forsaken me?" Silence. The Father ignored and crushed his holy son so that sinners could be heard. How? On the cross, Jesus identified with every sinner and was treated like every sinner so sinners like us could be heard, loved, and answered as if we were as holy and as perfect and obedient as Jesus. Yes! God knows your hearts- but he chooses to see you as if you were Jesus. Therefore, he listens to you, he hears you, in fact, that's his favorite thing- when you come to him in prayer. He loves it. It fills him with joy. There is no one he loves to hear from more than his dear children. And when your heart condemns you, which it will sometimes because we still sin, look at the Cross, and see what Jesus has done for you and remember what your Father sees when he looks at you: Righteous, perfect, holy, stunning, and if that's how your Father chooses to see you, who are you to tell him he's wrong? That's the first and ultimate reason we know that God is going to hear and answer our prayers.

2. Our Obedience. This second reason is one that I must admit, as a Lutheran who teaches that we are saved by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and that all our blessings come from that grace and we deserve nothing, and our works don't earn anything with God, I wrestled and struggled with verses 22 and 23. First, that's a radical statement from John- whatever you ask, it will be given. Why? Because you obey his commandments. Let's dig into what he's saying.

John says, that which we ask for, we receive, because we keep his commandments- and those commandments are that we trust Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and love each other. Trust in Jesus and loving each other sounds like two commands, but John says it's one- they are inseparable. Anyone who truly is a Christian, they will trust Jesus as their savior, and that always produces fruit in their lives- love. That's what God commands from us, that's what he wants. And that's what he produces in us. We give God what he wants- our hearts, because he has worked in us so that we can do that in the first place. God desires that we trust him, that we trust that Jesus' sacrifice was for us, and that we cling to that, and that we don't trust in our goodness, but in Jesus', and God empowers us to do that. God desires that we love each other, sacrifice for each other, forgive each other, and God empowers us to do that, all through the Gospel- the message that Jesus has forgiven you. And don't get me wrong- we aren't puppets. We are the ones who believe and love, but God is the one who works that within us. And no, it's not perfect, but remember what God sees when he looks at us? He sees only the good. He loves our faith. He loves our love. It's beautiful to him. And therefore, he gives us whatever we ask. Really? Whatever we ask? That's what John says! But let's not be simplistic. God is a good father. To all the parents out there: Would you allow your children to eat cake for every meal if they asked? Would you allow your children to see Jelly Roll in concert if they asked? (If you say "yes," that's okay, but you get my point!). Christian prayer is not about conforming God to our will, but us conforming and growing around his will. The kind of prayer that John is talking about is a prayer that is so confident that it doesn't just ask for health, wealth, or success, or happiness in this

world, but that God sustain me even if he doesn't give me those things- and when that your prayer, that God's will be done, that he sustains you through all things, that he blesses you and uses you to be a blessing, that he never leaves you even in pain, that he keeps his promises to you, the answer to that prayer will always, always be "yes." Simply put, God loves you too much to give you anything less than what you truly desire. God only gives us what we would ask for if we knew everything that he knew and loved like he loves. And we know this because he delights in us and our faith and our love.

3. The Holy Spirit. John then gives the third piece of evidence for how we know God will hear our prayers. The presence of the Holy Spirit. What does he mean by that, that we know that we have fellowship with God by the Spirit he has given us? He's referring to the Holy Spirit, true God, the "third" person of the Trinity- Father, Son, Holy Spirit- and we don't talk a ton about him, but the way that the Bible speaks of him is fascinating and beautiful. This, and many other verses in Scripture, tell us that the Holy Spirit is the one who changes our hearts, who creates faith in us, and who inspires and empowers us to believe and do what God wants, and John is telling us that although our works do not earn a single thing from God, it is okay to look back on our lives and marvel at what God the Holy Spirit has done in us and through us. How many of you would say that you feel closer to Jesus, more humbled and more confident by his Gospel, and more driven to learn more of it and share it, than you were a year ago? That's not an accident! The Holy Spirit is working in you! And how many of you would say that that's not true, but you want to grow, you want to desire what God desires! That too is the Holy Spirit! How many of you are a little kinder, a little more sensitive, a little more courageous, a little more faithful, a little more self controlled than you were when you were younger? That's the Holy Spirit working in you and molding you to be more and more like Jesus! Praise God for that! And how many of you aren't so sure of that, but you want to grow to be more like Jesus? That too is the Holy Spirit! Praise God for that! If you are struggling with a sin or a temptation and you feel bad about it and desperately want to overcome it, that itself is a sign that the Spirit is working in you and you are Christian, because if you weren't a Christian, you wouldn't struggle with your sin, you would just do it! If you are wrestling with a teaching in Scripture and you desperately just want to know and believe the truth about Jesus, but it's hard because it grinds against what you've always believed or what the culture says or what makes the most sense to you, and you're struggling, praise God for that! The Spirit is working in you- if he weren't you wouldn't struggle, you would just reject it! It's okay to look at your imperfect faith and works and notice that even through a broken sinner, God can work and do the impossible. Because he has identified you with Christ, and chooses to see his perfection when he looks at you. He has worked faith and obedience and chooses to see that because he loves you and you belong to him, and he works in and through you. If that's true- there is nothing that should keep you away from the throne, and speaking to him. What a God that he would want that. What a friend. What a friend we have in Jesus. Amen.