

How To Pray To Know God's Will

If you are married or are hoping to be married someday, you are familiar with the struggle and emotion that occurs when individuals try to determine whom they should marry. Ana Swanson wrote an article that may help some individuals determine who is the best partner to marry. She titled her article, "When to stop dating and settle down, according to math." It was published by the Washington Post. Here is a portion of what she wrote.

So how do you find the best one? Basically, you have to gamble. And as with most casino games, there is a strong element of chance, but you can also understand and improve your probability of

"winning"

the best partner.

It turns out there is a pretty striking solution to increase your odds.

...

To have the highest chance of picking the very best

suitors, you should date and then reject the first 37 percent of your total group of lifetime suitors. (If you're into math, it's actually $1/e$, which comes out to 0.368, or 36.8 percent.) Then you follow a simple rule: You pick the next person who is better than anyone you have ever dated before.¹

She says that technique gives you the very best person. But if you would like to achieve a perfect match, she says,

"And if you would like to find your perfect match, but you are also okay with maybe ending up single, you would wait much longer, reviewing and rejecting 60.7 percent of the total before you start looking for your match."²

I do not know if that approach to finding a lifetime partner really works. According to the math, it does, but I did not try that method. That method of choosing a spouse for life is maybe okay for some, but it should not be for those who believe in

Jesus Christ and desire to know God's will for their life. We can thank God that He has not left us all alone to make such difficult decisions. We do not have to gamble and hope!

Instead, we can

depend upon our loving Father to give us guidance. That is the message of King David in Psalm 31:3. He wrote,

For You are my rock and my fortress;

For Your name's sake You will lead me and guide me.



ington Post. February 16, 2016.

1. Ana Swanson. "When to stop dating and settle down, according to math." Wash-

2. Ibid.

Psalm 31:3 (NASB)

David said that God will lead and guide us for the honor of His name. He knew the character of God. Later, King David also wrote this,

For such is God,
Our God forever and ever;
He will guide us until death.

Psalm 48:14 (NASB)

I love the statement that God will guide us until we die. That is comforting!

But how can we know His leading and guidance? Jesus gave the answer to eleven of His disciples while they were in the upper room on the night in which He was betrayed. We can find His answer in John 15:7.

INTRODUCTION TO STUDY. John 15:7 is the beginning of our study. Here is what Jesus told the disciples.

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. John 15:7 (NASB)

In this verse Jesus gives us three conditions that must be satisfied if we want God to grant our prayer request. These three conditions are also required if you want to know God's will about a decision you want to make. Let us look at each condition and eventually learn six principles.

CONDITION #1 — IF YOU ABIDE IN ME! The first condition occurs in the first part of this verse. Jesus said, "If you abide in me." The key word in this statement is "abide." The Greek word for "abide" is *meno*. It literally means "to stay in one place" or "remain." That is, the first condition to having our prayers answered is that a person must stay in Christ. With that simple word, Jesus defined a true believer. True believers are not temporary Christians. True believers will always remain in permanent union with Christ. They will never leave Him. If someone does abandon Christ, then they were never a real Christian. It does not matter what they claim. Their actions scream louder than their words. Judas had already left the upper room according to John 13:27-30. He was an exam-

ple of someone we would think was a believer, but that was not true of him. Scripture calls him the son of perdition. Later the apostle John wrote in 1 John 2:19,

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. 1 John 2:19 (NASB)

The first condition that must be satisfied to have our prayers answered is that a person must be a true believer. Now as soon I say, "Have our prayers answered," we must remember that God always answers our prayers. Sometimes the answer is "Yes" and sometimes it is, "No!" So let me ask you a serious question, "Are you a believer in Christ?" If you are not a believer, then the answer to your prayers will be, "No!" John 9:31 tells us that God does not hear sinners, but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him.

CONDITION #2 — MY WORDS ABIDE IN YOU. The second condition that must be satisfied to have our prayers answered with a "Yes!" is given in Jesus' next phrase. He said, "and My words abide in you." Once again the Greek word for "abide" is *meno*. But now Jesus uses the word with a much broader meaning. He had already used *meno* in verse 5 to teach the disciples that only true believers produce spiritual fruit. Jesus said this in verse 5,

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. John 15:5 (NASB)

It is sad how many people think the fruit Jesus was talking about is good works or being involved in some ministry in the church. But the fruit Jesus referred to is called the fruit of the Spirit. Read John 14:14-15:11.

Here in verse 7, Jesus uses *meno* to also teach us that a true believer will be saturating themselves with the Word of God and obeying it. Listen to the words of Jeremiah the prophet in Jeremiah 15:16.

Your words were found, and I ate them,

And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart .
.. Jeremiah 15:16 (NASB)

The prophet says that he found the Word of God and ate them. That is, he delighted in God's Word like food. He studied it and it transformed his life. The Holy Spirit used the Word of God to produce righteousness.

So, the second condition that Jesus gives us for having our prayers answered is that a true believer will be "abiding in" the Word of God or saturating himself or herself in the Word of God and obeying it. The result is answered prayer. James 5:16 puts it this way.

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.
James 5:16b (NASB)

In sharp contrast, Psalm 66:18 helps us understand that God does not respond to the wicked. It says,

If I regard wickedness in my heart,
The Lord will not hear;
Psalm 66:18 (NASB)

Frankly, too many people are not honest with themselves. They think they are a good person and believe that God will hear their prayers.

But let me warn you, God is not influenced by our opinion of ourselves! God knows your heart. He knows if you want to study the book He has written, called the Bible. He knows if you are "eating" the Word of God and are increasingly obeying it. He knows if you have a sin habit that you are indulging. He knows if you seriously love Him.

So, the first condition for having our prayers answered is that a person must be a believer in Jesus Christ. The second condition is that they are saturated with the Word of God and are obeying it. It reveals your heart.

CONDITION #3 — ASK WHATEVER YOU WISH. The third condition that Jesus gives us to have our prayers answered is that we "Ask whatever you wish." Now, it is obvious that if we never ask for something, we may not receive anything. This reminds me of James 4:2 which says,

You do not have because you do not ask. James 4:2b (NASB)

We are missing out on some blessings if we never ask. We must ask if we want to receive anything, including knowing God's will.

The Context. Now, there is more to Jesus' statement than is revealed in verse 7. In order to understand Jesus' statement, we must also read what occurred before and after John 15:7. We call it the context. So, let us read John 14:14. Here Jesus told the eleven disciples,

If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. John 14:14
(NASB)

Then in John 15:16, we are told Jesus said,

... so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. John 15:16b (NASB)

Jesus said this again in John 16:23. Each time Jesus said that we must ask, "in My name," He was not referring to some magic words to add at the end of our prayers. "In My name" refers to everything that is consistent with the character, purpose, will, and glory of Jesus — all that He is.

So, the context is that when Jesus said, "Ask whatever you wish," He was referring to asking according to all that He is, including His purpose and will. I think 1 John 5:14-15 is a great summary of John 15:7. It says,

This is the confidence which we have before 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 the requests which we have asked from Him. 1 John 5:14-15 (NASB)

Commanded Will of God. We must pray according to or in agreement with His will. So how can we pray according to His will? First, we must know His will. Scripture teaches that there are two dimensions to God's will: 1) His sovereign will, and 2) His "commanded will." Let me briefly explain each of these by starting with His "commanded will," which is also called His revealed will or perceptive will. I will use the term,

commanded will, because it describes what we find in Scripture. His commanded will is the commands that we find in Scripture. Examples of His commanded will include the Ten Commandments, the various precepts, ordinances, and various other commands that He has given us. Some of these commands are very specific. Here are seven examples.

- 1 Timothy 2:14 — Will of God is that all men are saved.
- Romans 12:1-2 — Will of God is to not be conformed to this world.
- Ephesians 5:17-18 — Will of God is to be filled with the Spirit.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 — Will of God is to abstain from sexual sins.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:18 — Will of God is to give thanks in everything.
- 1 Peter 2:13-15 — Will of God is to submit to government.
- 1 Peter 4:19 — Will of God is that we suffer.

To ask according to “His will” includes asking according to His commanded will. So, if our prayer violates God’s commanded will, the answer to our prayer may be, “No!”

Sovereign Will of God. The other dimension of God’s will is His “sovereign will.” God’s sovereign will is also called His decretive will. God’s sovereign will includes His decrees to create the universe, His establishment of governments and their rulers, our salvation, and the birth, suffering, and resurrection of Christ. Also included is His sanctification of believers and His plans for the future of this world. That is just some of His sovereign will.

Part of His sovereign will is hidden from us. Deuteronomy 29:29 says,

The secret things belong to the LORD our God . . . Deuteronomy 29:29 (NASB)

This includes the things we usually want to know. For example, we ask, “Lord help me know your will.” His will for our life is hidden from us. He does not tell us what will happen to us tomorrow or next year. God has also hidden from us the one He wants us to marry - until the right time. Those are just some examples of His sovereign will.

Now since Jesus taught that the Word of God must abide in us, then we should be obeying what He has revealed. We should be obeying His “commanded will,” if we want God to

reveal His hidden or sovereign will to us. Why should God reveal His hidden will, if we do not want to obey what He has revealed?

Principle #1 — We Must Pray According To His Will. This brings us to the first of six principles about God’s will. The first principle is that true believers must ask according to God’s commanded, and sovereign will.

Principle #2 — We Must Believe God Can Fulfill Our Request. The second principle about God’s will in prayer is that we must believe God can fulfill our requests. James 1:5-6 says,

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. James 1:5-6 (NASB)

This passage is easily misunderstood. Some teach that this passage says we must believe that God will give us our request. Otherwise, we will never receive it. But that is not what this verse is saying. A simple proof is from the life of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. In Daniel 3 we are told that King Nebuchadnezzar demanded that they bow down and worship his idol. Daniel 3:16-18 tells us how they responded. Here is their reply,

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” Daniel 3:16-18 (NASB)

The early church considered these men to be such great examples of faith that they put paintings of them in the fire in the catacombs of Rome. The paintings were an encouragement and helped the early Christians go through the Roman tortures. Now if we look carefully at Daniel 3:16-18, we learn that Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego did not doubt that God

could rescue them. They believed God could. But they did not know if God would deliver them. They believed God was able and willingly submitted to whatever His sovereign will desired. They are great examples of James 1:5-6. How did God answer their prayer? He granted their request. Not only could God answer their request, but He also answered, “Yes!”

So, the second principle about God’s will in prayer is that we must believe God can grant our requests.

CONDITION #4 — IT WILL BE DONE FOR YOU. At this point we have studied the first three parts of Jesus’ statement in John 15:7. Now we will look at the next part of His statement which is, “It will be done for you.” That is, if 1) we are a believer; 2) we are abiding in His Word; and 3) if we are praying according to His commanded and sovereign will, “It will be done for you.”

Principle #3 — We Know God Uses Circumstances To Reveal His Will. This leads us to the third principle about God’s will and prayer. The third principle is that God leads us through circumstances. A great example of this can be found in the life of Isaac in Genesis 26:18-22. This is a fascinating account. It occurred after Abimelech told Isaac to move away because Isaac was too powerful. Abimelech was afraid of Isaac. He was a threat. So, Isaac moved to another location. Now watch what happened.

Then Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the same names which his father had given them. But when Isaac’s servants dug in the valley and found there a well of flowing water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with the herdsmen of Isaac, saying, “The water is ours!” So, he named the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over it too, so he named it Sitnah. Genesis 26:18-21 (NASB)

What did we learn? Every time Isaac’s servants dug a well, the herdsman of Gerar quarreled over the well. Each time Isaac moved to another location. The message is that Isaac kept moving, looking for a peaceful place to live. Verse 22 tells us what finally happened to Isaac.

He moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth, for he said, “At last the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.”

Genesis 26:22 (NASB)

Isaac moved again, dug another well, and finally found peace. Then notice what He said, “At last the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.” Can I ask, “If you had dug a well and someone wanted your well, what would you do?” Would you call the police or file a lawsuit? Isaac did not do that. He humbly moved to another place. He was a peacemaker. It is obvious from verse 22 that he understood God was revealing His will for him and his family through these circumstances. The third principle is that sometimes God reveals His will to us through circumstances.

Principle #4 — We Must Be Patient, and Not Lose Hope. The fourth principle about God’s will in prayer is revealed in Genesis 12. There we are told that God had promised Abraham that he would become a great nation. So, Abraham and his wife expected that they would have a child! But they made a mistake. They thought Sarah would have a child very soon. How do we know this? The answer is given three chapters later in Genesis 15. There we are told that Abraham asked God if his servant Eliezer of Damascus could become his heir. Then Abraham learned God’s sovereign or hidden will. God told Abraham, “No!”

So Abraham waited longer. Genesis 16 tells us that now ten years had elapsed since God promised them a child. It appears that Sarah was impatient because she suggested that Abraham have sexual relations with her maid, Hagar. So, Abraham agreed, had sex with Hagar, and then later learned they had made the wrong decision. The consequences were that Ishmael and his descendants would become a problem in the future. They should have waited upon God.

Finally, after waiting twenty-five years, God gave Abraham and Sarah the child He had promised them. This reveals that God can take a long time to answer our prayer requests, and we must be patient. So, those prayer requests that you thought God had rejected, may eventually be answered with a “yes!” We need to be patient and wait. Hebrews 4:16 also teaches us the same lesson. That verse reveals God waits until the right

time to answer our requests.

Principle #5 — We Must Want God To Have His Will Done. The fifth principle about God's will in prayer is found in Matthew 6:10. I will start reading at verse 9. Jesus said,

Pray, then, in this way:

'Our Father who is in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.'

Matthew 6:9-10 (NASB)

Now notice the last part of verse 10. It says, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Now if you seriously pray this prayer, then you will want God to have His will done here on earth, including in your own life. That can be scary! It was for me as a teenager. I was afraid that God would ask me to be a missionary in a foreign country. But in time, God changed my heart.

The message of this verse is that when we pray, we must want God the Father to have His will done! Therefore, as we seek His sovereign will for our lives, we must want His will to be done in our lives. To pray like this requires that we desire His sovereign will and not our own will. In the past, I have found that when I am the most anxious during a trial, I usually want my own will. I know that Jesus taught us in Luke 11:5-13 to repeatedly pray. But I have often discovered that often my repeated prayers reveal that I am not willing to submit God's will. I want what I want. I do not want God's will. So, I pray and pray as though I am trying to force God to answer, "Yes!" Peace finally comes when I submit to His will.

1 Peter 5:7 reveals how I finally found peace. It says,

... casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. 1

Peter 5:7 (NASB)

To cast requires that we submit to His will and believe He cares for me! So, I am learning to submit to His will and want His will when I pray. James 4:15 says,

Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." James 4:15 (NASB)

The message is I should want my plans to always be subject to His sovereign will. I desire that His will is done in my life. He is far more important than I am! John D. Rockefeller Jr. summarized this principle with these words,

An individual's highest fulfillment, greatest happiness, and widest usefulness are to be found in living in harmony with His will.

So, the fifth principle about God's will in prayer is that we must want God to have His will done in our lives.

Principle #6 — We Know Our Joy Will Grow As We Seek His Will. The sixth principle is that as we pray, an unexpected change will occur in our relationship with God. What is that change? First, as we pray we learn about God's sovereign will for our lives as He responds with a yes or a no to our requests. Second, as we learn God's will for our lives, we are drawn closer in our relationship to God. That happened to the apostle Paul. For example, In 1 Timothy 1:12 the apostle Paul wrote,

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service . . . 1 Timothy 1:12 (NASB)

Paul was so thankful that God had strengthened him, saved him, and put him into service as an apostle that he exploded in praise in this verse. When God saved Paul and put him into service, He revealed His sovereign will for Paul. So, the sixth principle about prayer and God's will, is that our joy will increase as we learn God's will for us. Our relationship with Him will grow. That is wonderful truth!

CONCLUSION. Now I want to conclude with Psalm 37:4. It says,

Delight yourself in the LORD;

And He will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalm 37:4 (NASB)

The Hebrew word for “delight” has the meaning of “habit” and “exquisite delight.” The idea is that we are habitually thrilled with God. It speaks of a great love for God. As we delight in Him, all six principles will be true of us. 1) We will be praying according to His will. 2) We will believe God can fulfill our requests. 3) We will know God uses circumstances to reveal His will. 4) We will be patient, and not lose hope. 5) We will want God to have his will done. Finally, 6) we will know our joy will grow as we seek His will. So, as we delight ourselves in the Lord, these principles will become true of us and our desires will be transformed and become like His. Our desires conform to His. That is why and how God will give us the desires of our heart.

1 Corinthians 10:31 reminds us that our purpose as believers is to give God glory. Remember Jesus taught us,

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. John 15:7 (NASB)

God answers our prayers consistent with His will and for His glory. Amen!