

Chapter 11

November 24, 1996

We are considering the “qualifications” or “characteristics” of true and prevailing prayer. We have so far examined *importunity, or perseverance in prayer* and, last Lord’s Day evening, *prayer in the Spirit*.

Tonight we add the next of these “qualifications,” viz, that prayer must be “*in the name of Jesus*.”

Read: John 14:5-14

Text comment: v. 12: “greater things than these”? What are these greater things? Many take this as an argument for the continuation of miracles in the apostolic era, after all, does not the end of v. 11 suggest that he is speaking of his miracles when he says that they will do greater things than these when he goes to his Father in heaven?

Well, even if the Lord means that they will do greater miracles than he performed during the three years of his ministry, this in itself does not answer the question whether miracles will continue to be a feature of Christian life after the age of the apostles. V. 26, for example, seems to apply directly to the apostles only and not to Christians in general or, at least to them in a different respect or degree. Therefore, he could mean in v. 12 that the apostles would do greater miracles than he did, but not Christians in general.

But, of course, it is not at all certain that Jesus meant that, because of the Spirit’s coming, Christians after him or even the disciples would do greater

miracles than he did.

First, it does not seem to have been the case that they did, in fact, surpass the miracles of the Lord. The account of their miracles in Acts and, to some extent, in the Epistles, does not support the contention that they did greater miracles than Jesus did. They did many of the same miracles — healing and raising the dead in particular (exorcism also, if you count that a miracle) — but it is not clear that they did any more of them or that they did them any more spectacularly. The report of their miracles does not suggest this. What is more, they did not perform, so far as we can tell, nature miracles, which were some of the Lord's greatest wonders: feeding the 5,000 and the 4,000, changing water to wine, stilling the storm, and so on.

Second, the Upper Room discourse on the coming of the Holy Spirit, of which these verses are a part, concern — as do other statements elsewhere about the Spirit's coming, e.g. John 7:38-39 [when the Spirit comes, “out of your bellies shall flow rivers of living water” cf. Zech. 14:8, an image of salvation extending to the world, but here, extending to the world *through believers* — the Spirit's ministry in bring salvation to the world. So in 16:7-10: “he will convict the world of guilt... and righteousness and judgment.” That work believers began to do after Pentecost and it was a greater work than Jesus himself performed. Peter brought more people to salvation by his one Pentecost sermon than Jesus may have through three long years of the most perfect preaching the world has ever seen!

If you take it to mean miracles that ought to be regularly a part of the life of the church, then where have those miracles been all of this time, miracles greater than Jesus'? If Jesus' words mean anything, they certainly do not mean that a portion of the church should have to convince another portion of the church and the entire world that some miracles have actually occurred. Jesus' miracles didn't have to be sold that way. But, if you take the “greater thing” to be reaching the world with the gospel, what a greater work it was, obviously, publicly, unmistakably. When Christ was finished with his earthly ministry, the entire church, tiny as it was, was Jewish. Now, it can be found in every nation, and Christians come from every tongue, tribe, and nation. That is the greater work the Spirit made possible for Christians to perform.

[Don't worry, brothers and sisters. Real miracles, the genuine article, such as Jesus and the Apostles performed, and Moses, Elijah, and Elisha before them, do not have to be searched for, they do not require a certain religious

attitude in order to be noticed! When God's power is released in the world in that way, everyone notices, believers and unbelievers alike. The fact that most of the church is unpersuaded that miracles are occurring is the proof positive that they are not. Miracles I mean, not answers to prayer, not the presence of God in the life of his people, etc.]

Now, what did Jesus mean when he said in v. 13, "I will do whatever you ask *in my name*..." and, again, in v. 14, "You may ask me for anything *in my name* and I will do it?"

Well, first, take note of the frequency of this phrase in this discourse.

1. 15:16: "Then the father will give you whatever you ask in my name. . ."
2. 16:23: "The father will give you whatever you ask in my name."
3. 16:24: "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive."
4. 16:26: "In that day you will ask in my name. . ."

There are many similarities, of course, with other such promises regarding prayer that Jesus made in the Gospels.

Matt. 18:19: "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." And the very next verse (20) reads: "For where two or three come together *in my name* there will I be among them."

Matt. 7:7: "Ask and it will be given to you."

(And many more)

Clearly, all of these promises have primarily to do with the confidence with which we ought to ask our heavenly father, the certainty that we will be heard and answered. "Whatever you ask...you shall receive." But what is the special significance of "*in my name*" in these promises?

I suppose most Christians think that it means that our prayers are to be offered *through* Christ, that is, that we have access to God only through Christ and that we are to confess that in our prayers.

For example, our Larger Catechism asks (Qs. 180-181):

What is it to pray in the name of Christ?

To pray in the name of Christ is, in obedience to his command, and in confidence on his promises, to ask mercy for his sake; not by bare mentioning of his name, but by drawing our encouragement to pray, and our boldness, strength, and hope of acceptance in prayer, from Christ and his mediation.

Why are we to pray in the name of Christ?

The sinfulness of man, and his distance from God by reason thereof, being so great, as that we can have no access into his presence without a mediator; and there being none in heaven or earth appointed to, or fit for, that glorious work but Christ alone, we are to pray in no other name but his only.

Now, all of that is wonderfully important and absolutely true. But it does not seem to be the simplest way of interpreting the phrase “in my name” in the Lord’s several commandments concerning prayer in the Upper Room Discourse. Nor does it seem to be the special interest the Lord has in that Discourse in his speaking about prayer and how it is to be offered. The general theme is not how we have access to God, but how Christ is going to advance his work in the world upon his ascending to the Right Hand. Notice verse 13: “. . . so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.”

A “name,” as you know, carried a greater weight in the ancient world than it does today. Because a name was considered to be descriptive of the essential character of a person or thing, there was a greater sense of identity between the name and its bearer. (We have not lost this, of course. If you overhear your name in a conversation you are suddenly very interested in what is being said. You don’t think to yourself, “Oh, it is only my name that they are speaking of, not me!” You identify your name with yourself.) When Moses says to God, in Exodus 3:13: “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” He is not asking “who” God is, but “what” God is. And God responds in keeping with the request: “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

This connection between name and person, name and personality, name and character, name and being, explains why names are changed when there was

a change in one's personality or calling or place in the world (Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Cephas to Peter, etc.). And why "name" is often substituted for the personal pronoun or the personal name itself.

For example, in the same Upper Room discourse, in 15:21, Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name. . ." That is, they will treat you this way because of what I am, and because you are associated with what I am and what I claim to be. All of that is in the "name."

It is with this background that to do something *in someone's name* meant to do something as that person's representative, with his inspiration, power, or authority.

1. Exod. 5:23: "Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name. . ."
2. Deut. 18:19: "If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name. . ."
3. 1 Sam. 17:45: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied."
4. 1 Kgs. 21:8: "So [Jezebel] wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal upon them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him."
5. Jer. 14:15: "Therefore, this is what the Lord says about the prophets who are prophesying in my name: I did not send them. . ."

The most obvious and simple explanation of the phrase "*in my name*" with regard to prayer in John 14-16, then, is that it is prayer that is prayed by us as representing Christ, or as acting on his behalf in his absence. (As already in 15:21: they will persecute you because of my name suggests the same thing — you are allied with my cause, you represent me, and so are subject to the reproach they cast on me.)

1. For example, in Luke 9:48-49 we have the phrase twice in two quite different respects, each of which, however, has this sense of doing something as Christ's agent or representative.

“Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me. . . .’ “Master,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.”

Cf. perhaps Mark 9:41 [though the “my” is missing in some texts and it may mean something else].

2. Still more to the point, in this very same Upper Room Discourse, the Lord, in 14:26, says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit “in my name” which certainly means, that the Spirit will come as Christ’s agent, his representative, and that is what the entire context confirms. He will teach the truth Christ taught, he will make Christ known, he will bring Christ’s kingdom to pass, etc.

So, to pray in Christ’s name, is not simply to end one’s prayers with the formula “in Jesus’ name, Amen.” It is to pray as Christ’s representatives on earth, to pray in his place and for his sake, to advance his interests and aims in the world, to pray for what he would pray for where he with us in the flesh to pray. To pray, as in v. 13, so that the Son will bring glory to his Father!

Do you see how this changes the perspective we bring to prayer. We are not now praying “for ourselves” but “for the Lord.” We are not asking anything simply for ourselves, but that which Christ approves, that which advances his name and glory in our lives or in the lives of others, that which is his aim and his interest in our lives. We pray as his representatives, as those who in our prayer are seeking to do his work and advance his cause. That makes of our life of prayer an altogether higher, less selfish thing. It purifies our motives, it clarifies our purpose, it almost certainly, as we will say next week, divides the subjects of our prayers in a proper proportion. We are to pray for what Christ wants done, for what Christ desires that there should be.

It is not always easy to know exactly what that is, of course, and that is why we must always also pray “according to God’s will” which we will take up next Lord’s Day evening, Lord willing.

But remember what you are saying, confessing, when you end your prayer, as you should, with “in Jesus’ name, Amen.” And be sure that you pray so

that such a conclusion is entirely appropriate for the prayer you have prayed and for the requests you have made to God. Christ would pray them too, were he here in the flesh, and you prayed them because he would!