



WHY YOU SHOULD PRAY ABOUT IT

MATTHEW 7:7-11

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SERMON MANUSCRIPT

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In one comic strip, Broom Hilda – a short, ugly, cartoon witch – approaches a wishing well and barks into it, “I don’t want anything!” The next panel is quiet. Then Hilda steps back and adds, “I just thought you’d enjoy knowing there was one satisfied person around.”

Is that you? Are you BROOM HILDA? Do you consider yourself a fully satisfied person? If you think you have it all together, you are just as deceived as that cartoon witch. All of us have needs to be met, pains to be healed, goals to be reached, voids to be filled, and changes to be made in our lives. Most people recognize they need help. Few people know where to find it. I submit that the wonderful resources God makes available through the Lord Jesus Christ are totally sufficient to meet any and every need in your life. And the means by which can you access what you need from God is through believing prayer. This is the message of Matthew 7:7-11: You can pray with assurance that God will hear and answer your prayers.

These verses are a part of THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. In this discourse, Jesus teaches the righteous standard that is required for kingdom citizenship. Yet Jesus is not teaching his listeners to practice a faith that pulls itself up by its own bootstraps. This discourse begins with the announcement of Matthew 5:3: “Blessed our the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This beatitude makes it clear that the only way to qualify for the kingdom of heaven is to confess your unworthiness. The principles Jesus teach in Matthew 5-7 are meant to confront us with the fact that we need divine help to be the righteous people God commands us to be. But how do we access the help from God we need? Matthew 7:7 says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”

This passage is the second section of this discourse that addresses the subject of prayer. The first is Matthew 6:5-15, which records THE LORD’S MODEL PRAYER. In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches how to approach God in prayer. In Matthew 7, Jesus teaches addresses another important issue: Why pray? This is a big question. If God is perfectly good, infinitely wise, and sovereignly in-charge, why bother to pray? In our text, Jesus teaches we should pray in obedience to the command of God and with confidence in the goodness of God.

I. PRAY IN OBEDIENCE TO THE COMMAND OF GOD.

Verses 7-8 read: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” In these verses, Jesus issues a call to believing prayer and a promise of answered prayer.

A. A CALL TO BELIEVING PRAYER

The verbs – ask, seek, knock – are all imperatives. This call to prayer is not a suggestion, recommendation, or encouragement. It is a divine command. Jesus orders us to ask for what we need, seek what we desire, and knock where we want to enter. There are some who see in these commands a picture of the different kinds of people who come to God in prayer. The child of God comes and asks the Father for what she needs. The lost person seeks God that he may receive salvation through faith in Christ. And the ones who have strayed away knock on the door for God to welcome them back home. But this teaching is not about those who pray as much as it is about how we ought to pray. We are to pray by asking, seeking, and knocking. These imperatives give several practical instructions for believing prayer.

PRAY WITH DEPENDENCE. Verse 7 says, “Ask, and it will be given to you.” True prayer is about more than asking God for things. But the focus of this passage is clearly on making petitions of God. The word “ask” is the key term of the text, occurring in each of these five verses. This is how we should make out petitions to God. We are not to tell God what to do or make any claims on God or speak positive confessions that God is required to perform. We are to simply ask God for what we desire of him. The word “ask” denotes dependence upon God. In fact, our faith in God can be measured by what we ask God for. When we pray, we are not informing God of anything that he does not already know. Matthew 6:8 says that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Our prayers affirm our trust in God’s sufficiency. Our prayers are a declaration of dependence. Our prayers express our confidence that God is ready, willing, and able to provide what we need.

PRAY WITH EARNESTNESS. Verse 7 says: “seek, and you will find.” If asking denotes dependence, seeking denotes earnestness. One reason we do not pray as we ought is because when we have a need, we are inclined to do something about it. And we don’t consider prayer as really doing something. But the command to seek teaches us that prayer is not a passive activity. It is not to let go and let God. It is to hold on and let God. GEORGE BUTTRICK said, “Prayer is not a substitute for work, thinking, watching, suffering, or giving; prayer is a support for all other efforts.” In other words, we are to work as if it all depends on us and pray as if it all depends on God. We should pray earnestly, passionately, and fervently. James 5:16b says: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” But your prayers will never mean anything to God until they mean everything to you. God responds to those who diligently seek him. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus says, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

PRAY WITH BOLDNESS. Verse 7 says: “knock, and it will be opened to you.” In Luke 11:5-8, Jesus tells a parable about a man who had guests to arrive at his house unexpectedly in the middle of the night. But this host did not have anything to feed them. So he went to his neighbor’s house and knocked on the door, asking for bread. His sleepy neighbor initially refused to get up and give him anything. But the man kept knocking. So the sleepy neighbor finally got up and gave the man whatever he wanted, so he could get back to bed. Jesus told this parable to teach us that God is not a sleepy neighbor. You do not have to harass God to get what you need. If you knock in faith God will open the door for you. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” “With confidence” means freedom of speech. We can come to God with boldness, confident that he will provide the grace and mercy we need.

PRAY WITH PERSISTENCE. These imperatives – ask, seek, knock – are all in the present tense, which denotes continual action or habitual activity. Literally, Jesus says, “Keep on asking... seeking... knocking.” There are some who teach it is wrong to pray for something more than once, claiming it reflects a lack of faith. But Jesus, who was no WORD OF FAITH teacher, commands us to persistently ask, seek, and knock in prayer. It may demonstrate of a lack of faith

when we do not continue in prayer until we get an answer. True faith prays until something happens. Have you ever sought the Lord for something that you felt you had to have? But you did not get it. Now you look back and thank for not giving you what you asked for. If we received everything we wanted at the first asking, we would receive many things that are not God’s best for us. So Jesus bids us to keep asking, seeking, and knocking. Pray with persistence. Don’t stop praying. RUTH GRAHAM BELL said it well: “Pray when you feel like it, for it is a sin to neglect such an opportunity. Pray when you don’t feel like it, for it is dangerous to remain in such a condition.”

B. A PROMISE OF ANSWERED PRAYER

Verse 7 says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” Each of these calls to prayer is accompanied by a corresponding promise of answered prayer. As if these promises are not clear enough, Jesus says verse 8, “For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” Without conditions, restrictions, or stipulations, Jesus declares that God will hear and answer our prayers. This is the promise of God you can count on when you pray. Psalm 50:15 says, “And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” Jeremiah 33:3 says, “Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.” 1 John 5:14 says, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”

This is not a blanket promise, a blank check, or a carte blanche guarantee that you will receive everything you ask for in prayer. Scripture interprets scripture. So we must read this promise in light of other things scripture teaches about prayer. A biblical doctrine of prayer acknowledges that there are some who cannot claim the promises of this text.

Unbelievers cannot expect God to answer their prayers. We have access to God in prayer through the blood and righteousness of Christ. Without faith in Christ, no one can expect to have an audience with the living God. The only prayer God promises to answer for unbelievers is Romans 10:13: “For ‘everyone who calls on the name

of the Lord will be saved.” Likewise, unrepentant believers cannot expect God to answer their prayers. Psalm 66:18 says, “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” Unconfessed and unforgiven sin hinders prayer. This does not mean you have to be perfect to get an answered prayer. If so, there is no hope for any of us. But sin separates you from God. So when you pray, you must make sure that you are on speaking terms with God. Proverbs 28:13 says, “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” Furthermore, Christians who pray with selfish motives cannot expect God to answer their prayers. James 4:2b states the number one reason why we do not receive answered prayers: “You do not have, because you do not ask.” But James 4:3 adds: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

But the fact that you are a sincere, godly believer does not guarantee you will receive everything you ask God for. You have a low view of prayer if it does not include a high view of God. No high view of God permits you to treat God like a cosmic Santa Clause or heavenly bellhop or rigged slot machine. God is God. And because God is God, he is free to answer our prayers when and where and how he chooses. That’s a good thing, even when the answer is not what we want.

I was flying home from Detroit to Los Angeles when my father died. When I landed, I got a sense that something serious was going on, even though no one told me. So I prayed all the way home. I had a sense that the Lord was about to take my dad. But I prayed that I could see him one more time to say goodbye. God did not answer that prayer. At sixteen years old, I struggled with why God would snatch my dad away when and how he did. Several decades later, I can tell you that God knew and did what was best for me. And even though my desperate prayers that day were denied, I stand to tell you that God hears and answers prayer.

Paul was given a thorn in the flesh. He prayed three times for the Lord to remove it. But the Lord answered “No!” But he gave Paul two consolation blessings in 2 Corinthians 12:9 – “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” The late DONALD GRAY BARNHOUSE once came to the pulpit and made

a startling statement: “Prayer changes nothing!” It was his provocative way of making the point that God is sovereign over everything, including prayer. We cannot take authority over our circumstances and cause them to change by the words we say in prayer. God changes things; prayer does not! Prayer cannot change things. But it can change me. Prayer changes the one who prays.

II. PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE IN THE GOODNESS OF GOD.

In verses 7-8, Jesus commands his disciples to pray and promises God will answer our prayers. But how can we be sure that prayer works? Jesus answers in verses 9-11 by focusing our hopes on God’s holy character. When we pray, we must not put our confidence in our sense of worthiness, the words we say, or the power of prayer. But we can pray with confidence in the goodness of God. DEREK PRIME wrote: “When we declare that God is good we are saying that he is in every way all that he as God should be, something that marks him out as altogether different from us.” Indeed, God is not like us. So we can pray with absolute confidence that God is good all the times. Jesus makes this point by comparing the goodness of human fathers and the goodness of the heavenly Father.

A. THE INSTINCTIVE GOODNESS OF HUMAN FATHERS

In verses 9-10, Jesus asks two rhetorical questions about the instinctive goodness of human fathers: “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?” These rhetorical questions assume a negative answer. A good father will not give his children useless or harmful gifts.

A GOOD FATHER WILL NOT GIVE HIS CHILDREN USELESS GIFTS. In verse 9 Jesus says, “Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?” Jesus pictures a young son who comes to his father with a simple request for bread. This was a staple for families in the ancient Near East. If they had nothing else, they had bread. This boy is asking for basic necessities. He does not want an allowance or an electronic device or the keys to the car. He just wants bread. How would a good father respond? What would he do? Will he give son a stone instead of bread? The bread of the poor was the size of a stone and the two could be confused. But the

son could not eat a stone. Would a real father respond to his child's hunger by giving a useless stone? Of course not. A good father will not give his children useless gifts. And neither will God. God only gives gifts that fulfill us and nurture us and perfect us. James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is not variation or shadow due to change."

A GOOD FATHER WILL NOT GIVE HIS CHILDREN HARMFUL GIFTS. Jesus asks another question in verse 10: "Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?" Again, Jesus pictures a son who comes to his father with a basic request. Fish was another staple, along with bread. Remember when Jesus fed a hungry crowd of more than 5,000 men. When the disciples inventoried their resources, all they had was five barley loaves and two small fish. Philip concluded it was nothing in the face of so many hungry people. It was just a lad's lunch that wouldn't fill one man, much less 5,000. Jesus pictures a little boy who comes to his father for fish to eat. What would a real father do? Will he give him a serpent or snake instead? A small reptile could resemble a small fish. Would a father play such a cruel joke on his son? Of course not. To give a child a stone instead of bread would be a parental neglect of duties. But to give a child a serpent instead of a fish would be an act of child endangerment or child abuse. A good father would keep his children away from snakes, not put them on his children's plate when they are hungry.

The fact that a good father will not give his children useful or harmful gifts helps us understand the mystery of unanswered prayer. There are some things we ask God for and he says no because he knows that they are spiritually useless. It is God's ultimate will for you to be holy, not just happy. And it is only when you embrace God's will that you discover to be holy is to be happy! Romans 8:29 says: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." This is God's purpose for your life: that you be conformed to the image of his son. And God determines what he gives and withholds on the basis of what he deems is useful in making us more like Jesus. Likewise, there are some things we ask God for and he says no because he knows that they are spiritually harmful. Some times what looks like a fish is actually a snake. And we are too childish to tell

the difference. What would you do if your little child asked you for a dangerous snake? Would you give it? What if your child cried and screamed and begged? Would you give it then? Your love for your child forces you to say no. There are times when God demonstrates his love for us by saying no to our requests.

B. THE INFINITE GOODNESS OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

The questions in verses 9-10 set up a fortiori argument. Jesus makes his point by moving from the lesser to the greater. Verse 11 concludes: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Note that Jesus calls his listeners "evil." Jesus is speaking primarily to his disciples, even though a larger crowd of people is listening. These words are directly addressed to those who have put their faith in Christ and left all to follow him. Yet he calls them evil. This is a powerful affirmation of the pervasive depravity of our sinful nature. Even after we are born again by God's sovereign grace, we still have remaining sin in our lives. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick, who can understand it?" Every one of us, no matter how long you have been saved or how mature you are in Christ, still has evil in our hearts that can only be cleaned up by the sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit.

Even though we are evil, we know how to give good gifts to our children. We know how to provide for our children. We know how to take care of our children. Here's the point: God is not like us! God is perfectly, infinitely, and unceasingly good. We are good sometimes. And when we are, our goodness is tainted by iniquity in our hearts. But God is good all the time! In fact, God's goodness is the pre-eminent expression of his glory. How much more can God be trusted to give good gifts to those who come to him in believing prayer! The proof of the Father's infinite goodness is the cross of Jesus. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." We were dead in sin and had nothing good in us that would move us to ask God to for salvation. But God gave Jesus without us asking! Romans 8:32 says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him

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up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

The evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, was the recipient of numerous benefits from the Lord. And he was suddenly seized with the realization that his heavenly Father was showering him almost more than he could take. Overwhelmed, he prayed with a loud voice, “Stop, God!” Moody felt the Lord had been so good to him that he could not take any more. So he spontaneously asked God to stop blessing him!

Thank for God Moody’s testimony. But that’s not where I am. My prayer is, “God, start!” He can stop on Moody, but I need him to keep working in me, on me, for me, through me, and around me. And God will work in our lives in a fresh, new, and life changing way if we come to him in believing prayer. Ephesians 3:20-21 says, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church an in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS, ALL OUR SINS AND GRIEFS TO BEAR
 WHAT A PRIVILEGE IT IS TO CARRY EVERTHING TO GOD IN PRAYER
 O WHAT PEACE WE OFTEN FORFEIT! O WHAT NEEDLESS PAINS WE BEAR!
 ALL BECAUSE WE DO NOT CARRY EVERYTHING TO GOD IN PRAYER